

Chapter 1

MOVING BEYOND THE “ONE TRUE STORY”

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From Augustine to Rahner, from Aquinas to Lonergan, Roman Catholic thinkers have long struggled with fundamental questions about human existence, including the goodness of creation, the need to enact freedom responsibly in a world plagued by suffering and brokenness, and the importance of engendering right relationships with God and others. Traditionally, these basic axioms have been framed in terms of *nature* and *grace*. It is not too strong to suggest, however, that these categories yield truncated notions of the human person as they breed binaries in which some individuals and groups are cast as closer to nature and, consequently, as less able to participate in God’s offer of grace, while other individuals are typed by their nature as more capable of living a grace-filled life. In the latter half of the twentieth century, black, feminist, womanist, Latina, liberationist, and queer theologians have demonstrated that women and other “others” are often the ones relegated to the status of less-graced beings, legitimizing their oppression and exploitation by more privileged groups in both ecclesial and secular contexts. Without a doubt, binary thinking cannot and should not hold. Less reductionist and totalizing categories are necessary for understanding what is at stake in being human with others in the twenty-first century—ones that account for the diversity of

experiences and the complexity of our identity in relation to God and others, ones that avoid the social sins of oppression and exploitation.

The notion of “story” is one such category. Stories profoundly shape who we are, what we want out of life, and how we are connected to others. Michel de Certeau puts it most eloquently when he writes that stories arrange our sense of reality in that “they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.”¹ Speaking about theological anthropology through the discourse of story also reveals how, in the contemporary globalized world, individual and group identities cannot be contained by binary logic because they more often than not are plural. We find ourselves playing a variety of roles and reciting a diversity of scripts all at the same time—a plurality that complicates the most basic theological assumptions about being human. Some of us are students, sons, and African Americans. Others of us are teachers, mothers, and Christians. Not defined exclusively by any one category or narrative, we are all in some way or another hybrids—collections of various stories related to our life experiences, family origins, gender, class, religion, and so on.² This has always been the case. Still, increased communication technology and multinational industry have shed new light on our hybrid reality, clarifying how we live with and among those with multiple stories, some of which either resonate with or contest our own. In order for life-giving relationships with others to endure, humanity is obligated to move beyond the potentially totalizing categories of nature and grace and engage the plural and enmeshed qualities of human existence—in other words, to claim its hybridity.

DEFINING HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is not a new term. Gregor Mendel’s foundational research on genetic crossings in plant life provided one of the first definitions of hybridity.³ More recently, in the humanities postcolonialist theorists have invoked the notion of hybridity to signify identities that cannot be reduced to any one static homogenous concept or story.⁴ Even political leaders strive to consider a hybrid sense of

humanity. When the former senator from Illinois, and now the forty-fourth president of the United States of America, Barack Obama, was under fire for being part of Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s church, a pastor associated with what some have considered to be hate speech against white Americans, Obama, the son of a “black man” and a “white woman,” responded by retelling his own hybrid story:

I can no more disown him [Rev. Wright] than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can disown my white grandmother, a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed her by on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe. These people are a part of me. And they are part of America, this country that I love.⁵

Together with these scientific, philosophical, and political trajectories, Christianity has much to contribute to the conversation about human identity being composed of many stories, particularly in relation to the doctrines of creation and Christology.

HYBRIDITY

Hybridity is the mixing that brings forth new forms from previously identified categories. The term has roots in the modern usage of taxonomies for organizing information about the material world, and is characteristically used in the natural sciences (for example, in botany). The term has been claimed by postcolonial and feminist thought to refer to identities that cannot be captured by static categories. It describes the experience of having no fixed or pure identity, and instead occupying various social locations or stories simultaneously.

CREATION AS PLURAL

One cannot utter the notion of hybridity without turning to scripture and interrogating the two paradigmatic, canonical creation stories found in Genesis 1 and 2. Both these narratives enrich and challenge one another and, as a result, counter any commonsense notion that there is any “one true story” about what it means to be human. Turning first to the account in Genesis 1, men and women are described as created equally in God’s likeness, “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”⁶ For feminists, this often is regarded as the great equalizing text in that God is portrayed as making both genders good and sacred. However, here I want to move beyond issues exclusively pertinent to gender and assert that being created in God’s image and likeness underscores the theological idea that human beings carry the story of the divine within them. Human beings, therefore, are by nature hybrid, and what’s more, their hybridized identity is regarded as good in and of itself. Accordingly, any resistance to the goodness of our multistoried selves becomes a potential site of brokenness, rendering sin an important category in thinking through theological anthropology.

In Genesis 2, Christians are faced with another paradigmatic account of human creation, one in which a female is created from a male: “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.”⁷ Even when interpreted metaphorically, this story can be read to be problematic, since it has been used to classify women as derivatives of men, concretizing a gender dualism that is already rife within Roman Catholicism, as well as in secular consumerist culture. What if, however, we play with the idea that in forming a female from the male body, women carry within them the story of a lonely soul, of another’s suffering? In making another

human from the first, God creates a hybrid being, who recognizes the story of the other as connected to her own and, as a result, is enabled to have compassion for him. One might even add that in a way the female creature best symbolizes our plural existence, because in addition to being hybridized by the image of God, she is crossed and complicated by another other's story, namely, that of her partner.

There are other talking points about hybridity within the doctrine of creation. God makes difference sacred by creating a diversity of creatures, all of which are labeled as good. Connected to that plurality of diverse creatures is the sacralizing of the interdependence among them, since all creatures are dependent on their creator for every moment of their existence, rendering being dependent and feeling vulnerable normative. Interdependence carries over to the relations among creatures. Human beings are dependent on all the plants and animals of the earth, and the earth is vulnerable to the actions of all of creation. Being dependent and vulnerable is an essential aspect of claiming hybridity, in that in telling our stories we have to admit our connections to and differences from one another. And, finally, the theological idea of “sacramentality” itself, specifically the notion of God's presence in the created and finite world, illuminates human existence as hybrid in that there is a constant exchange between the sacred and the everyday.

JESUS AS HYBRID

Teachings about the person and work of Jesus Christ provide additional talking points for making the case that hybridity is a normative dimension of human existence. Christians are hard-pressed to ignore the many stories of the historical Jesus: he was a Jew, a man, a friend, and a son, incarnating a hybridity that landed him in trouble on more than a few occasions and, at other times, became the cause for celebration. In most instances, however, the effects of

Jesus' hybridity remain ambiguous at best. Few can forget John's portrayal of the wedding at Cana, when Mary demands that her son alleviate a wine shortage: "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'"⁸ While this text can be interpreted in any number of ways, even as a rebuke of Jesus' mother's assumptions, it is most interesting for our discussion to read it as Mary calling Jesus to attend to another one of his many stories. Although it is ultimately not up to her to decide when and where he needs to intervene, her request acknowledges that he is not merely the party guest in this context, but in many ways he serves in the role of the host—the one who can save it from ruin.⁹ Arguably here, Mary points to Jesus' hybrid identity. While most of us do not have the power to change water to wine or save the world, analogously we play different roles in our lives, all of which come with particular responsibilities and challenges when trying to create and maintain right relationships with others.

Beyond his many-storied historical self, Jesus was actively engaged with others and their stories. In each of the Gospels, Jesus is illustrated as an *other-oriented* person, someone who is consistently engaged with and transformed by the stories of others. He does not hide behind one fixed identity; in fact, he constantly challenges the privilege of the "one true story." One example of Jesus' other-oriented style can be found in the Gospel of Luke where Jesus asks his host, and really all of us, to invite others to our tables, not just the ones with the same old stories: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."¹⁰ Christians have interpreted this text among others

in terms of the call for “table fellowship,” creating the possibility for each one of us to open to others through their many stories, some of which are enmeshed with our own.¹¹

References to human existence as plural and enmeshed are not limited to the historical person of Jesus. One only needs to examine the doctrine of the incarnation, which asserts that “Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine . . . one [person] . . . existing in the two natures . . . without confusion, without change, without division, without separation,” to find another significant talking point for realizing what is at stake in claiming hybridity.¹² In the incarnation, as Jesus takes on simultaneously the “spatial trajectories” of humanity and divinity, the mysterious and the mundane live in proximity, and relationships with otherness are graced and made sacramental. Most importantly, this hybrid relationship between the divine and the human is salvific. In reflecting on our own hybridized existence, Christians might contemplate the mystery of Jesus’ hybridity, not with any fixation on locating any one pure or true story about his divinity or about his humanity, but about being opened to hope and redemption by the rich interplay between these stories.¹³

Finally, in Jesus’ death and resurrection, hybridity manifests even more profoundly as Christians proclaim that through the cross Jesus takes on the stories of many, including those of the most stigmatized of his time: women, children, the sick, and the outcast. He takes them on by making them important, by de-centering his own need for survival in order to secure theirs. He dies for all of humanity—not just for mine or yours, but for everyone’s stories. Like Jesus, who takes on the stories of many, Christians are called to bear the other’s story as their own, largely because it is theirs too. As Jesus becomes the one who shoulders the burden of all our histories and refuses to take shelter in any one story, in any one home, Christians are elected to model Jesus’ humble posture, not by merely trying to transcend self, but through carrying the weight of many in their own hybrid selves. One might want to push even

further and argue that resurrection is the hope for all of our stories to be acknowledged, even if they have to be rewritten or relinquished in an act of reconciliation toward another.

In suggesting that the Christian tradition demonstrates hybridity as a normative dimension of human existence, in which one is called to forfeit a single, fixed, and pure story about oneself to make room for another, I realize that I am treading on dangerous terrain. After all, don't some individuals and groups have more to relinquish than others? Moreover, is it fair to say that everyone experiences hybridity the same? Certainly not, since for some, embracing their identity as hybrid is not a choice but something they are forced to do and are stigmatized because of it, including those peoples and cultures fragmented and broken by conquest and exile.¹⁴ These hybrids have been dehumanized and demonized by more powerful groups because they do not have one pure story or one idealized identity in their background. Other groups are robbed of the right to call themselves hybrid altogether, even if they wanted to claim the name. African Americans, in many ways, have been essentialized to such an extreme by white supremacist ideology that there is little room for them to be conceptualized as anything else than other. This reductionist thinking allows privileged groups to resist acknowledging that African Americans are comprised of multiple stories, some of which overlap and intertwine with their own.¹⁵ While being vigilant about these particular experiences, I argue here against interpreting hybridity in any commonsense manner, and instead propose that none of us are free from the responsibility of acknowledging our hybridity or that of others. As we begin to claim our hybridity, we will see that we all have idealized stories we need to surrender in order to make room for those of another. The mere realization of the fact that "we are all hybrids" can lead to an existence in which we shed the arrogance of having the "one true story," overcome our blindness to other stories, and ultimately acknowledge that our many-storied selves are connected to those of others. These concessions create the possibility for

living in the image of God, honoring the incarnation, and emulating Jesus’ other-oriented activity—in other words, for being human in a world with others.

THE COST OF HYBRIDITY

With all our heightened attention to the plural and enmeshed reality of human existence, it still is tempting to live as if our identities are singular and pure, not trespassed and challenged by the stories of others—that our story is the one, the only, and the true story. In fact, there is an undeniable cost to claiming hybridity, namely, that of giving up the “one true story” that provides us with a security blanket, shielding us from appearing or feeling vulnerable, and permitting us to avoid the responsibility of dealing with another’s stories. It is hard to deny that life would be somewhat easier, at least in the short term, if I could really buy into the idea that my story of being a Christian is the most important one in my life, or that I am a mother first and foremost. If either of those scenarios were the case, I could make ethical decisions quite easily and organize my social relationships accordingly. I would feel like I have a modicum of certainty and control in my life. Nevertheless, being human from a Christian perspective demands that one cease longing for total control and embrace the reality that our freedom and responsibility are always directed in service of another and their complicated stories. Any denial of that obligation defies our God-given plural and social—or what I have been calling hybrid—nature, leading to brokenness in individuals and communities.

Some feminist theologians, including myself, are inclined to resist the discourse of “sin” because it has been used to devalue women, starting with Eve as the locus of human transgression. However, one cannot adequately attend to the plurality of identity without sustaining, in the words of Serene Jones, “serious reflection on the depth to which persons can ‘fall’ in their brokenness and their participation in the breaking of others.”¹⁶ Sin is an

important piece in the discussion of anthropology, because when people refuse to engage their freedom in a way that respects their social relationships with all of creation, they risk refusing the call to live in the image of God and honor the incarnation. In the midst of hybrid existence, sin occurs when we fail to attend to the needs, feelings, memories, and stories of another. We sin not necessarily because we are mean-spirited or even because we are consumed by hubris, but perhaps, as Bernard Lonergan explains, because such sin is a result of scotoma, of being blinded to our hybrid existence. We experience this blindness as bias, which prevents us from having insights about ourselves that would reveal our negative feelings toward others. Fear, prejudice, and anger permeate our biased outlooks, prohibiting us from acknowledging how our individual and group stories are multiple and enmeshed with those of others.¹⁷ Overcoming the brokenness among individuals and groups that results from scotoma is an important dimension in claiming one's hybridity and building right relationships with others.

Without a doubt, theological anthropology can be read in terms of living among others with many stories. The question before us now is: how do ordinary persons, begin to consider the effects of their stories on others, to claim their hybridity? In a way, it begins with autobiographical storytelling that seeks to be as honest and responsible as possible—to tell one's stories in a way that invites others into one's life.

STORYTELLING AS PRAXIS

I consider myself a laywoman, a feminist, and a Roman Catholic (not necessarily in that order), and not surprisingly, some of these stories compete with others for my time and energy. More often than not, any one of my stories seeps into that of another, resulting in a situation permeated with ambiguity and internal emotional conflict. As a lay Catholic feminist theologian, I am also a mother, and every so often when I mother my two children, I feel as if I am neglecting my

students and colleagues; or when I tout my professional story, I feel as if I am ignoring the needs of my family. From another angle, from time to time when I embrace Roman Catholicism, I feel as if I am falling short of my feminist ideals.

This is not the end of the responsibility to others that my stories bring. In being a laywoman, a feminist, and a Catholic in an ecclesial context, I hold certain privileges that the women before me did not. It is not too strong to suggest that a laywoman in today’s world can wield as much or more power as any woman religious, whereas in the past this power dynamic may not have been present. This volume on Catholic feminist thought is written largely by laywomen, virtually destabilizing and marginalizing the previously privileged stories of women religious who came before. These shifts in power in relation to our stories must not be swept under the table to which we are called. Undoubtedly, talking about these issues is not always comfortable or desirable. I would like to think I secured my place in this book through my own merit. Claiming hybridity forces me to realize that I am always connected and indebted to others, some of whose stories are now occluded by my own. In order for right relationships of human flourishing and trust to emerge—to stand shoulder to shoulder with one another—human beings in general, and Christians in particular, have a responsibility to enact their freedom by being honest about these tensions and by being vigilant about how our stories overlap and intertwine with one another. As long as we hold on to singular, un-trespassed stories about ourselves, our religion, culture, and nation and, consequently, ignore the reality that many of our stories merge and conflict with that of another, we fall victim to sin.

Beyond these intensely personal stories, some of my stories are more politically charged, like that of being a Christian in the United States. After 9/11, many U.S. citizens, and many of them Christian, have adhered to a certain role when identifying themselves: the helpless victim of an unfathomable attack.

Feeling victimized by terrorists who can be anyone, strike anywhere, and at any time has led to unending discourse and anxiety about the need to survive in this uncertain world. These fears over survival have had disastrous effects, legitimizing inhuman and unjust acts across the globe. Claiming hybridity in the midst of the affective overflow of 9/11, including U.S. military engagements around the world, requires great courage and stamina in order to analyze how the roles of victim and perpetrator are cast, and to consider whether, and if so how, the stories about the victims and the perpetrators overlap and intertwine. There is very little wiggle room in the public sphere to imagine these roles and stories as overlapping, that the one who has been hurt may be connected (if only *de facto*) to those who are responsible for causing the injury; in other words, there is limited tolerance for being responsible for hybrid existence within the backdrop of global fears about terrorism. Like that of any story that wields a totalizing and hegemonic appeal, Christians must resist patriotism based in the ideology of victimhood and grapple with the stories of others, even the stories belonging to those typed as perpetrators. They must do this not to be in style with the latest theories about identity as multiple, but rather to avoid the sin of scotoma. Holding on to the primacy of one story at the expense of being blind to all others refuses to honor the good of all of creation, the mystery of the incarnation, and the right relationships between God and humanity and among all of creation modeled in Jesus' other-oriented activity.

MATERNITY AS A METAPHOR FOR HYBRIDITY¹⁸

Unlike at any other moment of my life, when I was pregnant with my two children, I felt hostage to the other and challenged by the multiplicity of stories that informed my identity. For those few months, I was concretely hybrid. Maternity is *one* way to speak

about what is at stake in claiming hybridity as a theological metaphor, one that is responsible to having overlapping and contesting stories that complicate our relationships with others.

MOTHER ISSUES

As one might already imagine, speaking about hybridity in terms of maternity and motherhood is not without problems. My work could be read as myopic, as there are countless people who cannot be mothers, including women who strongly desire to do so but are unable for a whole host of biological, economic, political, and technological reasons. My work also raises the question of whether my telling of this particular story excludes others. Or put more starkly, does even uttering the word *mother* in either a theological or academic setting further oppress women who feel either exploited by that story or alienated from it? My intention is not to occlude or erase any of these stories or hurt anyone, but to put forward one metaphor among many that further illuminates the very complicated process of being Christian in today’s world of plurality.

Others may label my invocation of the specter of motherhood as essentialist in that by suggesting that women have the potential to experience a certain role, I am reducing them to that specific role, namely, that of mothering. With the tendency toward essentialism as insidious as it is in an ecclesial context, and even more narrowly as defined by Roman Catholicism, I do not take this charge lightly. As Mary, the virgin mother, is cast as the perfect impossible role model, and as reductionist connotations about Mary and motherhood are embellished by spousal, heterosexist imagery that concretizes unequal and potentially harmful power relationships within the church, I too have wondered if Christians have any more room for another mother.¹⁹ I hope by the end of my essay it becomes clear that the anthropology I espouse purports precisely the opposite, specifically, that there is always room for another’s story at the table, and that welcoming another has the potential to

dislodge the dominant glamorized reading of motherhood in the Christian traditions as well as within everyday culture. In other words, I seek to complicate those insidious narratives that fabricate the “mommy myth” about an idealized woman with an unending reservoir of love, who sacrifices without complaint and never loses her temper.²⁰ Therefore, if I am engaging in essentialism, I hope it fits the label of what some feminists categorize as “strategic,” and that by rethinking maternity as a metaphor for hybrid existence, I can begin to chip away at the primacy of that one oppressive story about motherhood that blinds us to the many other stories of maternity, including those which uphold the reality that for some, it is not important to become a mother at all.²¹

MATERNAL HYBRIDS

From conception forward, a woman is hostage to an other who continually encroaches upon and de-centers her one private story, her soliloquy. Physical symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, fatigue, and fetal movement, commonly referred to as quickening, concretize this changing dynamic. Even if the pregnancy is interrupted, her story is trespassed and multiplied. Julia Kristeva writes of this process of emerging hybridity:

Cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down. Within the body, growing as a graft, indomitable there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. “It happens, but I’m not there.” “I cannot realize it, but it goes on.” Motherhood’s impossible syllogism.²²

With these bodily changes come emotional uncertainty and fear of what the other will bring. When I was expecting my first child, feeling him “kick” for the first time was so exhilarating, as each movement symbolized another dream that I had for his

future. With my second child there was a strange apprehension that accompanied each poke and hiccup. I realized that my story was no longer my own and that I was enmeshed with that of another’s story, over which I had very little control, yet toward which I had a momentous obligation.

One might think birth, which is an undeniable act of separation, clears up the physical or emotional ambiguity in the encounter between mother/self and fetus/other. Yet, separation on either level is never really possible when everyday life is shaped by the needs, feelings, memories, and stories related to that of another. A mother’s story seems indelibly marked by the otherness that was part of her either for a short while or for nine months five times over. Whether there is a “strong effect” or a “vague awareness” between the mother and the fetus, the “leaky boundary” between them makes their relationship difficult to navigate, as one spills over onto one another, creating as close as humans can get to living-hybrid existence concretely.²³ One needs to be honest about that challenge as they claim their hybrid existence and, as a result, realize the gravity of being interconnected with others and making responsible decisions accordingly—choices that are not necessarily based in accepting the other automatically without attending to the stories of all the parties involved.

“Ambivalence” about the stories of motherhood is not always tolerated, and in many ways it “remains a taboo subject.”²⁴ It is not as if women, including theorists, theologians, and ethicists, do not express mixed emotions about conception, pregnancy, and parenting; rather, it is tough for them and others to hear.²⁵ One might say that there is a blindness to the other stories about motherhood. Many people cringed when Adrienne Rich used the term “monstrous” to describe her experience of motherhood in the feminist classic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.²⁶ It is not as if everything about mothering is horrible; on the contrary, everything about mothering is ambiguous. Rich writes: “The bad and the good

moments are inseparable for me. I recall the times when, suckling each of my children, I saw his eyes open full to mine, and realized each one of us was fastened to the other, not only by mouth and breast, but through mutual gaze."²⁷

This snapshot of the intricate interdependence of maternity has the potential to highlight the multitude of complexities that hybrid existence brings. In a fascinating way, the interplay between the painful and the pleasurable moments and the multiplicity of overlapping and intertwining stories, which are both endemic to motherhood, bring to bear the most fundamental challenges of being human in a world with others. Claiming our hybridity is not easy, nor is it immediately rewarding; rather, in many ways, like being a mother, it is "complex and profound and terrifying."²⁸ Yet it seems our only option. By resisting any "one true story" about idealized motherhood, or more pertinent to our discussion, about what it means to be human, we become liberated and, dare I say, "graced" to celebrate and embrace even more fully the goodness of creation, the centrality of human freedom, and right relationships with God and others in our everyday lives.