Separate Stories, Common Myth: *disClosure* interviews Martin E. Marty

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Walter Bower and Jonathan Vincent  
Separate Stories, Common Myth  
disClosure interviews Martin E. Marty  
[1 March 2002]

disClosure: In the Tanner-McCurrin lecture on the History and Philosophy of Religion of Westminster College of Salt Lake City, Utah, “We Might Know What to do and How to do it: On the Usefulness of the Religious Past,” you made a distinction between story and history. For the purposes of illustration in the lecture, story and history were conflated. What is the primary distinction between story and history?

Martin Marty: The line between story and history cannot be an absolute. History always has to do with the past. You have nothing to say as a historian until something has occurred. Story does not have to. Religions have millennial visions and apocalyptic visions that become part of their story even though they have not happened. In history, I would just say in the proper sense of the term, everything you do is in the light of having to do with past.

As far as groundedness or basis in factuality is concerned, the goal is to do that much more in history than in story. You are allowed much more of an imaginative function in story than in history. You do not have to check out every detail. In history, theoretically you could. Now I do not believe that history is that grounded. We know nothing about the past if somebody has not left a trace. If there is no trace, there is no history. But the person who leaves the trace is already biased. If you make a monument, you are saying this is a mighty important person. So there is a prejudice in the first thing. If you just take the accounts of all the people witnessing the events, you get very different accountings even from two people sitting next to each other. I am not trying to say the groundedness of history means there is an objective absolute factual base, but you have more of a responsibility to be able to be checked out.

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One of the problems we have with the historical plagiarists of today is that they did not anticipate the watchful scrutiny. They did not realize what a lot of us would read and we would find. So it keeps you a little bit honest; in story, for instance, you do not have to do that. In story, I am thinking of illustrations: Iwo Jima, those are the flag raisers. We now know that it was posed after the fact. We would read and we would find.

stance, you do not have to do that. In story, I am thinking of illustrations: Iwo Jima, those are the flag raisers. We now know that it was posed after the fact. We know that one of them was an alcoholic, but we still put the statue up as part of the national story. And you can like it or not like it, but it is there.

dC: We invoked a kind of national scene in which the many might sit down to the table to better share their particular experiences of our specific groups as a means of communicating towards the common good rather than closing ourselves off in our private factions. It seems optimistic to me that everyone is engaged in this kind of collective concern restoring of the body politic. It seems to me this kind of or the people who are engaged in this story telling are precisely the groups who identify as exclusivist feminists, multiculturalists, neo-Marxists, are precisely the people who are telling their stories. The problem seems to be getting the power elites to listen or getting them to sit around the table. What motivates those already entrenched in the positions of power to want to affect change that benefits the many?

MM: I do not believe that anywhere we would want to say everyone is at the table, but a wide disparate set of people are pictured here. There is an informal table and a formal table. The informal table goes on in a situation of a tremendous imbalance of power. If you have somebody in your family who has Parkinson's, you are very animated in getting in a conversation saying, "Mr. Bush, change your policies on this." If you are an absolutist on cloning and every dimension of genetic tampering you are saying, "This is it." You could be sure that they are listening to some extent when Mr. Bush stocks his committee. He stocks in line with his ideology. That is one instance in which there is a tremendous imbalance.

There are many circumstances where occasions breed the necessity of conversation and if they are done at the right moment then really a lot can happen. A few quick illustrations. I was involved in this conference the Jewish community sponsored about faith-based initiatives. There were five Jews and five evangelicals and I was mainly there to report and observe. What was interesting to me was that the division was right down the middle of both groups. Some of the evangelicals said, "What a great release this would be of energy through the faith base." Others said, "If you take the king's shuckles, you get the king's shuckles." And very soon they are determining what is good religion and what is bad religion and how to do it. The Jews said we have been doing faith-based for years; it does not bother us and we have a nice legal setup. Others said, "There is no separation of church and state."

You have people who say birth control. All Protestants were against birth control in the 1880s, and then discoveries occurred and they start looking at their books and saying here is the alternative—Stewardship. So when the Vatican comes down with an absolute against it, eighty-five percent of Catholic women in America do not follow it. But I think it is partly because they have had a conversation "at the table," so nothing I have said assumes conversions go on. They might, but I think it's more of what I call a pioneering venture; it makes it possible to step into circumstances you wouldn't have thought of before.

dC: Is it largely practice based?

MM: Practice is a huge part to get to the table. You don't have to agree on anything except the rules of the game at the table.

dC: Practices might allow us to segue into how associations and pluralism fit into this kind of a dynamic you are talking about.

MM: Well, on one level, you simply have a political or civic association from which you cannot disassociate. You can, but you are out of luck; not many people get on boats and leave. So if you are there, they can get you for taxes; you can dissent; you can pay the penalty; you can have conscience against military service and so on, but you are playing the rules of the game. If you are a 501(c)(3) association, you are still playing the rules of the game because you still went to the government to get that status and you got draft exemption. You went to the government and got that status. Theologically, it is a horrible thought, because it means the civic order takes priority but in a practical world where you live. Martin Luther King could say there is a higher law and they put him in jail for it. He won, but he could not get out of the polity.

The associations we are talking about here—Planned Parenthood and evangelical pro-life and feminists—these are associations in which you are there because you agree with something about the general purpose. You can disassociate and you can move on. And so some people switch camps. On the gay front, Mel White, who wrote speeches for Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, came out as gay, for instance. And now there's an evangelical gay group. Now evangelical gay groups are not welcome at evangelical conservative groups.

dC: Trying to make a bridge here, I was wondering if you would be willing to talk about what you remark as being the absence of religion in thinking about groups and concentrating only on the familiar triad of race, class, and gender. The inclusion of religion here is problematic, since, generally speaking, race, class, and gender groups are promoting a broader acceptance of a multiple range of subject positions; whereas, religion, at least Christianity, clearly articulates a "One Way" teleology of salvation, and the absolute truth of the kerygma, and a "great commission" of the other world to the Christian version of the truth. These tenets of the Church do not seem to work well in the kind of pluralistic world you envision, not much tolerance for other stories. How do you see the church or the Christian's role in respect to this?

MM: You are certainly right that Christianity—certainly Judaism, Islam, and most of the world religions, as well—have particular views of reality that in some respects and on some fronts are "non-negotiable." When the chips are down, yes, conversionist religions or exclusivist religions have this dimension. I take a very developmental and evolutionary view of this, however, and I would say that before the Enlightenment I would hardly trust any Christian in the conversation. What we are hoping today in the Islamic world is that they get hit by something as corrupting as modernity and Enlightenment. I have good friends in the Islamic
world who think this may be the first time in that dimension Islam may come out in the polity of American pluralism. There are as many positive sources for that in their texts, as there are in Jewish and Christian texts.

When religious freedom came, all the religions in America claimed that it was their nation, except for the Baptists who they say were dragged screaming into it. There were sources in the text that made it easy for them once it happened. There certainly are, though, exclusivist religious forces in America that, given a chance, would like to turn America into a theocracy, which means not to talk to anybody else; there is no doubt about it. I do not think there is much danger of that happening; however, when someone pushes too far there is often self-correction from within the group.

Two years ago Robert Bork and Charles Colson put out a statement saying we are so far gone that we are going to need a [religious] revolution. They did not make a dime among the thirty or forty million Americans who theoretically share their theology. So they have the freedom to say those things, but they are unlikely to happen. Yes, it is always a problem, mainly on my own endeavors on the front where health and faith and ethics come together. And it is true that many things are negotiable until you get to the table and religion enters in on euthanasia, abortion as nonnegotiable. We are certainly not the only people at the table and I think we have to work on self-correction from within. As in the illustration I made before, Protestants who were unanimously against birth control and put the laws on, I have been on things with the population front, where the Vatican and Islamic fundamentalists massively opposed reproductive rights. We are involved in movements in Cairo 2005 where we get all the other religions to speak up. Just as there is a politics of religion, there is a politics of politics.

**dC:** This is more of a religious history question. What influence do you think postmodernism has had on historians of religion in trying to understand how religion shapes people's lives? Do you think historians working in a postmodernist culture have dismissed experiential forms of religion with the assumption you cannot possibly mean what you say? In an early American religious history seminar last semester, we discussed Lambert's *Inventing the Great Awakening*, a book using a postmodernist framework in discussing how revivalists wove their own web of meaning and talking about cultural wars between New lights and Old lights. Has the emphasis on the postmodernist interpretations in the academy moved religious history away from studies that are more grounded in the so-called data?

**MM:** I think they are grounded in different data. They are not ungrounded. Now, in the first part, certainly historians are trained not to dismiss experiential forms. That's one of the hottest things going today. Students I have worked with—Anne Taves, who writes books on disassociation and psychology, and John Corrigan has a brand new book out on the history of emotion in the Bible. I would say in that sense they are reflecting the trends of the time and are discovering past events that were overlooked. The first change came with women. When I started teaching, if I had twenty-four students enrolled in the course, only one of the students would be a woman. Over the last fifteen years of teaching, now at least half the class would be women. They write about things that women notice that men do not with different understandings of power, such as the history of religion, generativity, marriage, sexuality, health, domesticity.

My successor at the University of Chicago, Catherine Brekus, has written a book, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, on forty black and white women preachers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Now we do not own a single printed sermon by them. Why? They were not in power and not a single one of them was ordained. Ordination was a means of social control, and women preaching was a means of subverting it all the way back to Anne Hutchinson, if you go to early America.

So, I think what we call the hermeneutics of suspicion is there. What a lot of us have noticed is that, in the Perry Miller era, he was great at what he did. If a sermon survived, it was because it was leather-bound and gilt-edged, but you will find it because that was the official minister on the feast day or fast day. That side is certainly there, the studied experience.

As to the other part of the question—the weaving a web of meaning—I would have to say that is what all people do all the time. A fabrication of meaning goes on all the time. The question is, "Is it subject to criticism? Can it be examined?" In the case of the Great Awakenings it is being examined. If you have read Lambert, then you have probably read Jon Butler who argued maybe there wasn't a Great Awakening.

**dC:** *Awash in a Sea of Faith.*

**MM:** Yes, there is a chapter in *Awash* that makes this argument. Butler just questions if there was a second Great Awakening. Consider the contemporary scene: on one level you could describe America as an extremely secular materialist place. Whenever I am in any city, I pick up the weekend singles' free paper. There are hundreds of things in there, but you would be hard pressed to find even a trace or a vestige that this ever was a Judeo-Christian civilization. On another level, you could say there is a spiritual revival, by looking at all the people drinking Starbucks in the sections on spirituality, marriage, and alternative holistic religion at Barnes and Noble.

So, you can tell two true stories about America. It is undergoing a spiritual renewal and it may be more overtly secular than it was in the past. A fabrication of meaning, in a sense, is not bad "because of the presence of the world we are condemned to meaning." I think historians are trying to examine particular symbols and images that are put together in a certain way to create the fabrication of meaning.

**dC:** The next question deals with your work in public religion. Realizing that much of your work within the last twenty years has revolved around studying what Benjamin Franklin called "publick religion," what role do you think Franklin thought the role of religion should be in relationship to its contribution to civil society and civil practice?

**MM:** My interest in exploring Franklin is because I think he is a more accurate portrayal of how America turned out than is the tradition of Rousseau,
Durkheim, and the early Robert Bellah picked up in the famous civil religion essay, which is what I would call top-down civil religion—that is, every complex body needs corporate collective representation and the invention of a fabric of meaning. Bellah made a great deal of the kind of imposed unity based on Jefferson, Lincoln, and the Kennedy first inaugural. A few years later Bellah wrote a book called The Broken Covenant in which he said, “it did not work; if I had had Nixon’s second inaugural in front of me instead of Kennedy’s I would have written the opposite of what I wrote.” Bellah was discovering a bottom-up view and that is why I chose Franklin’s word, “public religion.”

Franklin was a deistic post-Presbyterian, and he remained nominally with the Presbyterian church. As a matter of fact, in a letter to Ezra Stiles, he wrote, “I am of the Presbyterian persuasion; however, Sunday being my day of study I rarely frequent its assemblence.” All the founders stayed with their churches nominally.

One crucial way to put it is, I think Lincoln thought every religion had to have a stick to exist. Catholics have the Pope. Baptists have baptism. Lutherans have the presence of the Eucharist. Everybody has their stick, which built the association literally, but they had enough common morality they were promoting that it was good for the republic, and that’s why Franklin supported them. Franklin thought, among other things, Christian religion should be taught for manners and morals and history.

dC: The next question moves on to the sociology of religion. In the new religious paradigm, 1993, Stephen Warner has come out with an article talking about the new paradigm in the sociology of religion and then just recently Paul Faraose and Stephen Pfaff have come out with another article documenting the emergence of the new paradigm within the sociology of religion. Do you think the emergence of the new paradigm in the sociology of religion can adequately explain religious change and flux in contemporary U.S. society?

MM: If the new paradigm is the “economic one.”

Rational choice perspective.

MM: The new paradigm cannot, by itself, explain religious change. It certainly has something to say, but I do not think anything as complex as diversity in your profession is going to settle on a new paradigm. It depends on where you start. If you start by saying everything is a power relation, then everything you see is going to be a power relation. If you say everything you see is a sex relation, including religion, then everything you see is going to be a sex relation. If everything is economic, then everything is going to be an economic relation.

To me, it has always been interesting that this has emerged at the height of the not-yet-criticized global market, pre-dotcom failure. I may be too influenced by the fact that the Chicago Divinity School is surrounded on three sides by the Business School and the Chicago School of Economics. And, in a strange way, it plays off that humans are nothing but autonomous enterprises, including religion. Now, they are certainly right that a great number of religious choices are made often unconsciously in the light of economic circumstance. If there is a new suburb of Lexington and the people in the suburb are making a hundred and twenty thousand a year, then they are more likely to go to an Episcopal or a Presbyterian Church than they are a Pentecostal. But that is changing because Pentecostals are moving up economically. I was just saying the church extension experts were the best Marxists in our society. They really followed the economistic deterministic model.

But there are a lot of things that go on in religion that are not that marketable either. Now again, you cannot get out of the web they wove. Suppose you are ready to die for your faith. They would say that is part of the market choice you are making. And you get more status in the life to come by the bets you are making now. I do not think that is how it really works in life, and a lot of people make decisions on too many other bases.

There is a lot to rational choice, but I think even in the few years since Stephen Warner’s article there have been so many other questions that have been raised that it doesn’t have it to itself. I have had Stephen Warner in my classes, and he himself does not want to be identified with rational choice. He says, “I am not a rational choice person.” So, I tend to keep learning from them. I think that the historian is sort of jack-of-all-trades. Anything that throws light on this story will help or exploring it will help.

dC: You talked about national stories that become, in an instant, places where we define ourselves in terms of a nation. You mention the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the assassination of JFK, and the explosion of the Challenger as moments that articulate us in a more visible sense. What implications do the events of September 11 have for thinking about collective identity? Do we think in these terms at the expense of racist creations of an “other”?

MM: I am more worried than not about the follow up to September 11. I was invited recently by members of the Institute of American Values who put out a statement in the Chronicle of Higher Education this week on the topic that “this war is just and we should all sign up.” And they sent it to me. And I said—never signed anything—but I said why is this necessary? Who are you when the President has got almost ninety percent approval ratings for what he is doing? Where is this dangerous dissent that people are raising too many pacifist questions? Lucky for them there is Noam Chomsky and Susan Sontag, and try to name number three.

It just isn’t fair. So that we have to pull together is obvious and you have to marshal resources. And you do have to make some budgetary adjustments. And you have to refocus and change airport security. You do those things and, in some respects, they are positives in that it did teach us that New York, our most pluralist heterogeneous city, can pull itself together for a lot of things.

Over against that as a positive force, I would say, as good historians, remembering one of the strongest forces in history is inertia. And, therefore, a lot of things that could be changed utterly because of it have not been changed utterly. I wish more of them had changed the values in the entertainment world, but they did not.

Now, unless there is an explicit reference to it on television, you would not know
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that it happened. You know it if it is on CNN and NBC, but if you are just watching pop culture, there would not be a trace. Church attendance went up for a week, and then it was normal right after that. After each of these events, the chapters were full because there was a need to symbolize what was going on.

My own energies have gone very much into, for example, fighting off the militarization. What got me off a few weeks ago was when Linda Chavez wrote, “They have a militant book, we have a peaceful book,” and if we read especially the New Testament, we have a bit of a guilty conscience because we do not follow it a week, in pop culture, there would not be a trace.

Linda

My own energies have gone very much into, for example, fighting off the militarization. What got me off a few weeks ago was when Linda Chavez wrote, “They have a militant book, we have a peaceful book,” and if we read especially the New Testament, we have a bit of a guilty conscience because we do not follow it as a book of peace. When Linda Chavez did this, I got steamed up before church on Sunday and wrote it on Monday and it was an e-mail column. Wednesday morning at six, I am on the airplane and the correspondent is quoting the fight between Linda Chavez and me. He is in Saudi Arabia where it is very important for what perceptions mean there to what we think they are. The objectification of the other even strategically is stupid. We are giving people an ideology they do not have and are forcing them into it. Yes, we are instinctively somewhat closer to each other, but when every suppression is made I agree with probably nothing in the President’s domestic program. And every time you raise any questions, you are unpatriotic and that is dangerous. And I do not think it will last but it has to be fought off.

We are not getting the truth in all dimensions about 9-11. This will be out of date by the time you put this together, but this morning there was a big critique of the administration during the first three days. President Bush is saying the object of this war is to get Bin Laden. We have got to get the terrorists. When we couldn’t do that, it drifted into the object of this war is to get rid of the Taliban, which is rather easy because we had warlord alliances. And we did that, but we didn’t get Bin Laden probably. When Senator Daschle reminded the President of that yesterday, he was called unpatriotic by officials. He was raising the question, well who has the truth? Now, over the long pull by the Gulf War, we said we have to get Saddam Hussein. We didn’t; we won the war, but we didn’t solve anything. We kept the oil lines flowing, but we didn’t solve anything.

I think self-revision occurred very quickly by the first three days. Everything that was said was really disturbing to me, as a citizen, as believer, as everything else. He must have thought the first three days, well that was the Texas talk, we are going to get him dead or alive or whatever. Well, a lot of people said that is not how you build alliances and that is not how you learn what you are about. So, sometimes the top person has to do the correcting, but I think groups are also mutually self-corrected. And groups don’t have a single story; suppose you did take African American, which is one of the more coherent stories in the view of larger America. And, on the far right, you have blacks like Thomas Sewell, who are absolutely the other side. But overall the people in the profession get to self-correct the thing and say, “let’s think of the context of those days and what he did and didn’t do, etc.” So, new books are self-corrected. Now that doesn’t hit the whole public tomorrow, but over the long pull I think it does. I think again you have to watch the stage of a movement. In the early stage of the movement, it has to belong to the speaker.

If you weren’t Native American, you have never heard the story from their angle. When I was introduced in a synagogue as a Lutheran, right after Hitler’s Germany, which is one-third Lutheran, the rabbis were embarrassed and saying, “don’t do that, he is our guest. He has to talk; let him talk.” I have to hear that, and the congregation has to hear that. Elie Wiesel’s first book Night, which at one time was believed to belong to Holocaust victims alone, is today the official book of Chicago and everybody is supposed to read it all over. And Elie Wiesel more than anybody else once said that to the national anti-hate groups there. So if the story is good enough and deep enough after it has been heard as representative, others by analogy can, I think, learn from them. I am not that optimistic that self-correction always works, but it’s the only sign we’ve got.

dC: Sociologist of religion Meredith McGuire has authored a very popular textbook used in many sociology of religion courses titled, Religion, The Social Context. McGuire claims that civil religion is an important sociological concept and also argues civil religion helps us to establish an understanding of the relationship of the one to the many. To what degree or to what extent do you think civil religion is successful at establishing these relationships between the one and the many? Or do you think public religion can make the links between the one and the many more clear?

MM: I am certainly not interested in fighting over the words. I may very well use civil religion myself in many contexts. I think in the historical unfolding from 1967 to 2002, civil religion more and more came to be seen as that set of meanings that was cultivated in formal occasions by satirizing power and presidential inaugurals. The president is the priest of it and the prophet of it. Now civil religion is important and I do not want to get away from it, but I think the public religion concept is a good deal more of the way people actually transact.

I do not think the average citizen ever caught on to what Bellah was talking about when he was talking about civil religion. I have a scene once in which you picture someone going into a bar in south Milwaukee where Polish American war veterans hang out. You better salute the flag, and you better say the pledge of allegiance, and you better sign up for military service. You listen to them and you say, “oh—well, that’s your religion.” “No, goddammit we are members of St. Anthony’s parish and that’s our religion and I’ll push it down your throat if you think something else is my religion.” On the other hand, take, for instance, a Christian church that has had a national flag and a cross. If you take the flag out and you have not had it you might win, but if the flag is there and you take it out the Sunday after 9-11, you are done. You can take the cross off and have it polished and not have to explain it. But not the flag, so you make that judgment. That is your real religion.

Public religion has a dual sense in that it is the overarching religious set of meanings, or it’s the religion generated in the groups that has a public dimension. And I think I tend to prefer public religion a little more. I do not disagree with Meredith McGuire about the general use of the term, “civil religion.” I think overall I work for metaphors. I think Peter Berger’s old sacred canopy is a good one—that there is something over it all in which you transact certain things. And that’s why I say some measure of cohesive sentiment or some sense of the constitutional myth allows for other things.
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dC: Despite the enormous controversy that surrounds the Constitution, you identify the "constitutional myth" as our unifying bond. You contend that, "if one remains a constitutionalist who is against coercion in matters of philosophy and religion, then one is advised to promote the 'binding tie of cohesive sentiment' in voluntary and persuasive ways for the very reasons spelled out in the godless Constitution's Preamble...The Constitution and devotion to it become part of the common good because of voluntary support for it" (200). Would you mind explaining the enigmatic assertion of this last sentence? I do you conceive of constitutional support as voluntary and, at the same time, the foundation for our thinking about "common good," a seemingly coercive myth?

MM: I think in the literal sense it is a piece of paper. I start by asking, "Why did the founders spend so much time on the concept of virtue?" Well, we all know that constitutional law by itself is insufficient. The founders knew you could never have enough police, never enough sub-laws, to have a republic unless you had a citizenry that had enough cohesive sentiment to want to make it work. Enough morals were generated by their associations, often religious, along the way, and I think that's where the Constitution being blissfully short works better than if it had been a fat law book. The longer they get, the worse they get. And the more amendments they get, the worse they get.

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