

Narrative Apologetics



SHARING THE RELEVANCE, JOY, AND
WONDER OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

ALISTER E. McGRATH



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1.

Introducing Narrative Apologetics

There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories.

Ursula K. Le Guin¹

This short book aims to introduce and commend narrative apologetics—that is to say, an approach to affirming, defending, and explaining the Christian faith by telling stories. It sets out to explore how these stories can open up important ways of communicating and commending the gospel, enabling it to be understood, connecting it with the realities of human experience, and challenging other stories that are told about the world and ourselves. The story of Jesus Christ, memorably and accessibly recounted in the Gospels, is capable of grasping our attention and stimulating our thinking—and rethinking—about ourselves and our world.²

Put simply, this book is an invitation to rediscover something that ought never to have been forgotten—the power of narratives

to capture the imagination, and thus to render the mind receptive to the truths that they enfold and express. If C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien are right in their belief that God has shaped the human mind and imagination to be receptive to stories, and that these stories are echoes or fragments of the Christian “grand story,” a significant theological case can be made for affirming and deploying such an approach to apologetics.

A narrative approach to Christian apologetics does not displace other approaches, such as those based on reasoned argumentation, so elegantly displayed in the writings of William Lane Craig and Richard Swinburne. Narrative apologetics is best seen as supplementing other approaches, reflecting the rich and deeply satisfying nature of the Christian gospel itself. It is one apologetic resource among others. Yet it is an approach that some will find particularly winsome and welcome, including those who find more clinically rational approaches to apologetics to lack imaginative depth and emotional intelligence. Marilynne Robinson is surely right in noting that purely rational attempts to defend belief can instead “unsettle it,” in that there is always an “inadequacy in argument about ultimate things.”³

Rational argument is to be welcomed in apologetics. Yet its limits must be recognized. C. S. Lewis often notes that it is impossible to convert stories to concepts without diminishment and distortion. The ideas and concepts that emerge from reflection on the narrative of faith often seem inadequate, failing to render its depth and complexity. A mystery, in the proper sense of the term, refers not to something that is irrational but to something that cannot be fully comprehended by reason, exceeding its capacity to discern and describe. The sheer vastness of God causes the images and words that humans craft to falter, if not break down completely, as they try to depict God fully and faithfully.

In writing this book, I have tried—not always successfully, I fear—to steer a middle course between a work that is practically

useful to preachers and apologists and one that is rigorously informed by the best scholarship. I set out to show that this approach is both *intellectually defensible* and *practically useful*. It is my hope that this work will help its readers assess narrative approaches to apologetics and craft their own distinct styles of approach, adapted to their own situations. There is much more that needs to be said. Yet hopefully even this brief discussion will be enough to encourage its readers to explore its core ideas in greater depth and try them out.

Why Stories Matter

We seem to be meant to tell stories.⁴ Human beings have a built-in narrative instinct, as if we have been designed to use stories to remember our past, make sense of our present, and shape our future. Humans have been telling stories for thousands of years, committing them to memory and sharing them orally long before the invention of writing. Empirical studies have helped us to appreciate that we human beings are creatures who try to understand who we are, what our world is all about, and how we ought to live by locating and positioning ourselves within a framework of narratives.

To be human is to ask questions about who we are, why we are here, and what life is all about. And most often, we answer those questions using stories. And sometimes we go further, telling grand stories—stories of (just about) everything, which weave together all the other individual stories that we tell. Christianity has a deep narrative structure, articulating a grand story that connects together God, Jesus Christ, and believers.

Storytelling is fundamental for faith because it is only through this act of telling that our story can be connected with that of God and Jesus; because this story must be told; and so that it can be told as

an unfinished story into which the faithful write their own stories and, in doing so, move the story forward. Thus at its basic level, the Christian faith has a deep narrative structure.⁵

The term “metanarrative” is widely used to refer to a grand story that encompasses, positions, and explains “little stories,” providing an imaginative or conceptual framework that weaves these into a coherent whole.⁶ Postmodern thinkers may have misgivings about the ambition of these metanarratives; they have, however, no difficulties in recognizing the importance of narratives themselves, realizing that it is impossible to give an account of our individual and communal lives without using stories. As cultural anthropologists remind us, there is overwhelming evidence that we use narratives to provide a means of organizing, recalling, and interpreting our experience, thus allowing the wisdom of the past to be passed on to the future.⁷

Postmodernism unquestionably has a point when it protests against the *imposition* of a master narrative on the complexities of experience, which is then used to control our understandings of the world.⁸ It is, however, difficult to see a legitimate objection to the *discernment* of a metanarrative as a means of colligating and coordinating multiple stories into a coherent whole. To be told what to think is one thing; to discover and embrace a way of thinking as a willing and joyful act of personal commitment is something very different.

The Christian metanarrative offers an imaginatively compelling and intellectually rich vision of a new way of existence, made possible in and through Jesus Christ. This narrative is proclaimed and enacted by the church, understood as an “interpretive community” of faith that is called into being by this God-given and God-grounded vision of reality. The Christian church can be seen as the community that crystallizes around what Rowan Williams styles “the one focal interpretive story of Jesus.”¹⁰

Outsiders might see this as a *particular* narrative, characterized by its own specific rationality and limited in its implications; yet those who embrace this narrative—or who find themselves embraced and enfolded by it—realize that, although it is indeed grounded in *particularities* (such as the history of Jesus Christ), it nevertheless has *universal* significance, enabling the church to see and act in the world in a way that differs strikingly from what Charles Taylor describes as the prevailing “social imaginaries.”¹¹ By this, Taylor means the ways in which people imagine their social existence, including the deeper normative notions and images that underlie their expectations about themselves and their social context.

It has long been recognized that narratives are ideally suited for conveying some central aspects of the Christian faith, especially the fact that we presently exist in history and are forced to think and act within it. Stories allow humans to see the contingent fragments of their finite lives within larger, more meaningful wholes. The theologian Gilbert Meilaender emphasizes this point and offers some helpful reflections on its possible implications for apologetics:

The human creature, made for fellowship with God, can touch the Eternal but cannot (within history) rest in it. For our experience is inherently narrative, relentlessly temporal. We are given no rest. The story moves on. And hence, the creature who is made to rest in God is in this life best understood as a pilgrim whose world is depicted in terms of the Christian story. This may explain why stories are sometimes the most adequate form for conveying the feel of human existence.¹²

The Christian Bible, as has often been pointed out, consists mainly of narratives—stories of individuals who are found by God, who have been transformed by God, and who seek to tell others of God.¹³ When the prophet Nathan wanted to criticize David’s

adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, he told a story of deceit and corruption—and then located David within that narrative (2 Sam. 12:1–25).¹⁴ Perhaps this suggests that stories have an ability to steal past our natural defenses, to disarm us in a way that in David’s case was corrective, maybe even redemptive. When Christ was asked an important theological question—Who is my neighbor?—he answered it not by using conceptual theological analysis but by telling a story. The parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is thus important on account of both its *substance* and its *form*. The story itself is a vehicle for disclosure, which draws its readers into that story and invites them to correlate it with their own personal stories.

In the 1960s and 1970s some sections of American evangelicalism resisted allowing the narrative character of many parts of the Bible to be acknowledged and to be treated as a distinct genre within Scripture with its own distinct capacity to tell truth and generate meaning. This is perhaps surprising, given evangelicalism’s emphasis on taking the Bible with the greatest seriousness and attempting to conform its own patterns of thought to those encountered in the biblical text. With the benefit of hindsight, however, this puzzling situation can probably be attributed to the lingering influence of Enlightenment rationalism on evangelicalism during this period.¹⁵ This rationalist legacy seems to have sometimes led to an emphasis on propositional revelation and hence encouraged a tendency to marginalize narrative as a genre, save as an illustration of a propositional truth.¹⁶

Happily, other evangelical voices of this period warned against the reduction of Scripture to a set of logical statements. As early as 1958, British evangelical theologian J. I. Packer insisted on respecting the different literary genres within the Bible, rather than reducing them all to a single level: “We must allow Scripture to tell us its own literary character, and be willing to receive it as what it claims to be.”¹⁷ This growing respect for the integrity of distinct

biblical genres has done much to clear the way for rediscovering the potential and theological legitimacy of narrative apologetics. The Bible tells many stories; their point of convergence, however, is the single story of God, which holds them together as a coherent whole.¹⁸

So is one story enough to engage all of life's questions and issues? It is becoming increasingly clear that many, if not most, people use *multiple narratives* to make sense of the world around them and within them. Anthropologists have noted that no single narrative seems adequate to organize and correlate on its own the complexities of human existence and experience. Our own personal stories are a unique and complex bricolage of the shared stories of the groups or communities to which we belong,¹⁹ even if we regard one of those narratives as being of supreme significance in dealing with the things that really matter.

The sociologist Christian Smith identifies a number of narratives that provide frameworks of meaning for people in the twenty-first century.²⁰ Examples of relevance include what Smith terms the "Christian metanarrative," the "Scientific Enlightenment narrative," and the "Chance and Purposelessness narrative." Smith notes that those who affirm the primacy of one master narrative still find themselves drawing on others, whether explicitly or implicitly, to provide detail, texture, and color for their rendering of reality. Many today regard any totalizing narrative with suspicion, preferring to see such narratives as local and particular. In one sense, Smith's conclusion is ultimately functional: we need a series of stories to illuminate, inform, and engage the different aspects of our experience. Yet Smith's empirical observation about multiple narratives leaves open the question of how we rank them. Which story do we allow to serve as our main narrative, and which do we treat as ancillary?

In my own case, I give priority to the Christian grand narrative, while recognizing how certain other narratives are important to

some of the disciplines I engage with, such as the natural sciences. My own project of allowing theological and scientific narratives to enrich each other through critical and constructive dialogue is predicated on my personal privileging of the Christian narrative, while welcoming others into the conversation.²¹ The Christian metanarrative provides a robust and reliable framework of meaning, which can be enriched or given enhanced granularity through interacting with other stories.

It is not difficult to see how an appeal to biblical narratives can inform Christian ethics. Stanley Hauerwas, for example, has affirmed the fundamentally theological character of Christian ethics, while noting its narrative orientation.²² Christians ought to “conform” the stories of their lives to the narrative of the Christian tradition.²³ The Christian way of seeing (and hence evaluating) the world is grounded in the Christian narrative, which is affirmed and reflected in the life and witness of the church: “The primary task of Christian ethics involves an attempt to help us see. For we can only act within the world we can see, and we can only see the world rightly by being trained to see. We do not come to see just by looking, but by disciplined skills developed through initiation into a narrative.”²⁴

The possibilities for narrative theology are also obvious, even if some points of debate remain to be settled. For example, is a narrative theology something that uses the medium of stories, or one that develops concepts based on those stories? For Michael Goldberg, there is no expectation that “the systematic theological task must itself be done in story form,” as if discursive reasoning is no longer appropriate for that task. While “an adequate theology must *attend* to narrative,” this does not require that the ensuing theology itself must be framed in narrative form.²⁵ Goldberg argues that the major requirement expected of a narrative theology is that such systematic theological statements, whatever form they may take, must remain “in intimate contact with the narratives which gave rise to those

convictions, within which they gain their sense and meaning, and *from which they have been abstracted.*"²⁶

Yet there has been a puzzling reluctance to extend such a narrative approach to the increasingly important theological and pedagogical domain of apologetics. This book thus aims to both commend and defend a narrative apologetics, dealing with both the general question of the wise use of narratives in Christian apologetics and more specific reflection on the way in which the Christian narrative generates and informs specific approaches to apologetics.

It is important to appreciate from the outset that narrative apologetics does not merely remain in intimate contact with its foundational biblical narratives and allow these to generate insights of relevance to its task; it recognizes that the apologetic task itself demands the use of a narrative medium. The Christian metanarrative, as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien both rightly discerned, authorizes the use of narratives to communicate, express, and commend the core themes of the Christian faith. As we shall see, narrative is thus not a medium that can be discarded once its theological or apologetic insights have been identified and articulated. We cannot “demythologize” Christianity, in that an irreducible narrative serves as both its heart and its backbone. Narrative acts as both the medium and the message in Christian apologetics.

Why Facts Are Not Enough

One of the difficulties facing an apologist is that demonstrating the reasonableness or truth of Christianity does not always lead people to embrace it. Something may be true yet possess little, if any, relevance for human existence. The three statements that follow are all true and can be *proved* to be true. Yet while they might be interesting, none of them probably makes the slightest difference to anyone.

1. The annual rainfall in the English city of Durham in 1870 was 604.8 mm.²⁷
2. The atomic weight of the only stable isotope of gold is 197.²⁸
3. C. S. Lewis nominated J. R. R. Tolkien for the 1961 Nobel Prize in Literature (but he didn't win it).²⁹

Truth is no guarantor of relevance. Veracity is one thing—indeed, a *good* thing. Existential traction, however, is something very different.

This point is of major significance, in that it raises an important question about the value of what is sometimes called “evidential” apologetics—that is, an enterprise that seeks to use historical evidence or rational argument to establish the truth of Christianity. This might simply prompt the question, “Well maybe that’s true—but so what?” It is indeed important to show that there are good historical and rational grounds for Christian belief. Yet this is, in itself, quite inadequate to demonstrate that Christianity is capable of changing people’s lives, giving them meaning and hope so that they can cope with a deeply puzzling and disturbing world. It presents Christianity as something external that is to be confirmed, not as something internal that is to be experienced.

The problem is that evidential apologetics fails to engage or display the existential traction of the Christian faith. To its critics, it seems obsessed with historical detail yet curiously inattentive to “big picture” questions—such as the meaning of life. There is a danger that apologetics becomes fixated on questions about the historical reliability of the Bible and in doing so fails to set out its powerful vision of truth, beauty, and goodness. As I shall demonstrate throughout this work, stories enable us to make meaningful connections between the gospel and lived human experience. We are able to show that the gospel is not merely true but has the capacity to transform lives, truthfully and meaningfully.

A point of major apologetic importance here concerns the cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity.³⁰ While this transition is rather more complex than this simple binary suggests—for example, it fails to take account of the importance of the recent emergence of “multiple modernities”³¹—it nevertheless highlights an important point. Back in the eighteenth century, it was important to show that Christianity was *true*; in the twenty-first century, it has become important to show that it *works*.³² Telling the story of how people came to faith is an *affirmation* that Christianity works and an *elaboration* of the ways in which it works, which will vary from one individual to another.

Each story of this kind represents a narration of transformation, in terms of both the motivations underlying it and the process of change that ensued. It is about the forging of connections between an individual’s life and the Christian metanarrative, reflecting the distinct characteristics and circumstances of that individual yet suggesting how others could make similar connections in their own ways and in their own lives. Stories have always been integral to Christian apologetics; they were unfortunately marginalized by the rise of rationalism. As the rationalist tide continues to recede, we can now recover narrative approaches to apologetics and rediscover their potential.

That elusive word “apologetics,” however, needs further exploration. Before we consider in more detail the role of stories in defending, commending, and communicating the Christian faith, we need to think more about the nature of apologetics itself and its role within the Christian life.

Why Apologetics Matters

Apologetics is a principled attempt to communicate the vitality of the Christian gospel faithfully and effectively to our culture.

Apologetics is not primarily about persuading people that a certain set of ideas is right, although the demonstration of the truth and trustworthiness of the Christian faith is clearly important. It is more about depicting its world of beauty, goodness, and truth faithfully and vividly, so that people will be drawn by the richness and depth of its vision of things. It is helpful to think of there being three main elements to this task,³³ which has become of increasing importance as Western culture has lost contact with a foundational Christian narrative and failed to understand its distinctive vocabulary or grasp its distinctive rationality.

1. *Cultural empathy*. Here, the apologist recognizes the sensitivities and difficulties that the Christian faith encounters in any specific cultural context. This may take the form of responding graciously and winsomely to specific objections to Christianity or to potential misunderstandings or historic misrepresentations that may stand in the way of an appreciative reception of the gospel. The best apologist is likely to be one who knows this cultural location well and understands its sensitivities, concerns, and anxieties. She can speak its language and address its concerns in terms it can understand and respect.
2. *Evangelical depth*. Apologetics rests on the deep understanding and appreciation of the Christian gospel, which both generates the motivation to communicate the faith and informs the way in which this is done. The best apologist is likely to be someone who is deeply steeped in the Christian faith and is able to discern how its riches can be faithfully communicated within a specific cultural context. Attuned to the resonances between the gospel and the deepest human concerns and longings, he will be able to construct bridges between the world of faith and a wider culture.

3. *Effective translation.* Finally, the apologist has to translate the language of the Christian faith into the cultural vernacular. The Christian faith is traditionally expressed using a wide range of abstract conceptual terms that are becoming increasingly disconnected from contemporary Western culture. Central New Testament terms—such as “justification,” “salvation,” and “sin”—are now likely to be simply dismissed as antiquated and irrelevant, or at best misunderstood, generally by being inappropriately assimilated to the nearest cultural equivalent. These terms need to be translated or *transposed*—that is to say, reformulated in terms of narratives or images capable of connecting with a wider audience, while retaining maximum continuity with the Christian tradition.

It is important to appreciate that the Christian church has had to face these three apologetic tasks throughout its history. Every period in Christian history has witnessed the fear that the church was entering an unknown future, confronted with difficulties and challenges for which there was no precedent. Yet a close reading of Christian history suggests that the church was generally able to rise to those challenges and has passed on to us resources that we can find useful and helpful as we face our own situation. The Christian church may, I fear, have largely forgotten some of those apologetic skills that were so effectively applied in earlier periods in its history. Christian cultural dominance in parts of Europe and America in the past has unfortunately led to a growing inattentiveness to apologetics, partly because it was assumed to be irrelevant. Happily, these apologetic skills can be rediscovered and put to good use.

So why is apologetics so important? I propose two main reasons why the study and practice of apologetics matters profoundly. To begin with, it equips both individual Christians and the Christian community to deal with the questions about faith that are being

raised by those around them. As the rise of the New Atheism made clear, many Christians and churches were quite unprepared to deal with the aggressive questioning of faith, occasionally amounting to contemptuous vilification, found in the works of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.

With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can now see that the New Atheism of Dawkins and Hitchens was really a very belligerent agnosticism, incapable of proving its own core convictions and relying primarily on ridicule rather than argument to discredit alternative ways of seeing the world. Even atheists sympathetic to this movement—such as the philosopher John Gray—dismiss it as intellectually lightweight, a media phenomenon more concerned with entertaining its readers than dealing with serious questions about life.³⁴

The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell showed a refreshing honesty about the intellectual predicament of atheism. Russell was an epistemological agnostic who knew that it was impossible to prove the truth of either atheism or Christianity. For Russell, we have to learn “how to live without certainty, and yet without being paralyzed by hesitation.”³⁵ He saw his decision to live as an atheist as a contestable lifestyle choice and was clear that other defensible choices were possible.

Yet there is still something to be learned from this encounter with the New Atheism. Perhaps we can now see that the churches ought to have been prepared for such a hostile interrogation of faith. It remains important to develop apologetic ministries within the churches, which can prepare individual believers and congregations for some challenges that might be issued to their faith and help them plan how they might respond to them. It is not too late to learn from this. Including apologetic material in sermons and adult education classes is one important way of preparing Christians to engage such challenges to faith—challenges that actually turn out to be opportunities for dialogue.

But there is a second reason for emphasizing the importance of apologetics. The finest apologetics arises naturally from a deep love of the Christian faith and a strong sense of its relevance to the world. The best forms of apologetics are steeped in Christian theology; they represent attempts to set out the rich vision of reality that lies at the heart of the Christian faith and demonstrate its transformative potential for human existence. Swiss theologian Karl Barth famously suggested that the best apologetics was a good dogmatics.³⁶ There is enough truth in this overstatement to require us to take it seriously. The difficulty is that many of us have a quite shallow grasp of our faith and fail to develop a deep appreciation of its richness and strengths.

Christian apologetics is a natural outcome of the “discipleship of the mind,” which is such an important aspect of our continuing growth in faith. Christian discipleship engages and makes demands of all our faculties. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). We are called to love God with all our minds, to *think* about our faith, and to respond thoughtfully and helpfully to those who ask us about the hope that lies within us (1 Pet. 3:15).³⁷ By becoming steeped and saturated in the rich Christian vision of reality, we find we can offer wise and winsome responses to those who want to know more.

With this point in mind, let us consider the importance of affirming the rationality of the Christian faith and the potential role of narratives in assisting with this apologetic task.

The Rationality of Faith

Christian apologetics aims to connect the realities of the gospel with every human faculty—with reason, with the emotions, and with the imagination. It is about building bridges from the gospel

to our culture, from the church to society. So how can the apologist connect with people outside the community of faith? As Aristotle pointed out, rhetoric (by which he really meant an ability to communicate) makes an appeal to a number of facets of human nature, each of which shapes the form of discourse that we should use—specifically, what Aristotle termed *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.³⁸ These three modes of appeal are regularly encountered in most forms of human argumentation, whether in the rhetoric of the courtroom³⁹ or in Christian apologetics. We might conveniently paraphrase these three approaches as logical argument (*logos*), personal appeal or plausibility (*ethos*), and emotional arguments (*pathos*). While Christian apologetics must never be considered a purely rhetorical device, without reference to God’s grace, it is nevertheless important to give consideration to the ways in which Christianity can best connect with people.

Narrative apologetics connects with people in a way that is not fully acknowledged by Aristotle—namely, through the appeal of a story to the imagination. Neither Plato nor Aristotle seems to have fully grasped the role of narratives in expanding the capacity of the human mind to visualize reality.⁴⁰ We might use the Greek word *mythos* to refer to such a narrative, providing that we are clear that this Greek term “means something entirely different from modern definitions of ‘myth.’”⁴¹ Aristotle tended to use the term *mythos* to mean something like a “story line” or “plot,” recognizing both the narrative dimensions of drama and the need for connectedness in human thought. Yet other writers of the classical period framed a distinction between *mythos* and *logos* in various ways—for example, in terms of a dialectic between falsehood and truth (especially in Plato), between the imagined and the real worlds, or between narrative and logical analysis.⁴² This final approach can serve us well today.

The apologetic appeal to *logos* has a long history and continues to be important in contemporary Western debates about the rationality

of religious belief. “Always be prepared to give an answer [Greek: *apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason [Greek: *logos*] for the hope within you” (1 Pet. 3:15, author’s translation). Oxford writer Austin Farrer highlights the importance of affirming a reasonable faith, as he reflects on the significance of C. S. Lewis as an apologist: “Though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish.”⁴³

The current cultural debate about the rationality of faith is driven by deep rhetorical agendas. For the writers of the New Atheism, religious belief is demonstrably irrational, in that its core beliefs are resistant to scientific verification. Yet the New Atheism applies criteria of rationality to religion that it fails to apply to itself and thus finds itself in contradiction of what most philosophers consider to be a core epistemic virtue: treating others *intellectually* as you would wish them to treat you.⁴⁴ Writers such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens judge others by standards that they refuse to acknowledge as normative for assessing their own beliefs. As Dawkins conceded in an Oxford University debate with Rowan Williams, he could not verify his own atheism on scientific or rational grounds and was therefore an epistemological agnostic.

Yet it is unfair to single out Dawkins for specific criticism here. Other New Atheist writers are equally prone to overstatement at this point, presenting their atheism as intellectually monistic, possessed of views that are so self-evidently correct that they are exempt from any requirements of proof placed upon lesser schools of thought. Hitchens, for example, boldly and inaccurately declares that New Atheists such as himself do not hold any “beliefs,” in that they only accept what can be proved to be right. “Our belief is not a belief.”⁴⁵ Yet Hitchens’s antitheism actually rests on a set of assumed

moral values (such as “religion is evil” or “God is not good”) that he is simply unable to demonstrate by rational argument. Hitchens appears merely to assume that his moral values are shared by his sympathetic readers, who are unlikely to ask awkward critical questions about their origins, foundations, or reliability. The proponents of the New Atheism seem unable or unwilling to apply the criteria by which they evaluate the beliefs of others to their own ideas.

I concede that Christianity is not totally logically compelling but make two points in response: first, that it can still claim serious consideration as offering an intellectually and existentially satisfying understanding of ourselves and our world; and second, that the New Atheism is also not totally logically compelling, in effect using aggressive rhetoric to shore up its obvious argumentative and evidential deficits. As philosophers of science such as Michael Polanyi have pointed out more than half a century ago, we simply cannot achieve certainty in meaningful beliefs. “There is no finished certainty to our knowledge, but there is no skeptical despair either. Through all our different kinds of knowledge, there is reasonable faith, personal responsibility, and continuing hope.”⁴⁶

So how do narratives come into this quest for rational knowledge and understanding? C. S. Lewis managed to combine an appeal to both *logos* and *mythos*, using an apologetic approach that could be described as an “enhanced” approach to rationality.⁴⁷ Lewis was drawn to Christianity on account of its intellectual capaciousness, its narrative structure, and its imaginative appeal. It told a story that made sense of things, without being limited to what could be understood or grasped by human reason. It allowed people to see themselves and their worlds in a new way, as if a sun had dawned on an otherwise shadowy and misty landscape. C. S. Lewis summarizes the intellectual virtues of Christianity succinctly and elegantly: “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen—not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else.”⁴⁸

One of the central themes of Lewis's apologetics is that Christianity offers a narrative that is capable of generating a "big picture" of reality, capable of allowing us to make sense of our subjective experiences and our observation of the world. Lewis does not try to prove the existence of God on a priori grounds but rather invites us to appreciate how what we observe in the world around us and experience within us fits the Christian way of seeing things. Lewis often articulates this way of "seeing things" in terms of a "myth"—that is to say, a story about reality that both invites "imaginative embrace" and communicates a conceptual framework, by which other things are to be seen. The imagination embraces the Christian narrative; reason consequently reflects on its contents.

As we shall see in chapter 3, Lewis often uses narrative strategies to communicate and assess rational arguments. However, in recent years there has been an important development in the use of narrative as a means of explanation, which we shall consider in the following section.

Narratives, Intelligibility, and Meaning

There has been increasing interest in the concept of "narrative explanation" since about 2000, especially in relation to the study of history.⁴⁹ To offer a historical explanation of an event is to tell its story, thus providing a narrative structure that allows beliefs, actions, and attitudes to be related to one another in a meaningful way. This kind of narrative makes history both intelligible and interesting by providing a framework of connection between motives, events, circumstances, and contingencies. "A story does more than recount events; it recounts events in a way that renders them intelligible, thus conveying not just information but also understanding."⁵⁰

This idea was developed with particular insight by the American philosopher Noël Carroll, who proposed the idea of a "narrative

connection” that goes beyond the mere *cataloging* of events, offering instead an *interpretation* of those events that finds ways of linking them together within a bigger picture.⁵¹ This helps us appreciate the potential of narrative in exploring the rationality of Christianity and developing appropriate apologetic strategies. The Christian narrative has the potential both to disclose the intelligibility of our world and to establish patterns of meaning in life. Those important terms “intelligibility” and “meaning” require further discussion.

“Intelligibility” is best understood in terms of the discernment of patterns of connection between events. In the philosophy of science, this is especially linked with the concept of “epistemic explanation,” understood as making phenomena understandable, predictable, or intelligible by setting them in an informing context.⁵² This approach is probably best seen in “unificationist” models of scientific explanation, which hold that to understand our observations and experiences is to see how they fit into a bigger picture, allowing us to see the fundamental unity and coherence that lie behind the apparent disconnection of the phenomena themselves.⁵³ Narratives play a particularly significant role in articulating the coherence of our experience of the world.⁵⁴

Now there is an important point to be made here. Yes, the Christian narrative is about explanation—but only in part. Focusing solely on the explanatory virtues of Christianity can, as Marilynne Robinson rightly points out, too easily lead to it being seen as “a crude explanatory system, an attempt to do what science actually could do, that is, account for the origins and the workings of things.”⁵⁵ And if that is allowed to happen, defenders of the gospel will treat it as “battling science for the same terrain,” rather than focusing on what is distinct and characteristic about the Christian faith. The explanatory capacity of the gospel is an undeserved and gracious gift; yet the real business of the gospel is about human transformation, not merely helping us to make sense of things.

“Meaning” concerns basic existential questions about our identity, purpose, and values. Science may help us with explanation; it has little to say about meaning. To speak of meaning in life is an act of rebellion against a “glib and shallow ‘rationalism’” (C. S. Lewis)⁵⁶ that limits reality to the realm of empirical facts. It is to reach behind and beyond our experience of this world, to grasp and explore a realm of ideas that position human beings within a greater scheme of things, and to allow us to see ourselves and our inhabitation of this world in a new way. The general term “meaning” is often used to describe the ways in which people comprehend, make sense of, or see significance in their lives, or perceive themselves to have a purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life.⁵⁷

Psychologists have stressed both the importance of finding meaning in life for human well-being and the role played by religious faith in providing a comprehensive and integrated framework of meaning that helps individuals transcend their own concerns or experience and connect with something greater.⁵⁸ More recently, philosophers have begun to explore how narratives help us discern or construct meaning,⁵⁹ opening up important apologetic possibilities. As we shall see, the Christian narrative allows individuals and communities to make sense of their own stories and see them as part of something greater. It is best seen as an epistemic device, which explains events by imposing an explanatory framework on what might otherwise seem to be an accumulation of disconnected events or experiences, thus laying the foundations for a “big picture” of reality. We shall consider this idea further in the next section.

Christianity as a “Big Picture”

I always wanted to align my life with what was true. Discovering what was truthful, however, proved to be more difficult than I had

realized. I stopped being an atheist while I was a student at Oxford University, partly because of my growing realization of the intellectual overambition of the forms of atheism I had earlier espoused, but also as I came to realize that Christianity offered a better way of making sense of the world I observed around me and experienced within me. It provided a conceptual framework that brought my world into focus. It confronted the ambiguity of our world and human existence and offered a way of making sense of what often seemed to be a senseless world. Mine was an intellectual conversion, lacking any emotional or affective dimension.

Yet it was not so much that this or that individual aspect of Christianity seemed of especial importance to me; it was its overall vision, rather than its constituent parts, that lay at the heart of its appeal. As the philosopher W. V. O. Quine suggested some time ago in his landmark essay “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” what really matters is the ability of a theory *as a whole* to make sense of the world. Our beliefs are linked in an interconnected web that relates to sensory experience at its boundaries, not at its core. The only valid test of a belief, Quine argued, is thus whether it fits into a web of connected beliefs that accords with our experience in its totality.⁶⁰

G. K. Chesterton made much the same point in his famous 1903 essay “The Return of the Angels,” when he pointed out that it was not any individual aspect of Christianity that was persuasive but the overall big picture of reality that it offered. After a period of agnosticism, Chesterton found himself returning to Christianity because it offered an intelligible picture of the world. “Numbers of us have returned to this belief; and we have returned to it, not because of this argument or that argument, but because the theory, when it is adopted, works out everywhere. . . . We put on the theory, like a magic hat, and history becomes translucent like a house of glass.”⁶¹ Chesterton’s argument is that it is the Christian

vision of reality as a whole—rather than any of its individual components—that proves compelling. Individual observations of nature do not “prove” Christianity to be true; rather, Christianity validates itself by its ability to make sense of those observations. “The phenomenon does not prove religion, but religion explains the phenomenon.”⁶²

The point that Chesterton was making is central to Christian apologetics. Christianity offers a rationally plausible and imaginatively compelling “big picture” of reality. It is not so much a collection of isolated individual beliefs as it is a web of interconnected beliefs that gains its strength and appeal partly because of its comprehensiveness and partly because of its intellectual and imaginative resilience. Christian theology weaves together the threads of biblical truth to disclose a pattern of meaning—like a tapestry, which brings many individual threads together, thus allowing their deeper significance and interconnections to be appreciated. No single thread can show that pattern; it emerges only through the process of weaving the threads together.

This strongly visual image helps us to appreciate how the Christian faith is able to weave together the threads of Scripture and human experience and observation to provide a reliable and satisfying account of life. C. S. Lewis is one of many writers to use images of illumination—such as the sun lighting up a landscape—to help convey the capacity of the Christian faith to make sense of things.⁶³ Yet it is important to appreciate both that there are other ways of expressing the explanatory capaciousness of the Christian faith—including stories—and that Lewis’s own rich understanding of Christianity was ultimately based on its fundamentally narrative character. Christian doctrines, for Lewis, are “translations into our *concepts* and *ideas*” of what God has already expressed in a “more adequate” language—namely, the “grand narrative” of the Christian faith itself.⁶⁴

Christianity as a “Story of a Larger Kind”

Human beings tell stories to make sense of our individual and corporate experience—whether this “sense-making” is stated in political, religious, or more general terms—and to transmit these ideas within culture.⁶⁵ Narratives provide a natural way of organizing, recalling, and interpreting experience, allowing the wisdom of the past to be passed on to the future and helping communities gain a subjective sense of social or religious identity and historical location.⁶⁶

But *why* do we tell stories in this way? Why are we storytelling and meaning-seeking animals?⁶⁷ If storytelling is a fundamental human instinct, what story can be told to explain our propensity to tell stories? Carl Jung famously suggested that certain “universal psychic structures” underlie human experience and behavior—an idea taken up in Joseph Campbell’s influential account of the fundamental plotlines of stories, such as the “myth of the hero.”⁶⁸ Campbell developed the notion of a “monomyth”—the idea that all mythic narratives are basically variations on a single great story, so that a common pattern can be discerned beneath the narrative elements of most great myths.⁶⁹ This basic idea has proved deeply influential within the film industry and has given rise to intense study of how movie plotlines conform to Campbell’s basic ideas.⁷⁰

Yet a Christian answer can also be given to the question of why we tell stories and what these might point to, which is grounded in the notion of humanity being created by God and bearing the “image of God.” For J. R. R. Tolkien, our natural inclination and capacity to create stories such as the great fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* are the result of being created in the image of God. “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.”⁷¹

Tolkien is often described as developing a “theology of sub-creation,” arguing that human beings create stories that are ultimately patterned on the “grand story” of God. We tell stories that are unconsciously patterned along the lines of this great story of creation and redemption, and that reflect our true identity as God’s creatures and our true destiny as lying with that same God. For Tolkien, one of the great strengths of the Christian narrative is its ability to explain why human beings tell stories of meaning in the first place. The Christian gospel enfolds and proclaims “a story of a larger kind” that embraces what he found to be good, true, and beautiful in the great myths of literature, expressing it as “a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world.”⁷²

Similar ideas are encountered in the writings of C. S. Lewis. While Lewis’s spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, can be read in many ways, one of its most fundamental themes is how Lewis’s discovery of the Christian narrative helped him make sense of his own identity and agency, allowing him to discern (and occasionally construct) a coherent narrative within his life.⁷³ Yet Lewis does not give his discovery of the importance of narrative the attention it deserves in *Surprised by Joy*, which passes over a conversation with J. R. R. Tolkien in September 1931 that is now seen as critically important in Lewis’s transition from a generalized theism to a specifically Christian way of seeing things.⁷⁴ That conversation with Tolkien helped Lewis realize that myths—in the technical literary sense of the term—were “profound and suggestive of meanings” that lay beyond his grasp, so that he was unable to state in plain language “what it meant.”⁷⁵

For Lewis, a myth is a story that evokes awe, enchantment, and inspiration and conveys or embodies an imaginative expression of the deepest meanings of life. Lewis came to see that the story of Christ was a “true myth”—that is to say, a myth that functions in the same manner as other myths yet *really happened*. Christianity possessed

the literary form of a myth, with the critical difference that it was *true*. The story of Christ is thus to be understood as “God’s myth,” whereas the great pagan narratives are “men’s myths.”⁷⁶

Lewis uses the term “myth” in speaking of the Christian narrative, often suggesting that Christianity is better conceived as *mythos* rather than *logos*. Many, particularly within the American evangelical community, misunderstand Lewis at this point, believing that his use of the term “myth” implies that Christianity is fictional or false. As recent scholarship has made clear, however, a “myth” is ultimately a worldview that is presented in the form of a narrative.⁷⁷ As Eric Csapo points out, the notion of “myth” is no longer limited to significant stories sourced from “ancient” or “primal” cultures but now extends to modern narratives of identity and value, such as those of the Enlightenment.⁷⁸

So what is the relevance of this for Christian apologetics? In his 1944 essay “Myth Became Fact,” Lewis stresses that God *authorizes* the use of myth as a means of captivating the human imagination and engaging the human reason. Since “God chooses to be mythopoeic,” we in our turn must be “mythopathic”—receptive to God’s myth, recognizing and acknowledging its “mythical radiance,” and offering it an “imaginative welcome.”⁷⁹ If God chose to use the form of myth as a means of communicating both truth and meaning, why should we not do the same? Why not tell stories—above all, stories grounded in the Christian metanarrative—as a way of creating receptivity to Christianity and the great truths that it enfold and conveys?

This short work responds to Lewis’s point by exploring the role that narratives can play in Christian apologetics. It explores how we can use narratives to make sense of ourselves and our world and considers the contributions of Christian writers such as C. S. Lewis, Marilynne Robinson, Dorothy L. Sayers, and J. R. R. Tolkien who

have focused on the apologetic potential of such stories. This raises some theoretical and pragmatic questions. It requires us to lay a theological foundation for such an approach to apologetics, on the one hand, and to show that it is potentially useful, on the other. We shall consider these two questions in more detail in what follows.