EXAMPLE

1

E Pluribus Unum:

The Use of Family Stories in the Construction of an Individual's National Identity

ABSTRACT: Family stories routinely include religion and race as facets of a family's identity, but how, if at all, do family stories position themselves in relation to their nation-state's narratives? If awarded a Faculty Fellowship (and the Fulbright Fellowship for which I applied in July), I will spend the spring 2011 semester at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, from whose literature department I have already received an invitation (see attached).   Slovenia became a state in 1993, and while there, I will explore how Slovenians have used their family stories—oral narratives spontaneously and often repeatedly told—to support, interrogate or challenge their still-emerging national narrative. After conducting 25 structured and recorded interviews, I will publish my findings as a scholarly article. Because most Slovenians are Roman Catholic Slavs in a region where religion and ethnicity were brought to the foreground by the recent wars in and among the former Yugoslavian republics of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, my hypothesis is that religion and ethnicity have also been brought to the foreground in both the Slovenian national identity narrative and the family stories of its citizens. Whether this is true, whether family narratives also explicitly embrace or reflect other elements comprising Slovenian national identity, and what the effects are of these potentially conflicting elements of composition present both the problem and the promise to be investigated by *E Pluribus Unum*.

BACKGROUND: My book, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us,* first published in 1988 and republished by Transaction Publishers in 2004 with a new introduction, looks at the function of family stories in several areas; these include the family's affiliation with (or sometimes distance from) ethnic and religious groups, and less frequently (and less pointedly) identifying the family as "American" or with some aspect of the conventional American national narrative, such as the Depression or World War II.   My later and more narrowly focused article ("Transnationalism as a Motif in Family Stories," *Family Process,* 51 (2005): 316-38) investigates the use of family stories in regard to a family's national identity, especially as employed by families in diaspora.   Specifically, I look at how transnationals—those who feel affiliated with the United States as well as with the family's country of origin— use family stories to "position" the family members in regard to both the American national narrative and the country of origin national narrative. National identity, I have found, is most predictably a component of family identity in diasporic families.

My proposed faculty fellowship project, *E Pluribus Unum*, will expand this research agenda to examine, not only families in diaspora, but also those who have remained despite the recent geographic, political and social upheavals their home has endured. The scholarly article that will result, which could serve as a platform for an eventual book on the subject, will follow my tradition of successfully publishing due to the generous award of a faculty fellowship. My 1988 fellowship gave me time to work on *The Hunter College Campus Schools for the Gifted: The Challenge of Equity and Excellence* (Teachers College Press, 1992), a social history as well as a study of the efforts of a publicly-funded school to be at once elite and racially equitable. My second

fellowship, in 1993, allowed me to complete a book proposal that led to a contract with

Harcourt Brace with Terence Real for a book entitled *I Don't Want to Talk About It:*

Overcoming the Legacy of Male Depression, later published by Scribners in 1998; the

collaboration did not extend to the book's completion, but my contribution is

acknowledged. My 1999 fellowship permitted me to complete a memoir, *A Boy I Once*

Knew: What a Teacher Learned from Her Student (Algonquin Books, 2002); and my

2005 fellowship, on wills as a variety of autobiography, led to an article in a refereed

journal, entitled "The Last Will and Testament in Literature: Rupture, Rivalry, and

Sometimes Rapprochement from Middlemarch to Lemony Snicket." *Family Process* 54

(2008): 425-39.

In addition to my own background, two of the colleagues I will be working with

in Slovenia have an academic interest in Slovenians in diaspora and the literature they

have produced. Because my trip would not occur until spring 2011, we have not

developed formal plans to collaborate, but given our shared interests, I foresee and will

pursue a collaboration relating to family stories and their relation to national narratives,

both for residential families and for families in diaspora.

CONTRIBUTION: My work on family stories has always been interdisciplinary—

ranging from textual and contextual literary analysis (with special attention to family

stories incorporated into memoirs) to gathering oral history—and as such has been cited

by scholars in psychology, folklore, linguistics, narrative studies, women's studies and

religious studies, among others. My newer work has been more concerned with

immigration narratives in both literature and family stories, and has therefore broadened

the scope of scholars who rely on my research, with frequent citation by migration

studies scholars. The current project in Ljubljana will continue and extend my interest in

and contributions to our understandings of the relationships between and among

literature, ethnicity, family stories and national narratives.

Thus *E Pluribus Unum* constitutes critical new territory for my research. As a

scholar in American Studies, I have looked at family stories in the United States, a stable

nation-state with a robust and varied public national narrative. But this is also a time

when nation-state narratives seem fragile, increasingly unable to create or sustain a *Unum*

out of so much ethnic and religious *pluribus*. Investigating the degree to which family

stories do or do not urge family members to affiliate nationally, as well as religiously and

ethnically, may shed some light on the fragility of the nation state compared with the

vigor of religious and ethnic identity—a critical concern across disciplines at the outset of

the 21st century.

Therefore, if I am awarded a Fulbright, the examination I propose would look at

the residents of Slovenia as an example of a people whose ethnic and religious identity is

already well-established, but whose national identity is not only still evolving, but is of

recent memory. If I am not awarded a Fulbright, I would still be able to capitalize on the

opportunity of a Fordham Faculty Fellowship by readily adapting my project to explore

similar issues through an examination of Slovenian diasporic literature. Both

contributions would be critical, because the family as an agent that promulgates national

affiliation has been rarely examined, though a few scholars, such as Andrews,

Brockmeier and Feldman are beginning to look in this direction. My project would thus

place my research, my department, and Fordham University at the forefront of this new and exciting trend in the scholarship.

CONCLUSION: *E Pluribus Unum* constitutes an exciting opportunity for me to use my experience and insight—gained from examining how family stories "position" transnational family members in the national narratives of both their adoptive and original country—in order to map out a new direction in my research and new territory in my discipline. Namely, how do family stories "position" *non*-transnational family members—those who remained within a struggling or nascent nation-state—when that home nation's own narrative has struggled to create or sustain a *Unum* out of its ethnic and religious *pluribus*?   Whether family stories do or do not urge family members to affiliate nationally, as well as religiously and ethnically, may shed some light on what scholars across disciplines—not to mention policy-makers and diplomats—have observed with trepidation: the increasing fragility of the nation-state at the outset of the 21st century as compared with the vigor of religious and ethnic identity. By advancing our understanding of the relationship between private family stories and public national narratives, my proposed Faculty Fellowship and Fulbright project's greatest contribution may be finding principles that can help us foster *E Pluribus Unum* in what many fear is an increasingly fractured world.

EXAMPLE

2

Abstract

It is not only Pontius Pilate who asked, "What is truth?" The answers to the question of defining truth are so varied (e.g., truth is correspondence of propositions to facts, truth is coherence among propositions, truth is disclosure, truth is "what works," truth is a rhetorical device, etc.) that some philosophers (e.g., B. Williams 2002, 63) have dubbed "truth" indefinable.

Yet another possibility looms.

Appraising Faith, the book-length project for which I am seeking both a Fordham Faculty and NEH Fellowship in addition to having been invited to apply for a residential fellowship at the University of Durham (England), will explore whether different definitions of truth do not compete so much as complement one another, as each definition captures only one part of the multiple meanings of "true." For example, if I make a proposition about medium-sized dry goods, the correspondence theory of truth is fitting, but not for a proposition about psychological states. "I am being appeared to now redly" may be true if and only if I am "being appeared to now redly," but that correspondence is of little practical use. Similarly, what is generally accepted as true in a discourse community may be whatever my peers in the community let me get away with, but this controversial proposed criterion of truth is too broadly dissociated from the conditions that make a proposition true for it to be a full-scale account of the use of "true."

It is this polyvalence of truth that led Williams to construe "truth" as indefinable; however, such polyvalence also sets the stage for what I have outlined in prior publications: an appraisal account of truth. *Appraising Faith* will fill out these earlier sketches to fully articulate, appropriately defend, and apply in the context of faith an appraisal account of truth – an account that is especially worthy of consideration because of its potential contribution to our increasingly interconnected yet religiously diverse world.

Background

I have held two prior journal and book-length producing NEH Fellowships (87-88, 03-04), and have written extensively on issues relevant to the present field of inquiry: the meaning of religious language (1978, 2000b, 2007d), religious epistemology (1989c, 1990a, 1995a, 2009), religious diversity (1990b, 1994, 1995b, 1999, 2006, 2007a) and the problem of evil. In presenting an appraisal account of truth, my previous publications have focused on appraising religious narratives such as myths, sagas and parables (1985, 192-214), and demonstrating how epistemological realism was compatible with a radically constructivist account of a religious tradition (especially *pace* Rorty 1979) (2000, 156-70). *Appraising Faith* will fill out these earlier sketches via a three-step argument. First, I propose to show how classic

theories of truth (coherence, correspondence, pragmatic, etc.) and conceptions of epistemology (internalist, externalist [reliabilist], etc.) fall short of being adequate theories of truth, but can be adapted as contextually sensitive criteria for performing truth appraisals of claims – which may be embedded in propositions or structured as narratives or descriptions. Second, I will defend an appraisal account of the use of "true" against its counter-arguments. Third, I will develop standards for appraising the expressions of faith for being true. The book's argument will be organized into the following sections:

I. The Possibility of Religious Truth
II. Theories of Truth and Their Discontents
III. An Appraisal Account of Truth
IV. Appraising Faith in Practice
V. Reconsidering the Reasonableness of Faith Commitments in a Religiously Pluralist World

Contribution

Appraising Faith will be of interest to philosophers of religion in particular and scholars of religion more generally – including both theological and non-theological scholars – with potential application by those invested in finding tools for inter-religious dialogue as opposed to debate, communication in contrast to conflict.

This is because beyond the problems inherent in arriving at an appraisal account of "true" lies the question of whether "faith" can be true; thus my title: *Appraising Faith.*

Religious believing and religious beliefs are sometimes taken to be beyond the realm of assessment or truth. It is part of the present project to distinguish faith as a fundamental attitude toward that which is the source of meaning as opposed to actual value derived from religious believing or beliefs. Some faith claims are religious, some not. For example, the Buddhist claim that the world results from dependent co-origination (paticca-samupadda), the creationist claim that the world results from a creative act of God, and the atheist's claim that there is no way to say anything about the conditions or causes that bring about the cosmos could each be faith claims as here defined. But not all of them are "religious beliefs."

Two kinds of arguments have been made for placing faith or religious belief beyond the realm of what is true.

First, there is the much maligned approach of "Wittgensteinian fideism" that finds no external assessment of religious traditions possible. Some scholars of religion also write as if truth were completely internal to religious traditions: the "truth of what the Christian is saying and the truth of what the Hindu is saying can only be understood and then assessed within their own cultures and systems" (Knitter 2002, 213). Yet this sort of position has been roundly criticized (e.g., Shepherd 1976). Even if the meaning of a claim is determined by its function in a discourse system, and

even if religious traditions are incommensurable, it does not necessarily follow that religious claims are incomparable or that they cannot be appraised by those who are "non-believers" (see Tilley, 1989a; 2006, 156). As one of the chief proponents of a Wittgensteinian approach to religious belief has shown, one can compare particular religious claims with other religious claims (Phillips 1981, 66-71), a point recently developed in the exploration of Dostoevsky's works by R. Williams (2008). Williams's analysis can be developed to show how a person can appraise incommensurable faiths that confront him or her.

Second, some claim that religious belief is simply fabulous – unjustified and unjustifiable – positing that it is merely the fictive expression of a desire or of a hope for meaning in an (objectively) meaningless world. Numerous critics, e.g. A.G.N. Flew (1976) have played variations on this theme. They assume that their own fundamental commitments – which differ from believers' commitments – are somehow immune from the trial that religious faith commitments must undergo. I have argued that such an assumption is unwarranted and that both religious faith and naturalistic faith can be put on trial or be appraised (Tilley, 1978: 12-18, specifically with regard to Flew; analogous arguments are available regarding the assumptions of the new atheists).

Therefore, neither the fideistic argument nor the fabulistic argument against the possibility of appraising faith succeeds; however, an even more fundamental objection to my chosen task of appraising faith is the constructivist argument. Many sociologists of knowledge and a few postmodern philosophers concerned with knowledge assume – and sometimes even argue – that we construct what we know. Properly understood, I accept that point. However, many of these thinkers assume that if we do construct what we know, we must be anti-realists in the sense that the objects of our knowing, from maple trees to God, are fabrications or fictions. I have argued, however, that anti-realism simply does not follow from epistemic constructivism. Rather, a realist option that I call "consequential realism" (Tilley 2000, 162-63; this is akin to Putnam's "minimal realism"; see *inter alia* Putnam, 1992; Hymers 2000) is available even to a radically constructivist approach to knowledge. My point in this project is to show how the expression of a faith can be both constructed and also epistemically realistic. One can therefore appraise a faith tradition as possibly true in realistic, not Pickwickian, terms.

Having addressed whether faith can be appraised as true, it is also necessary to address arguments that have been made against construing "true" as an appraisal. Evaluative and appraisal accounts of truth (see Austin 1970; White 1957) have come under scathing attacks (Mayo 1959; Khatchadourian 1962). However, these attacks misunderstand what an appraisal is. For example, Mayo explicitly parses appraisal as a "pro-attitude" and takes for granted a correspondence

theory of truth; but an appraisal is not an attitude, it is a finding, as when a judge finds a defendant guilty or a realtor finds a property worth a certain amount of money. Meanwhile, the attacks on the sufficiency of a correspondence theory of truth, which Mayo takes for granted, are legion. Given that the appraisal account has been misunderstood and that the basis for the counter-arguments is controversial, at best, these are arguments do not show an appraisal account defeated. Thus the approach that argues for "true as an appraisal term" has not been tried and found wanting; it has never been adequately tried. The time is ripe for such a trial.

Various contextual and evaluative uses of "true" have been recently explored, criticized and defended (e.g., Healy 1994; MacFarlane 2003; 2005a; 2005b; Meek 2000). Recent foci on truthfulness (B. Williams 2002), updated pragmatic epistemologies (e.g. Haack 1993, 1998; Hildebrand 2003), and virtue epistemology (Zagzebski 1996; Sosa 2007) provide additional arguments that will help flesh out my earlier sketches of an appraisal account of truth.

Part of this account must take into consideration that appraisals are always particular and contextual exercises in judgment, which has a number of implications. First, one does not appraise something with which one has no familiarity: for most of us, retiring to a Tibetan monastery is not what William James called a "live option" (it is not a real possibility for us), and so will not come up for our appraisal. Rather, our appraisals are among those particular faith traditions that are "live" for us. If "true" is an appraisal, it is a limited, particular, and conditioned one. The more relevant data with which we are familiar, the more reliable our appraisal is. But appraisals do not and cannot require or even idealize an appraisal as infallible, in the sense that it covers all possible options. Second, as contexts change and we change, some new "live options" may appear for us and our appraisals may change. We can and do reappraise our faith as the tradition that carries it changes and we change. For some, the changes in a particular faith tradition, e.g., the changes in Roman Catholicism from before to after the Second Vatican Council, may change an appraisal of that faith tradition. Third, the fact that appraisals can change because of new information, changes in context, or even changes in the appraiser's understanding does not mean that appraisals are tentative or provisional. Rather, appraisals are firm, but conditioned. They are the best judgments we can come to at a particular time and place on a particular range of possibilities, not judgments indefeasible under any conditions.

The particular and contextual nature of appraisals is important in that an appraiser does not have to solve every problem or appraise every tradition any more than a real estate appraiser has to appraise every plot of land or a judge every criminal. It seems a confusion to think that because faith claims are articulated in absolute or universal terms that our appraisals of them must also be absolute or include every possibility in the universe of fundamental faith

claims. Like many approaches in recent epistemology, an appraisal account of truth is person-relative. However, it is also a form of social epistemology in that the appraisals are done according to standards that are public and should be done in the context of shared exploration and understanding – a claim to be developed in the present work. The person doing the appraising is situated in a particular social context. Hence, the final move in the argument is not the development of an overarching theory, but the commending of a context socially extended enough to develop credible standards or criteria by which to appraise faiths. While recognizing that not all claims are subject to all appraisals, *Appraising Faith* will set forth five standards that seem intuitively relevant, in that they each reflect an ordinary use of "true":

- Does the proposition or narrative that articulates the faith claim represent the world or part of it revealingly (compare Fiorenza, 1985:306-10)?

- Is the faith claim free of incoherence in that it (1) is in contact or correspondence with the relevant facts as we recognize them (compare Goodman 1978); (2) refers to states of affairs, events, things and agents accurately; and (3) attributes properties to these items appropriately?

- Do narratives that express faith claims show ways for communities and individuals to be "true to themselves," i.e. to overcome self-deception (compare Hauerwas and Burrell 1977)?

- Do expressions of faith claims show how one can be true to others?

- Do the expressions of the faith claims provide a model for developing the virtues, especially that of truthfulness?

These five *loci* both capture the multiple ordinary uses of "true" and utilize the various theories of truth to provide standards for appraising expressions of faith – and in narratives, of appraising 'faith in practice' – as true or not.

Conclusion

A Fordham Faculty Fellowship would facilitate my taking advantage of any NEH Fellowship award and the residential fellowship at the University of Durham (England) for which I have been invited to apply in support of *Appraising Faith*, a book which is the culmination of an intellectual trajectory I have cultivated over many years of research and publication. The significance of the project is that it proposes a novel resolution to a problem long in impasse in religious studies and philosophy of religion: the truth-value of religious belief. By construing the various theories of truth not as theories, but as indicating criteria for appraisal, it proposes the challenging task of creating a system to appraise both "religious" and "non-religious" faith.