



Webber, Robert E.

Who Gets to Narrate the World: Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals

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Who Gets to Narrate the World? (*WGNW* hereafter) is Robert Webber's final gift to the Christian community. Robert Webber, in my opinion, was one of the most important leaders of evangelical thought in the last 25 years. His challenge to the Church to approach the obstacles of the future by looking back and reclaiming the Church's great traditions is one of the driving forces in the revival of liturgical worship in Evangelical churches. His emphasis on those who have gone before also seems to have revived the interest of Church History among many Evangelicals. I first heard of Robert Webber when a former professor suggested I look into *Younger Evangelicals*. *Younger Evangelicals* is not only an excellent description of a younger generation of evangelical Christians, but also seeks to give sound ecclesiastical advice to that generation from a wise leader. I found chapter 15 "Evangelists: From Rallies to Relationships" to be especially challenging and helpful.

WGNW is a short and simple book, comprised of 7 chapters, with an introduction and conclusion.

The Introduction to *WGNW* is subtitled "A Wake Up Call" and asks the title's question "Who Gets to Narrate the World?" This question may seem enigmatic to those unfamiliar with Webber's work or the larger ideology within which he is thinking. Webber's question comes from looking at the world and understanding as a series of stories that inform humanity of meaning, value, culture, truth and reality. Therefore a person's worldview is set by the story within which they take part and believe. So Webber's question "Who Gets to Narrate the World" asks what story will be the one that informs people concerning truth and reality. In this introduction Webber introduces the three narratives that he believes are competing to explain the world: the narrative of God, the narrative of Radical Islam and the narrative of cultural narcissism. The narrative of God is explained later in chapter one, which leaves the Radical Islamic story, which Webber describes as the external threat to the narrative of God, and the cultural narcissistic story, the internal threat, to be explained here.

Webber's brief introduction to the world of Radical Islam is quite helpful. He makes sure to stress that it is both Radical Islam's violent actions and the common Muslims' failure to stand up to their radical counterparts that pose a threat to the world. After providing statistics on the growth of Islam throughout the Western world, which shows a not too distant majority in many European states, Webber explains exactly why Radical Islam is a threat to the world; its goal of world domination. Utilizing Pope Benedict's quote of Byzantine Emperor Manuel II concerning the contribution of Islam to the world as one of violence and inhumanity, Webber explains how Radical Muslims are determined to spread their belief and devotion to Allah and the loyalty to Sharia Law across the globe using whatever means necessary, which is more often than not, violent and oppressive.

The next few pages of the Introduction concern the second, and internal, threat to the narrative of God. The state of western culture, which Webber characterizes as one of extreme narcissism, is the product of two factors: the exaltation of the self and the loss of connection to the past. While Webber does not classify them as such, it seems to me that his description depicts a hyper-Kantian view of humanity and a hyper-Hegelian view of history. The defining feature of this culture is their complete submission to consumer existence. Webber gives the example of work. No longer do people work for the pleasure of accomplishment or contributing to society and one's fellow man, but for the end result of a paycheck, which is then spent frivolously on needless stuff that the marketing empire has convinced us all we need or else our lives will be meaningless and devoid of happiness. Webber then explains how this culture has worked its way into the Church. People no longer desire to be fed by the Scriptures and communion with other believers, but now the Church is a place that sells "the window dressing of worship entertainment." Webber finishes his introduction with a few paragraphs about necessity of discerning and defending the God narrative and finally by explaining the structure of the coming chapters.

The ten short pages that this introduction consists of provide the reader with an excellent prolegomena to the topics that will be discussed. Webber's treatment of Radical Islam and what seems to be its eventual takeover of Western society and the decline of culture in the West due to its me-first, and often me-only, mentality introduces the threats that are currently struggling to control the worldview of humanity. If the following seven chapters and conclusion maintain this level, *WGNW* will take its place next to Younger Evangelicals as a formative text for the next generation of impacting Christians.

The first chapter of *WGNW* exists as the foundation for the rest of the book, giving the content of what Webber calls 'God's Narrative.' God's narrative is essentially the story of the Bible. Yet, before Webber begins he offers a few prefacing remarks to this, the third of the three competing narratives. The story, of God, according to Webber, is a cosmic story; one where reconciliation of that cosmos is the climax. This cosmic nature of God's story is what Webber believes the Evangelical Church has missed in recent years. The way in which the average evangelical understands the Gospel, as "the problem of my sin, the work of Christ for me, the necessity of my conversion and the expansion of my faithfulness to live like a Christian...I needed to invite Jesus into my life and my journey so he would walk with me and bless my life and my ministry." (25 author's emphasis) is reductionistic and too private. Instead, Webber says, God calls us to

join His story. Webber then proceeds to begin his understanding of God's story, which, as he observes first, is highly Christo-centric and deeply Trinitarian.

Webber's description of God's story is quite similar to many other descriptions of what many call the Biblical meta-narrative (a term used for better or worse). Creation, followed by fall, within which Webber curiously includes the history of Israel, Incarnation and Re-creation. Webber concludes the chapter with a short discussion of how those who have had their lives narrated by this story understand it to be formative for them. This conclusion is in my opinion, the best part of the chapter. It gives the reader a view into what Webber means when he speaks of a story narrating our lives. The description of how America's historical narrative, one of "hard work, self-sacrifice [and] personal integrity" led to the current story, one of "laziness, greed and narcissism," is especially helpful to explain how a story shapes a worldview.

While this chapter is a good summary of the story of the Bible, tracing the deeds of YHWH from Genesis to Revelation, it seems quite ordinary, which is slightly disappointing, as I was expecting something different from Webber based on my exposure to him. Not some grand breakthrough, but possibly a new metaphor or analogy. This disappointment stems mostly, not from Webber's failings, but from my own grand expectations. However, I would like to offer one critical remark. As stated above, Webber curiously places the history of Israel within the section of fall. Of course the constant rejection of YHWH and ultimately the national sin of Israel are examples of a people deeply affected by the fall, but the calling of Abraham and the subsequent nation that would grow from his offspring are the beginning stages of God reaching into the world to redeem it. I would have liked to have seen the Incarnation section part of a bigger redemption section which then included the history of Israel. This critique represents my preferred way of expressing the Biblical story and it is entirely possible that Webber structured his chapter the way he did for purpose that is not clear to me. However, I still wish he would have included a bit more about the calling of Abraham and the role of Israel as priests to the world and mediators of God's redemption.

One of Robert Webber's greatest gifts to the emerging evangelical community is the challenge to reintegrate the study and tradition of the early Church into worship. Only recently, with much credit to Webber, has the evangelical church begun to realize that the time between the apostles and the Reformers was not void of true worship and good theology. In chapter 2 of *WGNW* Webber seeks to position the story of the beginning of the Christian Church within its original context: the Empire of Rome. Chapter 2, "God's Narrative Emerges in a Pagan Roman World" introduces the reader to a world where the reigning worldview was not influenced by or the product of the Christian story. Webber does an excellent job of explaining how the Church's infant and toddler years were not spent with a world that embraced and fostered the message of Jesus, but one that was opposed and often militant against such a message, to culture that often has a hard time understanding this.

Webber begins his description by explaining the first two centuries of Church history and the persecution most believers in Jesus faced. By chronicling the beginning of the Empire in Augustus through the second and third century persecutions experienced by Ignatius and Tertullian to the legalization of Christianity by Constantine, the reader gets an adequate introduction to the history of the Roman Empire. From there Webber details three sections of the

Roman society that the young Christian movement came into conflict with: moral decadence, philosophical relativism and religious pluralism. The morality of the ancient Roman world is here described as one of self interest and extreme sexual indulgence. The description of the philosophical landscape begins with a treatment of the Sophists and their belief in the futility of truth. Comparably, Webber also describes the reigning thought of Platonic philosophy and its duality, exaltation of the abstract forms and disregard for the physical world. Finally, the religious world of Imperial Rome described here, was one where any worship was accepted with the condition that it also paid honor to the Emperor. The Christian story that was quickly spreading across the Mediterranean world was in stark contrast to these three Roman ideals. Juxtaposed to the lack of moral standards in the Empire, Webber claims that the early Christians found their ethical compass in the teaching of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Against the philosophical relativism, Webber outlines a clear understanding of reality that is informed by the promise of, coming and commission from Jesus. Finally, against the inclusivity of the Roman pagan system, the early Christians understood Jesus to be unique in His worthiness of worship. One could not worship Jesus as Lord and Caesar as Lord.

Following these sections, Webber describes another story that was competing with the story of God, and even tried to co-opt some of Christianity's story. This other narrative is Gnosticism. After a description of the ancient Gnostics, and their hyper-Platonic thought, Webber describes how this ultra dualistic philosophy is beginning to gain new ground today. To conclude this chapter, Webber compares the societies of ancient Rome and the modern West, urging Christians to hold fast and defend the narrative of God as the earliest Christians did.

In my opinion, this chapter is an excellent introduction to the position that the Church had in the earliest days as a enemy of the Empire. If the reader is able to understand how Webber outlines the rising threat of Radical Islam and consumerism as the new empires, they should be able to understand how he sets the narrative of God against the other two. I might have like to have seen a bit more discussion on Paul's polemic against the Imperial cult and also a deeper discussion of Platonic thought in the rise of Christianity, both its good and bad.

Chapter 3 of *WGNW*, "God's Narrative Influence on the Foundation of Western Civilization" does not quite live up to its title. It seems to me that the bulk of the chapter is not given to explaining how the narrative of God influenced the values, societal structure and ethics of post-Roman Western Culture, but to detailing in greater depth the disparages between the dominate pagan cultures of the first and second centuries. The first section explains why Rome fell. Here he lists four factors, the ineptitude of pagan religion and philosophy, rampant mistreatment of women, low sexual ethics and a lack of care and compassion, which led to an inability to handle the epidemics and plagues that faced the empire in the second and third centuries. To counter this, Webber says Christians held firm belief in Jesus as the true revelation of God, made significant progress in the treatment of women, had well established sexual ethics and often sacrificed for those who had become ill due to the plague, often contracting the disease and dying themselves because of their compassion work. The following sections is Webber's summary of Augustine's *City of God*, explaining the way three different groups view how the City of God and the City of Man should relate: separatists, identifiers, and transformers. The following section focuses on the influence Christianity and Christians have had in creating culture. Here Webber highlights the great history of Christian music, art and scholarship. In the

final section, Webber explains how the climax of God's story, the incarnation, itself is the greatest transforming power within the narrative. By coming into this world, Jesus provided the means for this world to be completely remade and returned to the perfect rule of God with the coming of His Kingdom.

I hope my short critical notes so far have made you think that I have not enjoyed this book, quite the contrary. However, it seems that nothing but a summary would not be a fair treatment of the book and also rather boring. In this chapter, I wonder why Webber does not connect the failure of pagan religion and philosophy with its failure in values and ethics. It seems to me that the pagan culture of Rome did not fall because any culture built around religious or philosophical pluralism is bound to fall, but because the pluralism of Rome's religion and philosophy contained no place for the love and care of others, the necessity of certain ethical systems and understanding of the equality of value of all people made in God's image.

Chapter 4 is the longest and by far the best of *WGNW* so far. The chapter begins with Webber explaining the influence Francis Schaeffer had on his life, namely in viewing theology and interpretation via its historical and cultural context. Webber then identifies six paradigms for understanding human thought throughout the ages: Biblical, ancient, medieval, Reformation, modern and emerging postmodern. The main thesis of this chapter is that Western culture has lost its understanding of God's narrative as it shifted from the Reformation to the modern and postmodern paradigms.

The foundational cause of this loss within paradigm shifts is a misunderstanding of the incarnation, Webber claims. Here he juxtaposes two views of the incarnation, the historic, that in Jesus God became creation and the modern, that in Jesus God stepped into creation. This is best understood by the following lengthy quote that I found to be the most fulfilling passage of the book so far.

“The historic understanding of the incarnation as the assumption of the entire created order has been replaced by a view that in the incarnation God stepped into history to save souls. The focus is no longer on the cosmic work of God in history but on personal salvation. The language often used to describe the salvation through Christ expresses this shift. We speak of God “saving souls.” We focus then not so much on God who redeems the world but on Christ who saves me...The history of the world from beginning to end and all that it entails - its political, economic, artistic, psychological and scientific establishments-the whole of God's creation and all of life, has been redeemed because God in the incarnation received it all to himself. God redeemed all of life by the cross and empty tomb, so that when he returns to the earth not just souls but all the creation will be made perfect.” (p. 76-77)

In the following section, Webber outlines the Reformation view that God's narrative was meant to affect all of life and creation, and its eventual cultural loss to the Renaissance, humanism and rationalism. The influence of these three movements in the modern West affected the culture and the Church by centering the world on humanity instead of God, establishing experience as the determining factor for deciding values and morals over against God's revelation, and bringing about a hope of human progress that would be fulfilled in Hegelian historical theory and the Romanticism of the 19th century. However, the wars of the 20th century shattered all hope in an

utopia created by human effort. The post-war West is a place of either total despair or the attempt to fix problems via technology, science, medication or behavioral therapy. The major problem with all of these ideologies is that human effort to fix the world is exalted instead of viewing Jesus and the Cross as the epitome of history where evil and sin were defeated and hope for the restoration of all things is the central ethic.

The Church in the twentieth century has been split by this separation of spiritual and physical. Webber describes the vast majority of churches in the twentieth century as falling into liberalism of privatism. The former buying into the idea that humans can fix the world as the core message of the Gospel and the later retreating from society and culture concentrating their efforts on “saving souls” instead of embracing all of God’s actions to save His world.

As I said, this is by far my favorite chapter so far. Webber does an incredible job of clearly explaining the cultural shifts Western Civilization has experienced over the last 500 years. His description of the incarnation may be most profitable contribution of the book. My only criticism would be that Webber quickly discusses the impact of Radical Islam’s desire for world domination throughout history, but gives no suggestions for standing against the new threat that it presents. Possibly this is to come in a following chapter.

The last three chapters of *WGNTW* are probably the most useful and informative. In chapter 5, “Our Post-modern, Post-Christian, Neo-Pagan World”, Webber discusses how the moral character of America and Western culture has lost what it once had, mainly focusing on sexual issues including abortion, homosexuality and pornography. He traces this loss of moral standing to the rise of the secular philosophy in the 19th century. The answers of Darwin, Freud and Marx to the questions Where did I come from? Who am I? and What is the purpose of life? replaced the Christian answers during this time. This has led to the rise of philosophical pluralism, New Age theology and the renewal of Gnosticism. These, Webber says, are the ultimate problems facing Western culture.

Chapter 6, “New contenders Arise to Narrate the World” is concerned with the other major contender to Christendom, Radical Islam. This chapter is concerned mostly with describing Islam and how it threatens Western society and its Christian roots. There are good explanations of the following aspects of Islam: God, Revelation Muhammad, Sunnis, Shiites, Sufis, the Five Pillars of Islam, Wahhabism, and Shari’a law. Webber says that while there are other influences trying to gain ground in the Islamic world, namely secularism and democracy, he believes they will eventually fail. In line with this, Webber also states that the Church and the Narrative of God should be very wary of finding partners in secularism and democracy in a conflict against radical Islam because, “Christianity is a faith that narrates the world not through a political philosophy but through the ultimacy of Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord of all history.”

Webber’s final chapter, “A Call to Narrate the World Christianly” is his call and advice on how to proceed in response to the issues presented throughout *WGNTW*. The Church must first relearn the content and purposes of God’s narrative, then powerfully decide not to give in to other narrations, and finally re-commit to spreading the story of God in radical devotion to God and His purposes.

In all Robert Webber's vision in *Who Gets to Narrate the World?* calls the Church to reclaim the world changing story of God's actions to save the world through Christ. While Webber does not have the most exhaustive description of the current state of Christianity and the world that surrounds it, nor the most complete treatment of the Biblical texts that deal with God's people's effect on the world, I would certainly recommend this book to beginning theology readers interested in understanding the relationship of the Christian faith and culture formation.