Rooting Our Systematic Theologies: The Moral Dimension of a Theology of Retrieval

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Abstract:
In the last decades 'theologies of retrieval' have become a popular way of doing systematic theology and reconnecting pre-modern authors with contemporary theological issues. This 'retrieval' of history within systematic theology is, however, not without its moral challenges. Certainly, today we have become more conscious of our presumptions and one-sidedness in our interpretations of historical events (e.g. the Dutch 'golden' age). A theology of retrieval can hence quickly be used to serve particular contemporary theological ends that fail to do justice to the complexity of the actual sources and run the risk of 'overemplotting' the past. Based on an exploration of James McClendon's retrieval of the Radical Reformation in his baptist vision, an argument is made for a more conscious 'art of historical conversation' within present-day systematic theology, especially theologies of retrieval.

Keywords:
Theology of retrieval; systematic theology; church history; ethics; James McClendon; Radical Reformation

Introduction

Coming from a bi-ecclesial background, both reformed and evangelical, studying theology at an academic level was both something admired, as well as looked upon with suspicion. When I was about six years of age, my parents exchanged the Dutch Reformed church for an independent evangelical church. It was characterised by a high stress placed on personal faith and the typical 'cover to cover' approach to scripture. This direct connection between the 'then' of the Bible and the 'now' of the reader eliminated not only the need for careful exegesis, but also any accountability toward the generations of Christians who had read the

Bible previously. During my theological studies as an adolescent, I encountered a different understanding of the church, one in which I learned to see my personal faith as rooted in the church of the ages. As a result, I increasingly came to see the absence of such a conscious catholicity among Dutch free churches as a form of theological self-deprivation. For the church as the Christian community through history exists precisely as a long line of reception and transmission under the guidance of the Spirit: 'the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints' (Jude 1:3). Tradition, another dreaded concept, does not refer to a 'dead church' long gone, but denotes the very lifeblood of the church today — as Jaroslav Pelikan so famously remarked: 'Tradition is the living faith of the dead.'[1] Studying the past thus becomes a theological obligation. It is therefore not surprising that in my own research as a systematic theologian, I continue to look back to the past to retrieve these lively voices for the church of today.

However, the way we retrieve events and figures from the past is not without its difficulties. Certainly today, we are repeatedly reminded of how narrations of history are tainted by the contextual bias of the narrator. Constructions of the events of history also contain a particular evaluation of history. For example, the seventeenth century is branded as the famous Dutch 'Golden Age', which accentuates its economic success above the horrific circumstances in which slaves were shipped from Africa to Brazil and Suriname. Likewise, a partiality is evident in the use of the term 'pioneers' over 'imperialists' (or vice versa) when describing the missionaries of the Christian Missionary Movement in the nineteenth century. There is, using the words of Rowan Williams, 'a moral dimension to the writing of history'.[2] When we tell a story about the past we make (value) judgements, selections, and prominences that are given with our subject position. Accordingly, when we look back into the Christian past to strengthen or revive theological debate today,

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[1] See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1971), p. 9.

[2] Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past: The Quest for the Historical Church,* Sarum Theological Lectures (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), p. 11, cf. pp. 24–26.

as specifically characterises the mode of theology commonly labelled as 'theology/ies of retrieval', we need to reflect on the kind of story we tell; for the way systematic theologians narrate history in their theological expositions subsequently 'expresses and nurtures' convictions of what it is to be Christian.[3] In view of further exploring this moral dimension in retrieving history, I will first describe the relation between history and theological argument in the so-called theologies of retrieval. Then I will reflect on the moral dimension from the perspective of historical theory which will provide the language tools to then subsequently analyse and reflect on James McClendon's retrieval of the Radical Reformation in the construction of his 'baptist vision'. Based on these findings, I will offer some preliminary thoughts on the moral dimension of retrieving historical voices in contemporary systematic-theological discourse.

The Retrieval of History in Systematic Theology

Since Christian faith is grounded in the history of the people of Israel, the witness of Jesus's ministry and passion by first-century Jews, and the continuing worship practice of the Christian communities over centuries, systematic-theological argument is intimately connected with the understanding of this historical trajectory.[4] For the central doctrines that make up Christian confessions did not come out of the blue, as the product of direct revelation, but are often the outcome — provisional as they may be — of debates set in a certain context and time. Consequently, as Colin Gunton reflects, 'what we make of questions of history will often have a bearing on how we see faith today'.[5]

The twentieth century, encouraged to do so by Karl Barth,[6] witnessed a resurgence of theological argument by way of resourcing the church's own history.[7] Among these *ressourcement* theologians there are,

[3] Cf. Christopher Ellis, *Gathering: The Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 98. Ellis writes in the context of liturgical celebration — yet his argument likewise applies to storytelling in general.

[4] See Colin Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. by Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 3–20.

[5] Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology', p. 3.

[6] Cf. Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I/1 (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1947), § 1.

[7] See notably Michael Allen, and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 1–48; W. David

besides McClendon, many Baptist theologians: Stephen R. Holmes, Elizabeth Newman, and Curtis Freeman, and in the Dutch context, Olof de Vries and Henk Bakker.[8] The name-giver of this mode of doing constructive systematic theology is the late John Webster (d. 2016) who, in his contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, used 'theology of retrieval' to capture this trend.[9] In his wake, several scholars adopted his terminology to denote a methodology in which pre-modern authors and movements appear as principal conversation partners to discuss contemporary issues.[10] As Darren Sarisky recently explained, 'Theologies of retrieval unsettle present discussions by offering resources from beyond the current horizon with a view toward enriching ongoing debates.'[11] Webster, in the aforementioned chapter, though fully aware of the large variety and ecumenical diversity of retrieval studies, perceives a 'common concern' that motivates this diverse group of *ressourcement* theologians; namely that the influence of Enlightenment critique 'distanced theology both from its given object and from the legacies of its past'.[12] As such, Webster views theologies of retrieval as an attempt to *reconnect* academic theology to its own distinct sphere, the community of faith that connects past and present. Especially by way of re-reading pre-modern sources, theologians of

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Buschart and Kent Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval: Receiving the Past, Renewing the Church* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), pp. 11–42; and Darren Sarisky, ed., *Theologies of Retrieval: An Exploration and Appraisal,* T&T Clark Theology (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

8 In order: Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest of the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012); Elizabeth Newman, *Attending to the Wounds on Christ's Body: Teresa's Scriptural Vision* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012); and Curtis Freeman, *Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017); Olof de Vries, *Leer en praxis van de vroege dopers: Uitgelegd al seen theologie van de geschiedenis* (Leeuwarden: Gerben Dykstra, 1982); and notably Henk Bakker, 'Tangible Church: Challenging the Apparitions of Docetism (Hughey Lectures)', *Baptistic Theologies,* 5, no. 2 (2013), 1–58.

9 See John Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 583–599.

10 See J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 2–7; Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), p. xxiii; and Jan Martijn Abrahamse, *Ordained Ministry in Free Church Perspective: Retrieving Robert Browne (c. 1550–1633) for Contemporary Ecclesiology*, Studies in Reformed Theology, Vol. 41 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2020), pp. 10–15.

11 Darren Sarisky, 'Introduction', to *Theologies of Retrieval*, p. 2.

12 Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', p. 584.

retrieval aim to present to 'contemporary practitioners descriptions of the faith unharassed by current anxieties, and enabling a certain liberty in relation to the present'.[13] As of consequence, in theologies of retrieval historical research becomes systematic theology since the contents of historical documents (whether confessions, catechisms, monographs, or letters) are not only treated as merely containing past particulars but as representing actual voices whose theological arguments, ideas and concepts are considered a valued contribution to constructive theology in the present day.[14] Meaning that those categories which have become untenable for modern writers, such as divine inspiration, vocation, or providence, are not treated as outdated vocabulary but as sources to advance current debate. In sum, as Webster notes about theologians of retrieval, '[t]hey consider modernity, however understood, to be a contingent, not an absolute, phenomenon, and suggest that whatever misdirections have occurred can be corrected by skilful deployment of the spiritual and intellectual capital of Christianity'.[15]

In his article Webster also touches briefly upon some 'perils' of theologies of retrieval as he calls it. First of all, theologies of retrieval might employ a too solid understanding of 'the tradition' that overstates its actual historical substance or negates the process-based character of the formulation of doctrinal statements. The second temptation Webster mentions, 'is to subscribe to a myth of the fall of theology from Christian genuineness at some point in its past (fourteenth-century nominalism, the sixteenth-century Reformation, seventeenth-century Cartesianism, or wherever 'modernity' is considered to present itself)'.[16] By this Webster refers to the specific (moral) attitude with which we look to the past; either motivated by imagined superiority, by prejudice or by ignorance we can oversimplify our readings of the past. As such, narrations of the past can become 'myths'.[17] In other words, we can mistreat our historical conversation partners due to the moral templates

[13] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', pp. 584–5.
[14] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', pp. 585; cf. Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology', pp. 5–6.
[15] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', p. 589.
[16] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', p. 596.
[17] Cf. R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, pp. 22–23. Rowan Williams likewise speaks of 'foundational myths' when the past is used as a source of deception in the present: 'that there has been a primitive disaster in which truth has been lost or overlaid.'

with which we present their history. Of course, that does not mean that it is easy to identify where 'myth' begins and 'history' ends or vice versa.

The Moral Dimension: Managing Our Relations with the Past

Webster's caveats force us to rethink our handling of historical sources, especially since our motivation is inspired by a contemporary concern. Rowan Williams reminds us, 'We don't have a single "grid" for history; we construct it when we want to resolve certain problems about who we are now.'[18] How do we prevent a retrieval from becoming mere nostalgia ('it used to be better'), superiority ('this is the only pure tradition'), or romantic idealism ('would we only return to this authentic form')? Whereas total objectivity is beyond the attainable, systematic theologians should be aware of this moral dimension that accompanies their interpretations and presentations of history, certainly when in view of the purpose of strengthening a certain ecclesial tradition or reviewing a contemporary theological debate.

Rowan Williams's remark raises the question of the relationship between narrative and event, between what is told and what happened. Northrop Frye, the famous literary critic, makes a clear distinction between *mythos* ('plot') and history writing, between the poet and the historian. 'Myth' (*mythos*), as Frye applies it, refers to the narrative construction ('plot') of historical facts preferring unity and coherence over realistic or factual accuracy.[19] History represents 'events put into the form of words. The historian imitates action directly: he [sic] makes specific statements about what happened, and is judged by the truth of

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[18] R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, p. 5.

[19] See the work of Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harbinger, 1963), pp. 37–70 (pp. 21–38, 53); and *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1971; first published 1957). Though Frye acknowledges that it refers primarily to a type of storytelling (stories of gods located outside history), in practice he says to follow Aristotle's use of *mythos* (*Poetics*, 6) as the composition of events (*viz.* his four mythological archetypes: tragedy, comedy, irony, and romance). It is disputed if Frye's version actually represents Aristotle truthfully, as he fails to recognise Aristotle's distinction between the arrangement of actions or 'plot' (*mythos*) and the ascription of intention or 'character' (*ēthos*). Consequently, modern writers too quickly assume that the construction of narrative and the ethical dimension coincide, see Elizabeth Belfiore, 'Narratological Plots and Aristotle's Mythos', *Arethusa,* 33, no. 1 (2000), 37–70 (pp. 41-42, 55, 64).

what he says.'[20] Poets are, on the other hand, concerned with what happens with their writing, they write to make something happen: 'We notice that when a historian's scheme gets to a certain point of comprehensiveness it becomes mythical in shape, and so approaches the poetic in its structure.'[21] Yet Frye continues to make a sharp differentiation, arguing that a historian seeks to limit themselves to the action of human events, working inductively 'collecting his facts and trying to avoid any informing patterns except those that he sees', while the poet 'works deductively' by imposing a certain pattern (*mythos*) upon the subject.[22] In short, a historian 'works toward his unifying form, as the poet works from it'.[23] In this sense, Frye concludes, 'the historical is the opposite of the mythical'.[24]

The philosopher of history Hayden White, in response to Frye's thesis, opposes this sharp opposition between history and poetry. Historical events, he argues, do not contain narratives but only 'story elements' at most.[25] Historians 'familiarize the unfamiliar' by making a comprehensible story, an *emplotment*; yet telling a story *of* history includes attributing narrative meanings *to* history.[26] Historical narratives thus not merely reproduce facts, but already tell the audience what to think of these events and therefore contain a 'fictive element,' argues White.[27] The moral dimension, then, in White's explanation, is given with the subject position of the scholar who not only recounts history to the reader but provides it with meaning and directs the audience to see and respond to the narrated history in a certain way.[28] Since these constructions are therefore always provisional and susceptible to

20 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 53.
21 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, pp. 53–54.
22 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 54.
23 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 55.
24 Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 55.
25 Hayden White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames*, ed. by Brian Richardson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 191–210 (p. 194).
26 White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', p. 196.
27 See White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', pp. 201, 208–9.
28 Cf. Kalle Pihlainen, 'The Work of Hayden White II: Defamiliarizing Narrative', in *The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory*, ed. by Nancy Partner and Sarah Foot (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2013), 119–135 (pp. 119–120).

revision, historians should therefore present their accounts as such.[29] The risk is that we '*overemplot*' the historical facts in our narrative constructions and charge them 'with meaning so intense' that we forget to discern past from present and facts from our storied interpretations.[30] Hence, the question becomes: How to familiarise people with historical events without, to borrow White's term, 'overemplotting' the historical evidence? How do we discern narrative construction from mere myth?

In his book *Wanneer het verleden trekt* (When the past draws us in),[31] the Dutch philosopher of history Herman Paul explores this moral dimension when he discusses the ways historians relate to the past. Following White,[32] Paul acknowledges that 'story' is not something inherent to historical events but something which is laid upon the facts of history (*historia res gestae*) to provide them with meaning and significance (*historia rerum gestarum*).[33] The Dutch title above already captures the aforementioned ambivalence of historical investigation: our relation to the past is not neutral. The past can 'draw us in', fascinate us, give rise to awe in us, make us become angry or whatever. The 'historical distance' we have to a certain time can be explained both in temporal as well as in affective terms. That is why, he argues, we have to specify our relation to the past. Paul then surveys various ways of relating to the past, such as the epistemic (getting knowledge), the moral (denoting virtues and vices), the political (deriving social and societal significance), aesthetic (attributing genre and shape), and the material relation (how we encounter remaining material objects from the past):

> [H]ow then can the relations be distinguished from each other? The answer is that every relation except the material one […] focuses on one or more specific aims. Almost every relation with the past is characterized by one or

[29] Cf. White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', p. 192.
[30] White, 'The Historical Text as Literary Artifact', p. 197.
[31] Herman Paul, *Wanneer het verleden trekt: Kernthema's in de geschiedfilosofie* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2014), published in English as *Key Issues in Historical Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015). The Dutch title (When the past draws us in) is derived from a poem by the Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman (1899–1940): 'als het verleden trekt, zoek dan een land, dat iemand heeft begaan, zoek naar den leegen weg.'
[32] See Herman Paul, *Hayden White: The Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011).
[33] See Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, p. 28; cf. *Wanneer het verleden trekt*, p. 46. I will refer to the English version in the footnotes hereafter.

> more goods that people hope to acquire in that relation. This may be knowledge of human nature or insight into causal connections, but also pleasure or profit.[34]

In making our historical constructions we can identify our 'bias' with regard to the voices from the past by questioning ourselves: What am I after? What is the 'good' I aim to preserve? Though there is a distinction, as said above, between *lived lives* and *narrated lives*, there is also interaction:

> Stories not only have a referential aspect, in the sense that they refer to reality and try to interpret it, but also a performative dimension. That is to say: they intervene in reality by providing people with frameworks in the light of which they think and act.[35]

Paul, combining White's thesis with J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, explains that our narrative constructions of history contain illocutionary intentions and have perlocutionary effects.[36] Our constructions of the past can, for example, be motivated (illocution) by critiquing certain moral values or practices, with the possible effect of changing perspectives and attitudes (perlocution). Yet, Paul comments, the desire to see our own ideas confirmed by history quickly runs the risk of making the past a 'ventriloquist's puppet' of the present.[37] This is essentially what White meant by 'overemplotment'. Historians need to be aware of their particular tradition (or 'subject position'), as these traditions provide our unavoidable 'starting points' for orientation in the world, by which we recognise 'that every interpretation starts from prejudices that traditions supply to the interpreting subject'.[38] In other words, to be aware of one's subject position demands awareness of one's own tradition; to know both its strengths as well as its weaknesses, its limitations, and its incentives.

To address the above observations and conclusions, Paul suggests approaching the moral dimension of historical investigation in

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[34] Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, pp. 33–34.
[35] Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, p. 64.
[36] See Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, pp. 39–40.
[37] Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, p. 128.
[38] Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, pp. 44–46, 51.

terms of relationship management, 'the art of historical conversation'.[39] Rather than letting contemporary motivation for studying the past have priority, the art of historical conversation starts with considering the past on its own; listening to history as a strange past before arguing *with* or *on the basis of* history in the present. Paul essentially argues to treat an historical event, document, or person, first as a stranger. When one treats historical sources first like an unknown 'other', self-questioning rather than self-confirmation becomes the central feature. Before deriving any moral, political, aesthetic *goods* from a certain source, the epistemic relation needs to be fostered: knowledge and understanding. That means asking questions relating to knowledge and understanding of the past, being open for correction by other scholars, and from the actual sources themselves, and the importance of keeping some distance toward the other relations (other than the epistemic).

Paul enables us to better understand the difference between emplotment and overemplotment by stipulating the different relations we can have towards the past when doing historical research. Paul's picture of the scholar's moral responsibility shows the importance of postponing one's own interest in order to listen more carefully to the sources. When we forget to approach the past as a stranger whom we need to get to know (epistemic relation), the past quickly becomes an instrument in the pursuit of our own theological agenda. Theologians who argue by way of historical retrieval and pursue a degree of realism, must be willing to 'listen' to the actual conversation in which the source is historically located. To prevent overemplotting historical events, they must be open to correction. The past might theologically be alive through the community of faith ('tradition as the living faith of the dead'), historically there are only remnants of the past that demand careful consideration. Especially since the way systematic theologians narrate history in their theological expositions also 'expresses and nurtures' convictions of what it is to be Christian, they need to reflect on their relation to the specific past they aim to retrieve: what kind of story do I tell, how do I relate to this past event, what *goods* do I aim to

[39] See Paul, *Key Issues in Historical Theory*, pp. 129–33, 142–7. See for a similar argument with regard to the general interpretation of texts Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

retrieve, and what is my aim for present debate? To relate these findings to the practice of systematic theology, I will examine James McClendon's retrieval of the Radical Reformation to see how he relates to this past in order to assess his emplotment of the historical facts of the sixteenth-century reformations.

McClendon's Baptist Vision and The Radical Reformation

James McClendon (1924–2000) presents his 'baptist vision' in his three-volume Systematic Theology, *Ethics, Doctrine*, and *Witness*,[40] not coincidentally also a core element, both beloved and feared by students, in the curriculum of the Dutch Baptist Seminary in Amsterdam. McClendon is an exponent of what some have referred to as a 'neo-Anabaptist' resurgence in the second half of the twentieth century, prominently associated with John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.[41] Central to their contributions is their looking into the history of the Radical Reformation to critique and renew modern theological discourse (e.g. voluntarism, consumerism, just war theory) by providing an alternate systematic-theological proposal with distinct roots in Christian history. References to the Radical Reformation and its representatives can be found throughout McClendon's three volumes, yet for our purposes here, I have selected those parts where McClendon explicitly comments on his methodology, and his retrieval of the Schleitheim confession as a more concrete example.

In the first volume, *Ethics,* McClendon introduces his particular approach and methodology for his baptist vision; he specifically explains his aim to draw on the heritage of the Radical Reformation to root his own theology in an independent ecclesial tradition alongside the Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Anglican traditions: 'A Christian

[40] James Wm McClendon, Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Volume 1*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002; first published 1984); *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994); *Witness: Systematic Theology, Volume 3* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

[41] See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 109–10, 150–66; and Stefan Paas, 'The Counter-Cultural Church: An Analysis of the Neo-Anabaptist Contribution to Missional Ecclesiology in the Post-Christendom West', *Ecclesiology,* 15, no 3. (2019), 283–301 (pp. 287–89). McClendon's agenda is obviously influenced by Harold Bender's influential proposal 'The Anabaptist Vision', *Church History,* 13 (1944), 3–24.

theology, we may say provisionally, must have a community of reference that cannot without confusion be subsumed under some more general ecclesial type.'[42] McClendon casts a fairly wide net when it comes to the various ecclesial groups he identifies as 'heirs' of the Radical reformers,[43] including even those who do not necessarily share his 'baptist vision'. Fundamental to his historical construction is the conviction that the Radical Reformation represents a distinct, yet overlooked and marginalised, tradition of ecclesial reformation in which contemporary 'baptists' (intentionally written with a small 'b' to include more ecclesial movements than just denominational Baptists) find their roots: 'The baptists in all their variety and disunity *failed to see in their own heritage, their own way of using Scripture, their own communal practices, their own guiding vision,* a resource for theology unlike the prevailing tendencies round about them.'[44] Clearly, McClendon aims to rectify not only the neglect of the Radical heritage but also to substitute dominant theological agendas (e.g. Calvinist, Arminian, Modernist) that fail to provide sufficient ethos and doctrine in light of contemporary challenges. The purpose of his ecclesial emancipation, namely, to retrieve the Radical heritage as a distinct baptist theological voice for today, returns again notably in the introduction to the second volume, *Doctrine*, where he writes that his

> contribution is to show that one large segment of Christian believers, next in size perhaps to Roman Catholics and exceeded in age by none, is under-represented in recent theology, and to remedy that defect as best as I can.

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[42] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 19.

[43] For example, McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 33–34 identifies, 'Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ, Mennonites, Plymouth Brethren, Adventists, Russian Evangelicals, perhaps Quakers, certainly Black Baptists (who often go by other names), the (Anderson, Indiana) Church of God, Southern and British and European and American Baptists, the Church of the Brethren, the Assemblies of God and other Pentecostal bodies, assorted intentional communities not self-identified as churches, missionary affiliates of all the above (and, as pointed out in an earlier section, hundreds of other bodies even in the United States and Canada alone).'

[44] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 26 (emphasis original). See for the 'small-b baptists', his 'The Voluntary Church in the Twenty-First Century', in *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church*, ed. by William H. Brackney, Studies in the Believers Church Tradition (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1998), 179–198 (p. 183). See the discussion of McClendon's complex use of 'baptist' in Spencer Boersma, 'The Baptist Vision: Narrative Theology and Baptist Identity in the Thought of James Wm. McClendon, Jr.' (doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 2017), pp. 244–53.

> Heirs of the Radical Reformation are often theologically pigeonholed as confused (though sincere) Protestants.[45]

The underlying unity behind McClendon's baptist tradition is provided by what he calls the '*narrative common life*'.[46] He directs us to understand the stories of past and present baptists, thus including the Radical Reformation, as one, continual tradition of practices and convictions on the basis of which he can speak of 'the baptist vision': 'by a vision I mean the guiding pattern by which a people (or as here, a combination of peoples) shape their thought and practice.'[47] This 'narrative common life' of Radical reform is then identified by five theological *notae* or 'distinguishing marks of the heirs of the Radicals': Biblicism, Liberty, Discipleship, Community, and Mission.[48]

In the course of mapping out his baptist vision, references to the heritage of the Radical reformers appear frequently to root or exemplify, among other things, his narrative methodology, his embodied ethics, and views on war, violence and authority and, of course, his characteristic hermeneutics of 'this is that/then is now'.[49] Since space does not allow for a full exploration of every instance where he makes an argument based on or reference to the Radical Reformation, I want to highlight a particular and more extensive example that can be found in chapter nine of *Ethics*. Here McClendon presents the Schleitheim confession as an event in which the communal dimension (*koinonia*) of the post-resurrection ethics as described in the New Testament is restored. Before going into the text of the confession itself, he explains his selection of this event:

> Conventional church history, when it adverts to the sixteenth-century baptist movement, has all too often cited Muenster. Indeed the tragedy at Muenster, like that at Jonestown, Guyana (1978), shows how the baptist vision can be perverted (just as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Thirty Years' War, and the witchcraft trials show how the Catholic and Protestant traditions can be

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45 McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 8.
46 McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 26 (emphasis original).
47 McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 27.
48 McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 27.
49 See for example *Ethics*, pp. 37, 68–71, 315; *Doctrine*, pp. 184, 341–3, 482–7; and *Witness*, pp. 78, 330–1.

> perverted). But an earlier and more typical picture of Baptists—one of the very earliest communal pictures—comes not from Muenster but from a gathering of radical Christians on a mountainside near Schleitheim, a Swiss-Austrian border town, in February 1527.[50]

As is fitting with his emancipatory project, McClendon aims to retrieve a confident theological heritage to root his communal and non-Constantinian baptist vision.[51] To do so, he refuses the often rehearsed 'Münster-image' and adopts the Schleitheim confession as the central picture to motivate the communal character of his baptist vision, as it more adequately represents the history of Grebel, Blaurock, Manz, Hubmaier, Sattler, and others, who understood that old 'Christendom' undermined Christian life. Schleitheim's rejection of 'the sword' as a symbol for earthly political power and violence (Article 6), therefore, is a more accurate representation of the radical reformers' legacy.[52] To demonstrate the gravity of the Schleitheim confession, McClendon makes a sharp differentiation between the conformity of the Magisterial Reformation ('submitting the word of God to the power of the princes or prelates'), and the direction in which these 'radical baptists' under the leadership of Michael Sattler went.[53] Against the prevalent *cuius regio, eius religio* these Anabaptist leaders gathered in Southern Germany where they 'adopted a method that was to have historic consequences — the *dialogue of those concerned*. They called a meeting for dialogue and decision, beginning on a day in February 1527, near centrally located but quiet Schleitheim."[54] According to McClendon, it was during these

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[50] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 246.

[51] Cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. by Michael J. Cartwright (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), especially pp. 242–261. In line with Yoder, McClendon understands the Constantinian turn in the early fourth century as an ecclesial 'Fall' that led to a situation in which the church became mixed up in political affairs and lost its eschatological dimension. Cf. Hunter, *To Change the World*, pp. 152–6.

[52] Already in the introduction to *Ethics*, McClendon commented that among the sixteenth-century Anabaptists there 'were with few exceptions nonviolent, that is, pacifists, and individually they were widely regarded as men and women of good character'. McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 20. For the text of the Schleitheim confession, see *The Schleitheim Confession*, trans. and ed. by John Howard Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), pp. 14–15. This booklet was earlier published as *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* in 1973 and forms McClendon's main historical source.

[53] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 247.

[54] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 247 (emphasis original).

conversations that the state-church compromise was substituted for 'a separate, radical church'.[55] His use of radicalism here, of course, adheres to the Radical tradition, but, because of the way he contrasts radicalism with the course advocated by the Magisterial Reformation, it also receives the flavour of 'higher commitment' to Scripture. Although actual reports about this gathering (e.g. the number and identity of its participants, the procedures followed, etc.) are absent, McClendon believes that participants met as equals (gender aside, he notes) and, following Yoder, states that 'perhaps uniquely in Reformation history, minds were changed in the course of a discussion! The baptist movement acquired at Schleitheim a free church ecclesiology that has survived to the present time.'[56] On the basis of his own reconstruction he then makes his argument for today:

> Most important for present purposes, the dialogue gave concrete expression to the koinonia-love that guided the conference, and that koinonia-love shaped the ethics of the movement into a social structure fitted for the 'resurrection walk' to which they committed themselves.[57]

To McClendon, 'Schleitheim' represents the restoration of the 'the community spirit of early Christianity', as can be found in Paul's Corinthian correspondence, the book of Acts, and 1 John, presuming a return to a pre-Constantinian situation.[58] In McClendon's baptist vision, the Schleitheim confession thus represents a defining moment, a restoration of the New Testament practice; this gathering of these hunted Anabaptists 'witnesses the truth of that argument' and although many of its participants did not live to see how it would continue, 'it is for us to supply their want, as they have supplied ours'.[59]

McClendon's baptist vision is built upon a narrative construction that allows him to tell the history of these radical reformers

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[55] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 247.
[56] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 248.
[57] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 248.
[58] Cf., 'It remains only to point out that the content of the Articles was the setting forth of a simple but effective structure for church life understood as a way of life, focusing on just those points that the old Constantinianism of the Roman South and the new Constantinianism of the Lutheran and Reformed North had made unlikely.' (McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 249)
[59] McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 249.

as a distinct theological tradition manifesting and maintaining a 'truth' (e.g. the *goods* of non-violence, communal ethics, equality). The particular value pattern in which he places the story of Schleitheim (namely, Christendom/Constantianism, submitting to Scripture/or princes) strengthens the impression that Schleitheim represents a turning point in the 'fallen' status of Christianity: the lost notion of *koinonia* that was restored or counteracted by these 'radicals' who went back to the New Testament roots; an example of commitment to scripture that accordingly therefore requires the follow-up of the reader (cf. 'they have supplied our want'). These value judgements are not inherent to historical events themselves, but they are McClendon's emplotment of the Schleitheim gathering in support of his theological vision. It is an example of how he as a systematic theologian retrieves the history of the Radical Reformation: he reads it as a narrative of the subversion of Constantinianism and, therefore, representing a purer version of obedience to the New Testament's witness.[60] Precisely because of his theological agenda as a systematician, McClendon seems to be concerned to a lesser degree with the epistemic relation towards his sources and more orientated toward the moral relation: correcting the present misapprehension and neglect of the aforementioned *goods* of radical history in 'conventional' history and theology.

The Emplotment of the Radical Reformation

To better assess McClendon's relation to the past as a systematic theologian, I need to say a bit more about his historical categorisation, separating a 'Radical' from a 'Magisterial' Reformation. This historical differentiation was prominently suggested by George Hunston Williams in 1957 and subsequently developed in his classic *The Radical Reformation* (1962). Although very influential, Williams's proposal was criticised from the start by other historians. Williams's intention was to create historical space and singularity (a 'third way') for those sixteenth- and

[60] With this moral scheme of interpreting the Radical Reformation, McClendon (again) follows Yoder's (to whom he frequently refers) interpretation, see John Y. Yoder, 'Anabaptism and History: "Restitution" and the Possibility of Renewal', in *Umstrittenes Täufertum 1525–1975: Neue Forschungen*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Goertz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975), pp. 244–58.

seventeenth-century dissenting groups and, especially, their offspring today.[61] Though he did recognise the diversity between groups, 'the underlying premise of Williams's approach was to argue the cohesiveness of the phenomenon', observes Hans Hillerbrand.[62] Williams used 'radicalism' (Latin *radix,* 'root') in a positive manner to highlight the thoroughgoing and exclusive biblical orientation that these groups pursued: these were 'radicals' who returned to the roots of biblical Christianity. As such, radicalism is not an historical observation, but a value judgement made by Williams to make a coherent story or emplotment of these different streams and figures. Northrop Frye calls such a device a 'conceptual myth'; meaning 'radicalism' functions as an image to make a certain classification or grouping that unifies by metaphor rather than by logic.[63] While Williams's efforts of shedding light on these neglected reformist streams in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformations are still applauded,[64] his use of radicalism as a cohesive description is challenged by many historians for being a too rough and biased classification of reformation history. For the definition of what these biblical roots are is very much dependent on the judgement of the narrator. Hillerbrand summed up the criticism toward Williams's employment of 'Radical Reformation' as a discriminatory category in two reflective articles in 1988 and 1993, concluding that radicalism is not only loaded with value judgement, but also that as soon as one agrees upon a definition, it immediately loses the ability to bring coherence among the various groups one wishes to associate with it.[65] Hans-Jürgen Goertz argued accordingly that

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[61] See George H. Williams and Angel M. Megal, eds, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, vol. 15, 3rd ed. (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 1992). Williams's basic distinction is made on the basis of 1) the practice of believer's baptism, signifying the radical break with the *corpus Christianum*; 2) a critical, or indifferent attitude towards the state; 3) the conviction that older ordinations and divine commission have lapsed with the completion of redemptive work of Christ; and 4) the acknowledgement of lay apostolate.

[62] Hans J. Hillerbrand, '"The Radical Reformation": Reflections on the Occasion of an Anniversary', *Mennonite Quarterly Review,* 67 (1993), 408–420 (pp. 413–14).

[63] Frye, *Fables of Identity*, p. 57.

[64] See Hans J. Hillerbrand, 'Was There a Reformation in the Sixteenth Century?', *Church History,* 72, no. 3 (2003), 525–552 (pp. 527, 532–33).

[65] Hans J. Hillerbrand, 'Radicalism in the Early Reformation', in *Radical Tendencies in the Reformation: Divergent Perspectives*, vol. 9 (Kirksville: Sixteenth-Century Essays & Studies, 1988),

radicalism should not be treated as an intensification of reformation insights nor as a cry on the margins, but its innate expression ('ureigenen Ausdruck').[66] The claim that there was a 'third way-type' of reformation neglects this inherent radical tendency of the wider reformations to aspire to social or religious change.[67] It follows then, that 'the Radical Reformation' does not represent an identifiable historical entity, but is rather an invention of Williams as a modern-day narrator, created to amplify coherence in view of emancipatory purposes in the twentieth-century ecclesial landscape. The prevalence of the moral relation becomes particularly evident in the value judgement that comes with the term 'radicalism'. It is meant to draw attention to Williams's idea of a higher devotion to the Bible, and particularly to the New Testament. As such, in a historical sense, the Radical Reformation comes close to what has been called earlier a (foundational) myth.[68]

25–41 (p. 29); and '"The Radical Reformation"', p. 417. Besides Hillerbrand, notable scholars such as Hans-Jürgen Goertz and James Stayer have disputed the sui generis conception of Williams's thesis, see Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed., *Profiles of Radical Reformers: Biographical sketches from Thomas Müntzer to Paracelsus* (Kitchener, Canada and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982); and *Radikalität der Reformation: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen,* Forschungen zur Kirchen-und Dogmengeschichte, Band 93 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); also James M. Stayer, 'Die Anfänge des schweizerischen Täufertums in reformierten Kongregationalismus', in *Umstrittenes Täufertum 1525–1975*, ed. by Hans-Jürgen Goertz, pp. 19–49; and James M. Stayer, 'The Radical Reformation,' in *Handbook of European History 1400–1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation, Volume 2: Visions, Programs, Outcomes*, ed. by Thomas A. Brady, Heiko A. Oberman, and James D. Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 1995), pp. 249–82. Williams himself defended his thesis but acknowledged that '[t]he term 'Radical' is admittedly, equivocal' ('The Radical Reformation Revisited', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review,* 39, no. 1-2 (1984), 1–23 (p. 8)).

66 Goertz, *Radikalität der Reformation*, p. 9.

67 'die sich zunächst durchsetzende Reformation allgemein könnte als ein radikales Geschehen aufgefaßt werden' (Goertz, *Radikalität der Reformation*, p. 11); cf. Bridget Heal and Anorthe Kremers, eds, *Radicalism and Dissent in the World of Protestant Reform* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017). During the symposium 'The Protestant Reformation and its Radical Critique' in London (15–17 September 2016) preceding this publication, it was remarkable how united the gathered scholars were in their conclusion that 'radicalism' is a much too ambiguous and multi-interpretative concept to function as characteristic to distinguish between figures, groups, movements in (Reformation) history.

68 Cf. the statement by Diarmaid McCulloch, 'A story of the past told in order to justify the present', in McCulloch, *All Things Made New: The Reformation and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 239–255 (p. 241). See also his 'The Myth of the English Reformation', *Journal of British Studies,* 30, no. 1 (1991), 1–19. In this famous essay MacCulloch displayed how interpretations of the ecclesial changes in the English church of the sixteenth century correlate to the subject position (namely, the denominational or religious tradition) of

The moral relation of reading history through the lens of Williams's radicalism becomes particularly evident in McClendon's adoption of the Schleitheim confession as a theological 'turning point', restoring the New Testament picture of the 'radical church'. From a mere historical perspective, his statement that the Schleitheim confession represents the true witness of scripture and the character of the sixteenth-century radicalism is quite arbitrary. First of all, since historically it is not particularly clear why Schleitheim surpasses the millenarian violence surrounding the invasion of Münster as an identity marker.[69] And second, the Schleitheim articles are surrounded by many unknowns. Not only with regard to its authorship, the number and identity of the participants, or the precise location of the meeting place, but also its intended audience.[70] Additionally, the influence of the Schleitheim confession upon the broader Anabaptist tradition was very small as it was rejected by a large number of Anabaptist leaders.[71] The innovative power of the rejection of 'the sword'(Article 6) by Christians for being 'an ordering outside the perfection of Christ', is tempered by Michael Sattler's schooling in Benedictine thought and practice, which is a likely candidate to explain the distinct Christological argumentation.[72]

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the historian. He uses 'myth' as a hegemonic historiographical narrative that fails to do justice to the available data.

[69] For a recent description of the events surrounding the invasion and occupation of the city of Münster in 1534–1535, see Ralf Klötzer, 'The Melchiorites and Münster', in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism, 1521–1700*, ed. by John Roth and James Stayer, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, vol. 6 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 217–56.

[70] Cf. C. Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler,* Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 26 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), pp. 97–100; and James M. Stayer, 'Swiss-South German Anabaptism, 1526–1540', in *A Companion to Anabaptism and Spiritualism,* 83–117 (pp. 89–92).

[71] See C. Arnold Snyder, 'The Influence of Schleitheim Articles on The Anabaptist Movement: An Historical Evaluation', *The Mennonite Quarterly Review,* 63, no. 4 (1989), 323–44 (p. 343): 'it is clear first of all that important doctrines articulated at Schleitheim were known and rejected by a significant portion of first-generation Anabaptists. In fact, the list reads like an Anabaptist who's who. Looking just to the questions of separation, sword and oath we find Hubmaier, Denck, Hut, the Marpeck circle and Melchior Hoffman adopting positions that either deny Schleitheim outright or stand independent of Schleitheim. Thus to posit a general influence of Schleitheim on the Anabaptist movement as a whole is to ignore the evidence arguing for widespread rejection of key Schleitheim teachings among the South German and Melchiorite Anabaptist branches.'

[72] Cf. Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, pp. 151–69. Snyder locates the 'life of perfection' (p. 157) in the Benedictine background of Sattler who possibly served as a prior of the monastery of St. Peter of the Black Forest.

Regardless, the non-violent radicalism of Schleitheim is hardly representative of all streams put together under the Radical Reformation. Besides Münster, there is the violence of Thomas Müntzer (who championed, inspired or, maybe, even lit the fires of the Peasant wars, 1524–1525) and Balthasar Hubmaier's encouragement of the violent expulsion of Jews from the city of Regensburg. Closer to the Baptist home in England, there are the seventeenth-century baptistic congregationalists (among whom John Bunyan) who fought side by side with Oliver Cromwell in the Revolution and later with the Duke of Monmouth to overthrow Charles II.[73] These b/Baptists — to make things even more difficult — wanted nothing to do with the label 'Anabaptists' and associated themselves more closely with a larger network of Reformed Congregationalists.[74] McClendon's attempt to unite sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists with twentieth-century (American) Baptists into one distinct tradition can hardly be done without confusion and the inclusion of theological positions that contradict his view.

These historical observations and criticisms enable us also to highlight where the systematic theologian's art of historical conversation might diverge a little from that of the historian. Although he ostensibly borrows Williams's inclusive emplotment of the Radical Reformation, in reality McClendon makes a differentiation between what he sees as truthful and erroneous 'radicalism'. Although he does not make his definition of radicalism explicit, it shows that the moral dimension in McClendon's proposal serves precisely as a value judgement that explains *why* a certain past is worth retrieving in the present. In McClendon's narration, his subject position as a systematic theologian leads him to read history theologically, as becomes particularly evident in the way he positions (or 'constructs') 'Schleitheim' as a model for

[73] See John Coffey, 'From Marginal to Mainstream: How Anabaptists became Baptists', in *Mirrors and Microscopes: Historical Perceptions of Baptists*, ed. by C. Douglas Weaver, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2015), pp. 1–24; and Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018), pp. 130–44, 230.

[74] See Matthew C. Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals: Baptist Identity in the English Revolution,* Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 90–117.

genuine Christian witness.[75] Nonetheless, he should have been more attentive toward the epistemic relation to avoid the risk of overemplotment. It is true that Schleitheim is a fascinating confession, yet besides the articles themselves there is barely any information available. McClendon's historical inferences regarding the particulars of the drafting process and its significance cannot be verified. Moreover, his overall presentation could have been more forthcoming regarding the disruptive history of Anabaptists and Baptists in which the coherence assumed under the category 'the Radical Reformation' anything but corresponds to the available sources.[76]

History in Systematic Theology: Balancing between Affection and Realism

In this article I have explored the relation between the events of history and their narration, particularly in view of theologies of retrieval. When systematic theologians retrieve history, they are not just representing the events of history, but they are *emplotting* a narrative of identity formation. They 'construct' events in such a way that they become a coherent and comprehensive story of who 'we' (as Christians or a denominational group) are, or can seek to be.[77] In narrating history, the systematician clearly constructs historical events, or emplots them in view of a present concern: the retrieval of some 'moment of truth' in the past.[78] McClendon's retrieval of the peaceful *koinonia* concept as 'a moral good' for his communal ethics is a captivating example. Herein, a systematic

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75 See Hunter, *To Change the World*, pp. 109–10: 'They are, in effect, "political theologies," and they are powerful in part because they are shrouded by compelling myths that give voice to the ideals and public identities of different parts of the Christian community. And though the political landscape is changing, these myths provide a source of continuity in the language and logic of their competing positions.'

76 Cf. David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), pp. 25–26; and David C. Cramer, 'Mennonite Systematic Theology in Retrospect and Prospect', *The Conrad Grebel Review,* 31, no. 3 (2013), 255–273 (pp. 257–58): 'I sometimes fear that discussions of "Anabaptism" tend to downplay or ignore the historical particularity of the Mennonite tradition in favor of ethical abstractions or core theological essentials.'

77 See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 41.

78 Cf. R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, p. 102.

theologian is akin to Frye's poet who seeks new expressions, not new content; they read history through the lens of a theological pattern (namely, a recurring conviction that gives consistency to a certain 'tradition') in order to present coherent pictures of a past with the aim of reforming present convictions and practices.[79] Measured along the line of Paul's art of historical conversation, the systematic theologian then differentiates themselves by explicitly cherishing the affective relation to the past: the systematic theologian does not aim to reconstruct history per se, but openly seeks to retrieve 'goods' from the past. Given the contemporary objective of changing perspectives and attitudes, the role of the moral dimension which is now shown to be a 'relation', is naturally more heightened in systematic theology than one would expect in church history.

Nonetheless, since theologies of retrieval also presume a reasonable degree of realism, there is the risk of what Hayden White has called 'overemplotment' when disturbing parts are ignored without sufficient argument, and/or the past is oversimplified or instrumentalised to fit present concerns. For instance, Matthew Bingham's recent study *Orthodox Radicals* (2019) has shown that particularly from nineteenth-century Baptist historiography onwards, the early seventeenth-century 'Particular Baptists' are wrongly emplotted as a coherent group next to the 'General Baptists' on the basis of a common Baptist identity.[80] Rather than understanding themselves as a *particular* brand of Baptists, they saw themselves as part of a larger network of Calvinist-orientated congregationalists that included pedobaptists. Bingham's revision of Baptist historiography, as a result, offers a less clear-cut understanding of Baptist theological identity by nuancing the deeply rooted impression that 'believer's baptism by immersion' and the rejection of pedobaptism delineate the core of this common Baptist tradition extending from John Smyth until today. A contemporary retrieval of early modern concepts of believer's baptism should, then, besides arguing for this particular practice of baptism based on early modern baptistic authors, also give account of the different functions that these theologies of baptism had in relation to

[79] Cf. Abrahamse, *Ordained Ministry in Free Church Perspective*, p. 12–13.
[80] See Bingham, *Orthodox Radicals*, pp. 147–55.

their ecclesiastical positioning. While such an approach retains affection for these early advocates, based on a contemporary concern for believer's baptism by immersion, historical reality also demands restraint in portraying this mode of baptism as *the* distinguishing Baptist feature under some guise of 'the tradition'. Rather, on the contrary, by listening to the actual voices of among others John Spilsbury and Henry Jessey, a systematician should be open to question rigid interpretations of Baptist identity and, in addition to stimulating a less combatant attitude in ecumenical conversations, give impetus to ecclesiological revisions within Baptist communities in their stance on baptism (e.g. open membership).

It is just an example of how systematic theologians need to consciously balance their moral relation (in which value judgements are made) to the past with the attention for the epistemic relation (that seeks better understanding by listening carefully and being corrected), doing both justice to the past's familiarity and strangeness. This requires openness about how a particular theological agenda affects our reading of history. In other words, a systematician needs to give an account of how they manage their relations to the past. This is where the moral concern that motivated this paper is located: while a systematic theologian does have their own angle towards retrieving history, this does not relieve them from doing 'justice' towards the past. Rowan Williams adequately points out, 'But the figures the historian deals with are not modern people in fancy dress; they have to be listened to as they are, and not judged or dismissed—or claimed and enrolled as supporters—too rapidly.'[81] To prevent a theology of retrieval from becoming an 'anachronical cross-dresser' Paul's art of historical conversation is a viable tool: approaching history with an attitude of self-questioning rather than self-confirmation. Bad history, according to Rowan Williams, is to leave out that which is strange to us, while

> [g]ood historical writing, […] is writing that constructs that sense of who we are by a real engagement with the strangeness of the past, that establishes my or our identity now as bound up with a whole range of things that are not easy for me or us, not obvious or native to the world we think we inhabit, yet

[81] R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, pp. 10–11.

> which have to be recognized in their solid reality as both different from us and part of us.[82]

The moral relation in theologies of retrieval does not only require a concern for historic realism (doing justice to the facts of the past), but also, as Rowan Williams writes, theological humility: story-telling should not rely on the consistency and coherence of my narrative constructs but on God's consistency that sustains this disruptive and broken people called Israel and the church.[83] In other words, the 'living faith of the dead' that makes the Christian tradition is not dependent on the unity I can construct, but on God's relation to people over time and place, of any language and culture. And precisely for this reason, systematic theologians can retrieve history without the need to polish a coherent 'we-story' that functions as a foundation for our present-day theologies. As John Webster reminds us, 'there is no pure Christian past whose retrieval can ensure theological fidelity'.[84]

Conclusion

The manner in which we retrieve the stories from history in our theological proposals counts. If I use history solely as an instrument to make my case, I neglect the moral task of treating my source as an actual other; *that is* after all what 'theologies of retrieval' aim for, bringing a voice from the past in lively conversation with contemporary discourse. When we pursue such an encounter with the past, solid research of the relevant sources needs to accompany our narrative constructions of the past. Rooting systematic theology in history in pursuit of keeping traditions alive requires systematicians to give voice both to what affirms and what contradicts contemporary agendas or preferences, and to exercise reluctance toward making grand identity claims by propelling contemporary labels back onto the past in acknowledgement of the lasting strangeness of the past.

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[82] R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, pp. 23–24.
[83] R. Williams, *Why Study the Past*, p. 10.
[84] Webster, 'Theologies of Retrieval', p. 597.