

The ‘Story’ That Replaced Christianity Is Collapsing

In graduate school, one of the most helpful concepts I learned about was narrative theology. The basic premise behind it is that theologies are rooted in a narrative, or story, that forms the lens through which a religion’s adherents interpret the world.

Christianity itself is a story, one that captured the West’s attention for almost two-thousand years. According to this narrative—as contained in Scripture and expressed by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus of Lyons, the Cappadocians (Basil and the two Gregories), and Maximus the Confessor—God created all men to participate in His divine life, i.e., for deification. He created them in His “image,” and they had to freely choose to grow in His “likeness.” The “Fall” was an attempt to achieve deification apart from God. After the Fall, man retained the image of God (though marred by sin), but no longer had the divine life dwelling in him. God’s redemption of man, over the course of many years, culminated in Christ’s death and Resurrection, which “conquered death,” redeemed human nature, and enabled man to once again fulfill his original call to participate in the divine life.

In saying that “Christianity is a story,” there are many who will immediately smirk and say, “Why yes, it is.” What the smirks usually reveal about their owners, however, is a total lack of awareness of the narrative-based character of their own lives. They have rejected the Christian story—at least, the parts they’re conscious of—and merely replaced it with another story.

As theologian Robert Jenson pointed out in the title of [his 1993 essay](#), the Western world has “lost its story,” the

Christian story. For the past two-hundred or more years, its replacement in the West has been “modernity.”

In [a remarkably insightful article](#) published yesterday, popular blogger Fr. Stephen Freeman reminds us of the story-based character of modernity:

“We live in a story that calls itself the ‘modern world.’ It is about the ‘time’ we live in. It invented terms such as the ‘Classical Period,’ the ‘Dark Ages,’ and the ‘Middle Ages,’ naming history in such a way that it inevitably yielded modernity. It is the story of progress and evolution, not the unfolding of a divine plan, but the successive work of increasing understanding, science and compassion.”

But stories are to be tested by their fruits, and as Freeman and others have argued, modernity has not delivered on its promises of making of the world a better place, and of making people happier. In other words, it’s a *bad story*. That’s precisely why it has needed to be propped up by various forms of entertainment and distraction for people. That’s precisely why people have gravitated toward the fantasy genre (represented by Tolkien in the quote below), which hearkens back to a past way of life and being in the world:

“Of course, the narrative that is the story of modernity is fictional. It’s power and strength come from repetition. Modernity did not end war; human suffering has changed but not disappeared; prosperity has come to some but very unevenly; democracy has created universal suffrage to little or no effect; human dignity is a popular slogan, but largely without content. Has the world truly left behind superstition and ignorance in an ageless march towards a consumer paradise?”

Modernity is only a story: it is a narrative disguised as

history. The emptiness and pointlessness of the modern narrative begs for questions. I suspect it's why our hearts ache from time to time and dream of Hobbits. The narrative of Middle Earth, though fictional, has a transcendent meaning and purpose, something that calls for the deepest courage and makes every sacrifice to be significant. That Mordor and Isengard both embody elements of the industrial revolution, endangering even the Shire, are not accidental. They intentionally represent the flaws of modernity. Tolkien's mythology imagines that such forces can be defeated."

Twenty-five years ago, Jenson saw that "the modern world, the world that instrumental and critical reason built, is falling about us." Its successor is postmodernism, which has not only revealed the shaky intellectual foundations of the story of modernity, but has also sought to do away with all universal narratives that seek to make sense of reality. The postmodern world is one in which each of us is free to make up our own story, using whatever narrative helps us get by.

To reiterate what I mentioned above, the story of modernity was able to come to power because the Christian story in the West had first been lost. Christianity itself had started to tell a bad story, one that did not capture the glory of the original revelation, and one that was not bearing sufficient fruits in its purveyors.

I contend that most Christian churches today continue to perpetuate a bad story, one that's not really Christianity, but instead, the story of modernity with a superficial Christian garnish. In the description of [Rod Dreher](#), the average person attending a Sunday worship service these days is "fed nothing but the thin gruel of contemporary Christianity, with its shallow theology and upbeat sloganeering." Today's churches have sold the birthright of a rich narrative for "a pot of message."

In line with Freeman's article, philosopher John Milbank [argued](#) that modernity is not actually "secular reason" (he doesn't believe there is a such a thing) but a story, or *mythos*, "and therefore cannot be refuted, but only out-narrated." If Christianity is to ever hope to overcome both modernism and postmodernism, they're going to have to start telling a better story again.