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Functions of Narrative Genres for Lived Religion

The article presents the object and results of a study which combines the psychology of religion and folkloristics in the form of a qualitative analysis of empirical ethnographic material compiled from sources in a local neo-charismatic congregation called the 'Word of Life'. Personal narrative is discussed as a genre which represents the collective tradition of a religious community. It is a socially-learned speech act and a means of interpreting and sharing religious experience, thus constructing and confirming the faith of the community, both individually and collectively. In the neo-charismatic tradition, everyday speech draws on a literal (biblical) tradition as well as on socially-shared narrative genres such as ritual testimonies, prophecies, sermons and casual, personal narratives of co-believers. The faith-creative power of these stories can be found in their performative utterances and evaluative structures as well as in non-communication.

Today, scholars of religion talk about *lived religion* (e.g., McGuire 2008) while focusing on the levels of everyday life and personal experience in religiosity. It is well acknowledged and documented that people within the same religious tradition tend to have idiosyncratic, sometimes discordant, or even conflicting ideas concerning doctrinal questions. The various popular and vernacular forms of an established religion reflect not only cultural and temporal variations, but also individualist stances, each based on a believer's personal experience and life history. These variations emerge and spread without forming institutions or a centralized, authoritative leadership (Primiano 1995, Howard 2011). In that sense, they can be seen as similar to a traditional folk religion in the sense of being a theologically unsystematic set of beliefs and practices transmitted as an oral tradition, but nevertheless inspired by and closely related to the literal and canonical religion.

Analysing Ingrian memorates as a genre in the oral tradition, Lauri Honko indicated that '[t]hrough them we grasp *the living essence* of folk belief'. Honko's article 'Memorates and the study of folk beliefs' (1964) was an inspiration for my own doctoral research (2007) in comparative religion. The interrelated functions of tradition, an individual's experience and narration make up a theme that can also be approached from the perspective of everyday life in modern times and in the context of a theologically formulated religion. Accordingly, instead of working on gradually disappearing folk beliefs and an oral tradition of legends and myths in rural borderland areas, I decided to focus on personal narratives within the context of a late twentieth-century, urban neo-charismatic Christian community[1] in the city of Turku in south western Finland.

In this article, I present results of my study which combines the psychology of religion and folkloristics

1 The Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian trend that I am referring to as neo-charismatic Christianity is often called the Third Wave Charismatic Movement and originates from the turn of the 1980s in the United States and Canada. It is a trend which is generally known for an emotional fervour in revival meetings and eager evangelizing, as well as for an emphasis in its doctrinal teachings on the 'Gifts of the Holy Spirit' and present-day biblical signs and wonders in everyday life. In Finland, this trend began to get a foothold in the early 1990s, mostly in the form of the City Church Movement, based on the Toronto Blessing Revival. The traditional Pentecostal communities in Finland have been tending to withdraw from the latest Third Wave Charismatic boom because of its typical emphasis on 'health and wealth', according to which it is also often pejoratively labelled.

in a qualitative analysis of empirical ethnographic material which was compiled from amongst the local 'Word of Life' (*Livets Ord*) congregation. I discuss *personal narrative* as a genre representing the collective tradition of a religious community. In the neo-charismatic tradition, even everyday speech draws on a literary (i.e. biblical) tradition, as well as on socially-shared narrative genres such as ritual testimonies, prophecies, sermons and the casual personal narratives of co-believers. By composing an analysis of the performative expressions I trace the faith-creative power of these stories.

I begin by making a short overview of the potentiality of a narrative inquiry regarding the psychological study of religion. Thereafter, I discuss the role of personal narrative within the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian tradition and introduce my ethnographic material. With the help of speech act theory I move on to an analysis of an experiential narrative of a Word of Faith believer.

The psychology of religion and narrative inquiry

The modern psychology of religion is largely based on a measurement paradigm, represented by a variety of psychometric approaches and methods, including questionnaires and scales. These quantitative methods provide valuable information, for instance, with regard to variable samples of population. However, they do not allow much space for the experiential dimension of religion; for the interpersonal relationships and practical, everyday interpretations of religious doctrine (Hill 2005). In addition to scale analysis, correlation studies and other quantitative methods, interdisciplinary and qualitative approaches are nowadays gaining a foothold within the psychological study of religion alongside the traditional methodologies (e.g., Hood and Belzen 2005). To learn more about the personal and vernacular aspects of religiosity it is important to focus on situated contexts of religious thinking and behaviour, which emerge from lived religion in all its diversity and complexity (e.g., McGuire 2008: 6). As a response to structured questionnaires, the narrative inquiry opens up alternative points of view as an example of qualitative approaches to the psychology of religion. It supports the constructionist understanding of religiosity as a lifelong process, as well as a tool for contextual meaning-making (e.g., Ganzevoort 1998, Popp-Baier 2001, Tromp and Ganzevoort 2009).

For the most part, the discipline of narrative studies has created customary practices of its own and is based on working with interviews. The basic idea is to take an interview as a narrative event. As Catherine Kohler Riessman argues, narrative analysis has more in common with ethnographic practices than with the typical interviewing practices of the social sciences, which rely on a question–response pattern. The narrative interview, for its part, aims at generating detailed accounts rather than brief answers or general statements (Riessman 2008: 23). Furthermore, the life-history approaches to ethnographic data collection enables the construction of an understanding of informants' perceptions of their particular life situations (Davies 2008: 210). Narrative inquiry has been adopted and applied also in the sociology of religion as a biographical method. For instance, Inger Furseth's study (2006) of changes in the religious landscape of Norway applies biographical interview material alongside survey data. A 'storied approach' has also been suggested as a method which may be employed in the sociology of religion for understanding community identity processes (Singleton 2001a, 2001b). Comparably, the massive *Bielefeldt-Based Cross-Cultural Study of Deconversion* (Streib *et al.* 2009), carried out by psychologists of religion on two continents was designed to make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods combining typical psychological scale analyses of a vast body of questionnaire material and a narrative analysis of interviews.

Biographical material such as life stories as they are produced in an interview situation is a fruitful source for studying religiosity as a dynamic process arising out of social interactions throughout life. The life-historical perspective does not, however, always give much space to an individual's meaning-making in the context of tangible, single events in everyday life, where religiously-inspired interpretations of what is happening construct an individual's worldview in a very down-to-earth manner. Thus, in addition to narrative biographical methods in the study of religious development, I am of the opinion that the folkloristic study of popular and vernacular religion in the course of everyday life gives another interesting perspective to the psychology of religion. It takes into consideration cultural and interpersonal factors such as tradition and the role of sharing experiences and situated storytelling in a modern community. It may reveal another perspective on lived religion in terms of often quite trivial events being actually elements of personal religiosity in practice.

I have studied how religious conviction is constructed, maintained and reproduced through

personal narratives by combining the theoretical approaches of *narrative psychology* and *speech act theory* in the study of religion. The starting point of the study is that religious tradition offers cultural models for experience, and these models are transmitted and internalised with the help of personal narratives. Religion as a literal and oral tradition standardises interpretation and behaviour, and thus provides socially acceptable roles for a believer. Through a narrative process the lived events are emplotted in a plausible way (cf. Bruner 1987). It makes personal experiences meaningful in a certain social reality, in this case, that of a religious community. To master the particular narrative process is a precondition of being a member of a community of believers, as the individual member creates coherence in his or her own life (cf. Linde 1993, Lawless 1991). It can be understood as a form of tacit knowledge; that is, implicit information or cognition about what the identity of the group is, how to become a member, and what it means to be a member. It is the kind of knowledge that is most frequently conveyed in a process by which newcomers learn to make the story their own (Linde 2001: 2–3). The tradition of 'witnessing' as a socially-shared personal religious experience carries and transmits this tacit knowledge within a neo-charismatic community. It has a performative dimension as it shapes the identity of a believer, making him or her a part of the reference group. Thus, narratives function as catalysts for religious experience; the relationship between narration and experience is inseparable.

The analytic lenses through which I have approached my empirical material focus, above all, on retrospective meaning-making and accomplishing something by means of verbal actions. I have also read personal narratives as being both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances (cf. Chase 2005: 656). In the case of the interview material that I have used, personal narratives are biblically-framed stories about everyday events. The contents of these stories are personal and idiosyncratic, but the manner in which causality in the chain of events is built up – and why – is socially learned within the community of believers. The causality as it is interpreted and understood by the interviewees is based on the idea of 'God's plan', which covers all aspects of human life. While I studied the relationship of religious experience and personal narrative in the context of neo-charismatic Christianity, the thematic areas in which divine intervention most frequently emerged in the interviews were contained in stories about *healing* and *guidance*. In these two areas, the binary and opposing supernatural powers – God and Satan – were encountered in narratives which took place during the course of daily life and the idea of a miracle was typically included in their explanations.

Personal narrative as witnessing

The folklorist Sandra Dolby Stahl has formulated an already classic definition of personal narrative as a genre. According to Stahl, it is usually *a first person story about something meaningful that has happened to the narrator*. Even though the content of the story is not predefined by tradition, the personal narrative does have its collective aspects, too. An experience is never completely personal, as both experience itself as well as an interpretation of it are socially constructed (Stahl 1977: 14–15). Both personal narratives and memorates have been categorised as first-person stories, except that the former is said to deal with everyday events in which the supernatural factor does not occur or is not essential, while the latter is said to include a supernatural experience as the very point of the story. However, when it comes to the neo-charismatic tradition, the presence of the supernatural essentially belongs to the everyday life of believers. It is more or less integrated into all their actions and experiences, and is not highlighted as something unusual or extraordinary. It rather belongs to casual speech in a community of believers and it is not surprising or shocking as such, as it often is in memorates. That is why I have chosen to use the term 'personal narrative' instead of 'memorate' while studying the relationship between experience, language and tradition in the neo-charismatic context.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is a fascinating context in which to study the relationship between religious experience and personal narrative. This is because the strong emphasis on the personal and experiential dimension of religiosity and the importance of the tradition of *witnessing*, meaning a ritualised sharing of personal religious experience, are fundamental themes in the spiritual life of such a community. The importance of personal experience is a forum for individual and cultural interpretations, even though the tradition in question simultaneously represents a fundamentalist[2] Christianity. The events

2 In this context fundamentalism is understood, without political or extremist connotations, as a religious system of meaning that relies exclusively upon a sacred text (cf. Hood *et al.* 2005: 6, 9).

and experiences are interpreted categorically in the light of the biblical reality but still, there is plenty of room for personal and experiential variations in the tradition of witnessing and casual sharing (Hovi 2000: 178).

According to Stahl (1989), personal narratives establish and express intimacy between a teller and a listener. As an intention to exert influence on the listener or transmit the message, a personal narrative can also be interpreted as an attempt to create intimacy between the speaker and the listener in the situation of an arranged interview. For a believer, even an interview may be regarded as a missionary tool. The actual interviewer may be the object of the challenge, or the interviewee may be aspiring to evangelize one who listens to the documented discussion later on. Simultaneously, an interview situation can also be a means of identity-building, being a chance to delineate the boundary between the believing 'me' and the non-believing 'world' outside the congregation.

Meaningful experiences expressed as stories were used as explanatory examples. The appropriate manner of talking about one's faith in the Word of Life community is typically learned in the Bible school and in collective gatherings of believers. Witnessing and telling about one's personal experience of 'receiving the grace of the Holy Spirit', is thus a genre and a speech act that it is typically ritualised in prayer meetings and services. However, it also belongs to charismatic Christianity as a form of narrative and conversation in casual interaction – 'in a suitable as well as unsuitable moment'. A true believer has to be ready to witness at any time, 'like a flaming torch' even without an intentional preparation, as an elderly Salvation Army soldier once explained to me (Hovi 2007: 204).

Ethnographic material

The methods of compiling the research material for this study included participant observation and thematic, open-ended interviews. Participation in the meetings of the congregation not only made it possible to get to know members of the community, but also produced valuable contextual information for carrying out the interviews as well as helping when it came to analysing them. Without listening to the sermons and experiencing the atmosphere in the meeting hall during intensive praising and praying sessions it would have been very difficult to understand the reasons for the explanations and interpretations that were so self-evident to the interviewees themselves. Participant observation actually facilitated the discussions with the interviewees a great deal (cf. Davies 2008: 81).

Observing the meetings of the congregation also provided information which it would not have been possible to acquire by interviewing alone, and which provided a reflective backdrop for the interview contents. For instance, the presence of a visiting Swedish evangelist at one of the Word of Life meetings that I attended added a distinctive flavour to the narrations of those interviewees who themselves had been at that very meeting. That, of course, is the desired effect of the teaching and sermons; they are meant to influence the thinking of the listeners. One of the reasons for inviting visiting evangelists to the congregation serves the same purpose; to give new perspectives for interpreting 'the Word'.

For carrying out the interviews, I used a thematically-structured list of questions. The questions were focused on the informants' spiritual development and their own explanations for this. The thematically-focused interviewing method helped to encourage interviewees to tell their own stories and develop narratives about their own experiences, even though they do frequently share them in a community of believers (Davies 2008: 210). I wanted to discover ways in which the teachings of the movement are vindicated at the level of individual everyday life and how much there is space for personal variation. Personal religious experiences are not structured as ready-made stories, even though narratives most obviously generate religious experience. At the moment of telling, an interviewee combines and picks up the fragments of memory and compiles the story that he or she expects an interviewer to be looking for in that specific situation. Thus, I cannot really say, that I 'collected' a storied tradition, but rather built the material up together with the interviewees in relation to certain situations. In that sense, I could talk about 'creating the source' by means of qualitative methods (cf. Alver 1990). During my period of fieldwork, I interviewed fifteen members of Word of Life altogether, including the pastor.

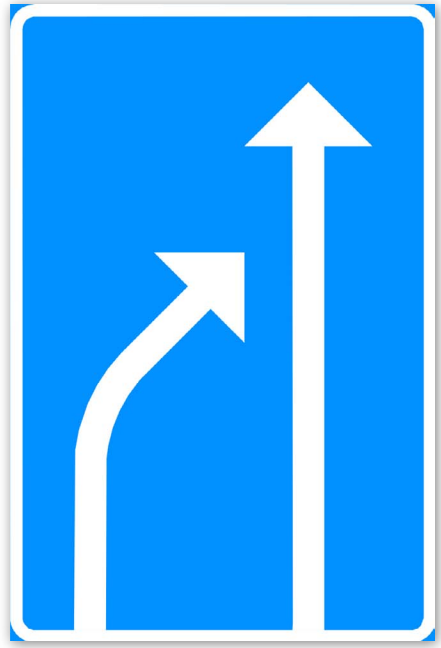
Performatives of faith

Witnessing, such as telling a story about healing through God's grace, strengthens the identity of the community of believers (Singleton 2001b: 136). It maintains social cohesion by marking out the borderline between 'the insiders' and 'the others'. Using the principles of the speech act theory and narra-

tive psychology I have studied how socially-learned roles make personal narrative *performative*, or in other words, how the social and situational context gives personal narrative its reality-constructing and reality-maintaining potential. Correspondingly, the sociologist of religion Abby Day (2010) has formulated the concept of performative belief by indicating a belief's social and relational location. She indicates how it can produce identities that actors strategically create to adapt to and to integrate themselves into various social situations.

A storytelling event may function as a tool for the work of identity formation. In a religious community, it ritually creates and shapes social relationships – by telling a story of a personally meaningful religious experience that fits the tradition, a narrator can put his or her believer's identity in place (cf. Hydén 2010: 44–6). I have analysed the interview material as a kind of everyday speech, as a personal narrative. Despite the fact that the interviews were carried out for a non-religious purpose (academic research) in a documented situation, they were also situations where interviewees had a chance to witness to an outsider as it is proper according to the neo-charismatic tradition.

To summarise J. L. Austin's idea; in explicit cases of performative sentences, the action that the sentence describes is performed by the utterance of the sentence itself. In his own words: 'By saying something, we *do* something' (Austin 1978: 5–6). The utterance changes the state of affairs radically when it is spoken out in a certain situation, by a certain person with a certain intention. Good examples of the performative power of the spoken word within religious contexts are ritual formulas, such as spells, incantations, blessings and absolutions. However, the spoken word can also have a certain performative power in contexts of the informal everyday lives of believers. It may have such a function when it takes the form of storytelling combined with the intention of witnessing being attuned to the mythical truth: a biblical model.



In neo-charismatic teachings, the intentional, witnessing discourse that is supposed to produce wellbeing and prosperity for a believer is known as *positive confession* (Coleman 2000: 28–9). Following the principle of positive confession, the Word of Life adherents are urged to avoid adopting a negative attitude because it is said to be self-actualizing; thinking of failure will cause failure. Correspondingly, speaking out loud things about God's benevolence and expressing gratitude is said to produce positive outcomes in a believer's life. In fact, the very same idea is advocated in many New-Age based teachings which have their roots in the 'New Thought' and Christian Science (Walker 1997: 30–1; Hunt 1998: 274). Productive themes for this purpose are experiences of healing and God's guidance and providence.

Stories about healing and guidance were selected from the interview material and treated as categories of personal narrative in which faith seems to render the most diverse dimensions of everyday life as forms of lived religion for the Word of Life members. The healing and guidance stories function as narrative seals on God's tangible presence in human life. They are descriptions of events where human and supernatural realities are experienced as meeting and blending into each other. In this sense, it is also possible to read the role of the healing and guidance stories theoretically as experiences of an interaction between a believer and his supernatural counterparts (cf. Holm 1995: 409–10). These narratives also make it possible for believers to interpret the situated roles and experiences with extensive variations.

In order to look for *performativity* in the personal narratives of believers, I built up an analytic frame. As a form of narrative inquiry, it represents the structural microanalysis by which I have studied how believers use speech to construct their faith (cf. Riessman 2008: 77–8, 103). Thus, what kinds of utterances actually are used to speak out the performative functions of speech? As I analysed the stories about healing and guidance, I found three types of performative utterances by which believers construct and maintain a biblical reality in the course of their everyday lives and I outline them below.

1. *Normative utterances* refer straightforwardly to the model of the appropriate behaviour of a believer. They are not only explicit arguments about how

things should be done; a normative utterance can also be disguised as a rebuke, denial, an inhibition, a request or a wish. In addition to this, normative thinking can become obvious as a person reports following a particular moral code or expounds their belief that something should or should not be done. Normative utterances may also take the form of direct references to 'God's will' or to the authority of the Bible. Speaking about norms can also involve a reference to a moral collision; it may have been possible to behave in some other way, but the person wants to emphasise the right choice that he or she has made. Furthermore, being ashamed of one's own actions brings up a new question. Why is the norm brought up in the discussion if the normal action is against it?

2. In *confessional utterances* the interviewees express their loyal commitment to the doctrine and to the community, or explicitly reject something they do not want to represent. In the community of the Word of Life believers, the importance of confessional utterances is emphasised almost as an institutionalised manifestation of the personal religious experience of witnessing publicly. For instance, the following interview excerpt includes both normative and confessional utterances:

> TH: Did you have any fear or doubt whether the prayer really works or not?
> NN: No I didn't, no. Because I know it so clearly that it is not God who sends this kind of accident and other things like it. On the contrary, if something bad happens, He helps. Yes, I really couldn't [doubt]… It must be so that when you trust Him, you just trust Him. He helps in every situation. (TKU/A/99/31:11)

An essential part of the cultural model of healing is the act of praying. Confessional descriptions of healing and the believer's trust in the efficacy of prayer includes her in the community of 'the saved', and differentiates her from 'the lost'. The interviewee's belief in the automatic effect of a prayer – the performative power of words – is revealed in how she had earlier spoken about praying by herself and also asking the others in the congregation to do the same for her. Thus, the idea of a collective prayer being more powerful than an individual one was also obvious in another interviewee's narration when the narrator described her own healing from an inexplicable illness in hospital while other believers 'turned the prayers on' for her in the congregation; prayer being like a healing mechanism that can be switched on and off as needed (Hovi 2007: 128). The citation above also gives the same impression of a prayer working automatically for the benefit of believers.

3. *Legitimating utterances* are used to justify and give reasons for the personal choices and acts of believers. They also explain (biblically) the correct state of affairs. In cases of legitimating utterances, the interviewees express the personal level of their faith, whereas the normative utterances express the officially-defined doctrine of the community, which is the ideal faith. In the Word of Life people's interviews, an inspiring topic was the realm of personal preferences and interests, which were justified as God's will to care for each and every believer as an individual. A woman who liked, for instance, pretty clothes, legitimated her preferences by referring to God's creative power:

> I believe that God has made us in a specific way. God enjoys us being unique, having something of our own, and God likes to give you what you want and He enjoys it together with you when He can give and His child may be happy of it. (TKU/A/99/36:19)

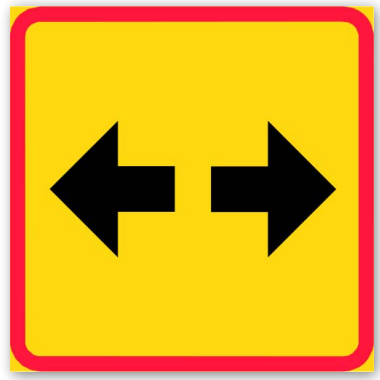
The interviewee justified her personal weakness for pretty clothes by invoking the Word of Life teachings of God's kindness towards believers as individuals, thus demonstrating that she belongs to the group.

The three above-mentioned types of performative utterance are relatively easy to point out in the transcribed text. In addition to these rather explicit performatives, there are other meaningful narrative elements that support the believer's identity. Being integrated into speech, *evaluation,* as well as *non-communication* may also function as the building materials of a believer's reality. Both evaluation and non-communication may work in either normative, confessional or legitimating ways more or less implicitly, so that the interpretation may need the support of contextualising information.

Narrators evaluate the events that they have been speaking of by several different means. I refer here to the linguist Livia Polanyi's theories on evaluation in personal narrative (Polanyi 1979, 1989). In believers' stories, evaluation is often combined with normative utterances, as for example when citing the Bible as a mythic model, or comparing one's personal situation to one described in the holy text. The first-mentioned interviewee added an evaluation to her confession, as

she described being grateful to God: 'I am so grateful to God for He helps in everything even though there can be difficult situations. *It is lovely*.' In addition to such an explicit evaluation, *repetition* is a typical evaluative strategy in confessional utterances, used to emphasise the importance of a matter, and it is frequently deployed. Legitimating utterances also often include *keywords* or phrases which are typically evaluative, direct citations, indirect allusions or invocations of the words of an authority figure, such as a pastor or a visiting evangelist. Explicit *mitigation* or *emphasis* are also strategic evaluative methods in speech which are used to justify something that is regarded as irrelevant or meaningful in the light of a narrator's growing faith and the accepted biblical truth.

When using Gregory and Mary Bateson's (1988) concept *non-communication* I mean basically: *saying nothing* about negative things, or *veiling* and *belittling* them. I have tried to understand what has been veiled in silence or passed over as being less important or irrelevant, or has even been tabooed. In the speech of Word of Life members, non-communication hides misfortunes and failures, for example, as well as difficulties in faith. They are themes that may be skipped over quickly or explicitly said to be 'useless topics'. This is how silence labels them as subjects which are detrimental to maintaining and developing the faith. It goes without saying that misfortune, failure or difficulty do not fit the discourse of positive confession. Thus, non-communication has performative power through *negation*. It protects the reality in which a believer wants to live. In the following excerpt, the interviewee insinuates by negation what is the origin of all evil, but only after my definite question does she indicate what she believes is the reason for misfortune – although she does so without spelling out the actual name – ending her story with the normative utterance of trust in God:



> NN: I know it so clearly that *it is not God who sends this kind of accident* and other things like it. …
> TH: Do you think it was a situation like Satan's intervention?
> NN: Yes, yes. *It* always tries to harm people and God's work. And so on. You see it so clearly. It is self-evident. You just have to trust God, and everything will be all right. (TKU/A/99/31:11)

Non-communication somehow has the effect of altering the nature of ideas, maintaining sacredness, as the Batesons argue (Bateson and Bateson 1988: 80). An attempt to avoid speaking about damaging themes is an attempt to control the surrounding world and strengthen a feeling of safety. In this way non-communication functions as a means of supporting the idea of positive confession in the neo-charismatic reality.

Conclusions

Witnessing as a performative act serves several purposes. It works as an important building block of faith for newcomers, when formulaic stories about encountering the Holy Spirit are repeated and presented in various versions. As a way of conquering 'stage fright', witnessing to outsiders functions as a means of strengthening the believer's own existing faith. Speaking about one's faith to an outsider also works as an opportunity for the believer to recruit new converts, an opportunity that he is obliged to take (e.g., Rambo 1993: 158; McGuire 1979: 166–7). After all, within the context of evangelizing Christian revival movements, it is a duty of every believer to participate in a mission, and witnessing can also be a modest chance for it, as the Salvation Army soldier, cited above, argued. Witnessing can also open up opportunities for theologically ambitious speech acts in front of peer believers. For instance, an elderly Pentecostal woman defined her active role while witnessing to the congregation by saying that it is a 'chance for a lay person to speak like a priest' (Hovi 2007: 204). Nevertheless, regarding the witnessing speech, the more personal the story is, the more convincing it is in the context of a peer group. Furthermore, by narrating his or her experience and thoughts to an outsider, a believer can also analyse and evaluate them as a member of the community without fear of co-believers' criticism or disapproval. This function was obvious in the case of a young woman who had ambitions outside of the community of believers. As she revealed, she had learned very quickly that her mundane career plans were not welcome in the congregation (Hovi 2007: 191–4).

Maintaining one's religious conviction is an ongoing process of making choices. When it comes to the

psychology of religion, taking a narrative perspective to the study of everyday life brings out the aspects of religiosity that cannot be achieved by means of quantitative research. Religiosity as a changing and re-interpreted process of meaning-making becomes adjusted to day-to-day living at many levels. The tradition of witnessing, especially in its ritual and expository form of storytelling, produces a *narrative world* that has the potential to alter a believer's experience of the physical world (cf. Gerrig 1993). Nevertheless, it also has a reality-constructing function as an element of everyday speech, as in the personal narrative.

Lauri Honko's idea of memorates as a genre within the oral tradition being something through which it is possible to grasp the living essence of folk belief can be applied in the context of contemporary popular Christianity. The neo-charismatic healing and guidance stories of modern, urban believers are examples of encountering the believed-in supernatural aspects of everyday life that I have analysed in the form of personal narratives. These idiosyncratic experience stories connect individual believers with the objective reality of a faith community. That of narrative is also the level at which the individual can create and modify his or her faith with the help of a socially-learned special language. In this way, narration functions as *a performative of faith*. ■

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