

A Modern Ancient Story
*An account of how two vastly different stories
of humanity's origins, purpose, and future
– the Christian and the Modern –
can belong together*

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Introduction

Amongst humans there is often found a desire to place our lives, whether individually or collectively, in a narrative larger than ourselves -- a grand story that explains why we are here and where we are going.

Countless such stories have been composed throughout history, some of which have had more staying power, more persuasiveness, than others. Many of these are religious, such as the narratives told by various versions of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Others stories are non-religious, or Materialist (or Naturalist, as some call it) -- whether in pre-modern or modern modes -- which contend that the material realm (or nature) is all that there is. On this basis, our human story, however constructed, should reject any 'transcendent power' such as God or the gods. Then there is the post-modern mode that rejects any attempt to put together any grand explanatory narrative at all, either because we cannot or we should not make such an effort.

I am not among those who completely reject such attempts, although I recognize in their objections very legitimate concerns. I have long found myself attracted to the idea of being able to place myself, and thus my way of living, within such a story -- and this book is my effort to do so. Indeed, my adult life has been, in significant part, a journey seeking to discern a way among humanity's various stories. I have done this by seeking to live in parts of the world which are home to devotees and practitioners of various stories and ways-of-living, along with studying them through many years of graduate school.

Through the course of this journey, I have found myself most attracted to two stories in particular -- 'the Ancient Christian Story' and 'the Modern Materialist Story' (although for a time I found myself attracted to the Mahayana Buddhist story). These are the two stories that have dominated the history of Western culture. The Ancient Christian Story tells us about a creator and redeemer God, as told by the Bible. The central element of this story is the life, death, and resurrection of *Jesus of Nazareth*. In contrast, the Modern Materialist Story tells its story on the basis of modern disciplines in mathematics, the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, astronomy, biology, and paleo-studies), the human sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics), and the humanities (literature, history, philosophy). The central element of the Materialist story is the *autonomy* (self-sufficiency and inherent abilities) of humanity.

In short, the Christian story contends that humanity can only find its true meaning, and can only be truly saved, through the action of God; the Materialist story contends that humanity can only find its true meaning, and only be truly saved, through humanity's own efforts.

Unsurprisingly, relations between advocates of these two stories are not good. Advocates for each of these stories -- or, more accurately, of these two *families* of stories (for they both come with their own many varieties) -- seem either completely unengaged with the other or else constantly at the other's throat. This mutual indifference or even contempt is, though, hardly surprising, for on an immediate comparison of the two stories, they could hardly be more

different – *there appear virtually no commonalities or points of contact between the two stories.* It is no wonder then that people who feel drawn to both stories have such difficulty figuring out how the two stories can be related – if at all!

Nonetheless, there are strong reasons for seeking to understand how both stories belong together, why they need each other. Both views have crucial contributions to make to how we live, to what we make of our lives; both frequently hold false assumptions about the other; and both have valid critiques of the other. So my undertaking here is an attempt to write a single grand narrative for our time using these two stories. I am fully aware of the sorts of objections that immediately arise to such an effort, but these will be addressed through the course of the book. I say ‘for our time’ because every story is shaped by the conditions of its own age. This story may, I hope, be found persuasive for today, but fifty years from now will feel dated. This is not a relativization of truth, it is rather a conditioning of truth which we cannot escape -- but that is a larger discussion for later.

This book really has two audiences in mind: on the one hand, it is for those who hold to some form of ‘historic’ or ‘orthodox’ Christian faith yet find significant elements of modernity persuasive, and thus are seeking to understand whether the two can belong together; on the other hand, this book is also for the atheist or agnostic modernist or post-modernist who feels the lure of God and so is moving toward the possibility of faith in God, yet needs to see how to connect this potential Christian faith with their modern or post-modern worldview and ways of living.

Why Each Story Benefits from the Other

Here I will identify some of the ways in which each story benefits from the other. Beginning with the Materialist story, we see it has four significant problems, and will benefit from the Biblical story to redress these:

a) *Modernist Materialism claims that physical reality is the only reality.* Proponents of this claim often assume or contend that this is a scientific claim, and yet it is not a scientific claim but a philosophical claim, for there is no way by which to substantiate this claim scientifically. As a philosophical claim it is coherent, yet it has no evidential or logical basis by which to deny, as it does, the equally coherent possibility that the spiritual realm is as fundamental, or even more fundamental, to reality than the physical realm. To assert dogmatically that the physical realm is the only reality is ultimately an instance of *faith* – the faith of modern Materialism, no matter how cogently argued in philosophical terms.

b) *Modernist Materialism holds that physical existence has no ultimate goal, meaning, or purpose (telos in Greek).* On this view, while we as humans can construct meaning and purpose for ourselves, the universe itself has no inherent purpose, meaning, or *telos*. Again, however, this is not a scientific claim but rather a philosophical claim. Again, it is a coherent view, yet the possibility that the physical realm possesses a *telos* is just as much a possibility as the opposing materialist view. To assert that the physical realm has no *telos* is again ultimately an instance of *faith* – the faith of modern Materialism, no matter how cogently argued in philosophical terms.

c) *Modernist Materialism is unable to account for the significant and extensive evidences or signs of God* that arise in physical reality and in human life. Materialists make various efforts to provide a materialist or non-religious explanation for such evidences or signs, for instance that they are simply the product of neurological conditions, ranging from being genetically coded to simple self-delusion. As we will see, at times these objections hold some validity, yet in total they are inadequate to the cumulative case that evidences of God are to be found in the universe and in human lives. The question then is what to make of, and do with, these signs of God.

d) *Modernist Materialism has areas of significant failure.* Let me identify three in particular: i) Modernist Materialism has been very successful at producing very advanced technology, yet the impact on humanity of this technology has been in part deeply harmful to humanity -- the production of massively-destructive weaponry and the harm done to the earth's environment by pollution being obvious examples. ii) Modernist Materialism has failed to provide a universal basis for character formation, including such important character traits as moral discernment and responsibility. Modern Materialism often gives much prominence to 'education' in the optimistic hope that 'education' will reform character and values, and thus reform societies. Yet so often this emphasis on education has *not* provided the character-formation and societal-reform desired, precisely because it lacks a universal account of moral norms and conversion of heart. iii) A derivative of the previous point, modernist Materialism has failed to give an adequate account of the limits of human freedom, giving rise to such excesses as increasing rich-poor disparities, the consumerization of societies, and the hypersexualization of societies.

Other failings of modernity could be identified. Regardless, there is nothing new in this list of failings -- they have long been recognized, the first three by theists of any stripe (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), and the fourth by modernist materialists themselves. Indeed, the fourth has given rise to a range of responses, ranging from those who continue to believe in modernist Materialism and so seek to reform it from within (such as Jürgen Habermas), and those who have found it unredeemable, and so have advocated a new phase of Western cultural history, namely post-modernity (such as Michel Foucault).

A Christian perspective on all this begins with a story -- the Biblical story. For the Biblical story enables us to address these various holes, fundamentally because the Biblical story enables us to propose that physical reality does have purpose: the *telos* of the universe (or multiverses) is the *telos* given by its Creator, namely *to provide the place and conditions for loving beings to come to exist and to flourish in loving relation with God and with each other.* This claim, though remarkably simple, enables us to address a wide range of questions that face us as humanity, including redressing the four holes of modernist Materialism. In effect, the rest of this book serves to elaborate and defend this claim.

The Biblical story, on the other hand, benefits from several important aspects of the modern story.

a) *Modernist Materialism has been remarkably successful at providing knowledge of physical reality,* both inanimate and animate. There are traditions within Christianity that dismiss human ability to have not just saving knowledge but *any* sort of knowledge outside of God's revelation. Nonetheless, as we will see later, this view is neither biblical nor conforms to observable reality. Materialist modernity, through the tools of mathematics, natural science, and technology, has hugely expanded our understanding of both the physical realm and of humanity. For Christians, mathematical and scientific knowledge is of value for at least two reasons: for knowing God indirectly (understanding God's creative acts and thereby understanding something of God as Creator); and for caring for humanity (such as providing greater food security through improved agricultural and transport methods, or providing improved healthcare and medical resources). On the ancient Christian view that all truth is God's truth, mathematical and scientific knowledge need to be recognized as God's truth and thus integrated into a unified account of the nature of knowledge, including into the story of how we as humans gain knowledge in its various forms. Furthermore, there is also an ancient Christian view that holds there are two books of

God's self-revelation – the book of scripture and the book of nature. Since all truth is God's truth, the bible and natural science need to be part of the one story.

b) *Modernist Materialism has significantly extended our knowledge and understanding of humanity.* The social sciences have achieved this by developing a wide range of qualitative and quantitative research methods, giving rise to a variety of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, and so forth. The objection can, and should, be made that the social sciences involve greater degrees of interpretation than mathematics or the natural sciences (though these too involve interpretation), and thus their findings and proposals are less certain and more subject to error – indeed, they can provide very serious *misdescriptions* of humanity too. Such an objection is certainly true, and yet the social sciences have proven sufficiently successful that the significant knowledge they do provide cannot simply be discounted.

Similarly, the humanities contribute knowledge through their own inherent methodologies. For instance, the humanities provide various forms of self-expression and self-description (both individually and collectively), allowing us to better understand the nature of subjectivity and human interiority. Like the natural and social sciences, the humanities have their own methodologies, reflecting disciplines from literature through history to philosophy, and each discipline can provide deep insights into the nature of humanity. To give one brief example (a provocative example, I admit) the area of materialist moral philosophy can provide truth and wisdom. Of course there is modernist moral philosophy that is wrong or even evil, which need to be named and challenged head-on. But the situation is not black and white, for there is also truth and wisdom to be found and acknowledged in the humanities. Such a claim may seem dubious to some Christians, such as those who argue that unbelievers cannot act morally. We will address this later, but for now we should note Jesus' words, 'If you who are evil know how to give good things to your children, how much more so does your heavenly Father'. Here Jesus himself clearly, and quite remarkably, says that those who are evil can still have moral knowledge! The larger point here is that whatever knowledge of humanity is provided by the humanities and social sciences needs to be seen, like mathematics and the natural sciences, as God's truth and thus part of a single unified story.

c) *Modernist Materialism has given rise to significant forms of wisdom for the modern context.* Modernity has given rise to very complex structures – social, economic, political, bureaucratic, educational, and so forth, ranging in scale from local through regional to global. To manage these, modernity has also produced a wide array of concepts and practices, such as democracy, public administration, technological innovation, and international law, to name just a few. From a theological perspective, these do not convey 'kingdom-of-God values', yet they can count as forms of wisdom – wisdom for how to effectively manage the complexities of modern societies. Of course, many such proposals turn out not to be wise at all, though others – to name democracy as one – do prove their wisdom. In this example, the wisdom of democratic values and processes is illustrated by Reinhold Niebuhr's famous dictum that 'humanity's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but humanity's inclination to *injustice* makes democracy necessary'. Then this human wisdom is partial, it is still subject to Paul's warning about 'the wisdom of the world', still subject to possibilities of abuse and unwise manipulation – and thus we still need to infuse Kingdom values into it. Nonetheless, whatever forms of genuine wisdom modernity is able to provide for itself in the midst of its self-made complexities must therefore be accounted for in the unified story.

d) *Modernist Materialism encourages questions.* The modernist habit of persistently asking questions can arise from a cynical desire to doubt, but it can also arise from a genuine

desire to understand. Ironically, modernity's deep instinct to inquire arose from both of these motives -- both to doubt God and to more fully understand physical and human reality. (I say 'ironic' because of my claim that we cannot understand reality without understanding its God-given *telos*.) Unsurprisingly, then, some Christian traditions view asking questions about God and faith as a sign of doubt -- yet questioning can equally reflect a sign of maturation. There is an important analogy here with children: if children do not ask questions, then we worry that they have developmental problems. Children that do not ask questions possess less understanding of the world, and develop less maturity through life, than curious, question-asking children. Indeed, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus' last recorded words are a question -- 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' If questions are part of our natural human process of maturation, and if Jesus himself can ask God a question (indeed an apparently-despairing question!), then surely *we* can ask God questions too! Modernity encourages questions, and to take this on board does not necessarily mean doubting God but can in fact be an important part of maturing in faith and discipleship.

We see this by the challenges posed by modernity and post-modernity to the Biblical story: The Bible is a collection of pre-modern texts, with bizarre 'science', historical errors, and repugnant ethics. Biblical ethics advocate a range of offensive values, from sexism to genocide. To call the Bible '*The Word of God*' is inherently arrogant (as if texts from other religions do not contain God's word). The very idea that God somehow 'inspired' these texts, and that they contain ideas and values normative for today, seems highly implausible to moderns and post-moderns alike. The idea that these texts should therefore be considered 'canonical' (permanently fixed and normative for all time) is regressive for human progress. Indeed, the idea that these texts contain any fixed meaning is simply self-delusion. Such are modernist (and post-modernist) challenges to the Ancient Christian story -- facing them head-on is an opportunity for Christian faith to mature and for Christian discipleship to deepen.

The Proposal

Despite the vast differences between the two stories, the proposal here is that both the biblical story and the modernist story contain truth, and, since all truth is God's truth, it is problematic to have two separate stories -- there must be a single story, in the mind of God at least. In effect, this book is seeking God's mind on this, seeking to understand how these two apparently-incompatible stories can indeed be compatible within a single enlarged story.

So over the course of chapters 4-10 I work through various issues, ranging from Modernity's rejection of God to the relationship of evolution to the biblical story, and a host of other issues. Then in Chapter 11 I provide my version of a unified story.

What will be the difference between my unified story of Chapter 11 and the original biblical story summarized in Chapter 1? There are two main differences: *first*, the unified story is provisional (it will change according to different versions of the biblical story, and it will change with further advances in knowledge by modernity), whereas the biblical story does not change because it is not provisional. *Second*, because it is provisional, the unified story is a *heuristic device* to help us form a comprehensive worldview; the biblical story, on the other hand, does not change because it is Christian scripture -- it is *kerygma*, to be proclaimed.

Contents

Part I: Three Stories that Shape Our Lives

Ch.1: The Biblical Story

Ch.2: The Modern Story (including Post-Modernity)

Ch.3: The Story of the Great Divorce (historical origins of the modern story in its separation from the biblical story and from the early modern Christian worldview)

Part II: Discerning and Weaving

Ch.4: Love as Epistemology (first step in meeting modernist and post-modernist sceptics; discusses not just love and epistemology, but our cognitive capacities and dispositions in light of evolutionary and social psychology)

Ch.5: Knowing God by Reason (Review of the classical arguments for God. What's the point of the classical arguments for God? Incl McGrath's natural theology)

Ch.6: Knowing God by Revelation (God's modes of self-disclosure in Jesus as the Word and Scripture as the Word of God; focus on the nature of scripture as 'the Word of God' in light of modernist and po-mo critiques; the nature of language)

Ch.7: God's Revelation of Love: God as Trinity; Israel, Jesus, Holy Spirit, Church (church as location of Christ-pointing Spirit-enabled love taking three forms – worship, ministry and mission)

*Ch.8: Love as Freedom: order and disorder in nature; freedom in nature; freedom in humanity; free-will and determinism; meaning; discipleship; ethics (incl O'Donovan's *Resurrection & Moral Order*); wisdom; the problem of suffering.*

Ch.9: Freedom Fulfilled in Eschatology: redemption of humanity, second coming, resurrection of the dead, the new creation.

Part III: Unifying the Two Stories

Ch.10: The Gospel, The Kingdom of God, and Modernity (probably using Jürgen Habermas's account of modernity as my foil for this; including what the natural sciences, human sciences, humanities, and professions look like if subject to the Gospel and serving the Kingdom of God)

Ch.11: A Modern Ancient Story (the unified story)