

TUTORIAL

1.2

The stories we tell

To begin to think about and discuss the importance of cultural relevance in the presentation of Biblical Truth, and to see how different cultures have very different views of the world.

Life - a tale of survival

There is something very compelling in accounts of survival, to someone beating the odds and pulling through despite terrible and desperate circumstances. Ernest Shackleton led his expedition, incredibly without loss of life, after their ship was crushed in the Antarctic ice or, more recently, mountaineer Joe Simpson lived to tell the tale of his fall into an abyss while climbing in the Peruvian Andes. (Book and movie 'Touching the Void'). Perhaps these stories resonate with us because for all of us to some degree, life itself is a tale of survival.

Every one of us comes into this world in the same way, with very few resources for survival - equipped with little but our skin and one or two highly effective ways of demanding attention from our parents. And we need every bit of help we can get, because the world that we find ourselves in is in many ways a harsh one. There are many things that jeopardise our survival. As we grow, the things we need become more sophisticated and complex. We need companionship. We need to feel we belong. We look for acceptance. We want to be valued, and we all need some reason to get up in the morning, some reason to keep going - to survive - to make sense of it all.

But we humans have a massive dilemma. Our senses are constantly receiving data, bits of information, from the outside world. And we're specifically designed to have all those bits of experience tie together - we were made to try to make sense of it all - we need to make sense of it all to face life and death. That need is at the core of being human. Remember that we were designed by God specifically to hear Him tell us His Story and for us to understand our story within that framework. It was always His intention to tell us why any of this matters - why we find ourselves alive - why we exist - but our understanding of the world and our place within it can only be correctly or truly understood when it is placed within His narrative. So what is our dilemma? We

were designed to listen, but we have rejected God who made both us, and the world we live in. And we rejected His over-arching narrative that actually does make sense of it all.

So how have we, as a human race, tried to resolve this dilemma? Our very design leads us to seek the Narrative to explain life, but having rejected the true story, we really left ourselves with no choice but to make something up. To a degree we do this as individuals, but we also pass on these stories to each other - we make an agreement to accept a certain version of a story so that we can survive together as communities, or as societies. It's actually what a culture is, and a language is the verbal communication of that common story among a group of people. People who share a language often share quite a lot of the story or stories they tell to try to make sense of their common experience of the world.

Two very different stories

Let's briefly explore two examples - which are about as far apart as they can be - to illustrate the need we humans have for making sense of it all, and in what way we hold stories in common to do so.

Scientific Humanism

The first example is a cultural context that most of us are familiar with - modern, scientific, humanism. What do we mean by those terms? If we had time, we could trace the origins of this particular story - or worldview - much further back, but we're using 'modern' to mean the last few centuries. So we will say that this particular story began at the time of the Renaissance - when people began to challenge an assumption held up to that point by Western societies, that everything we can know comes from the Bible as interpreted by the so-called universal or Catholic Church. As a result of that challenge, human rationality - our thoughts - became the guiding principle. Humans claimed the right to tell their own story. That's why we call it 'humanism'.

Science - the way in which humans investigate and describe the world around them - took over as the chief storyteller. Its version of the world became the narrative of choice. For a time God was given a small role as a distant Creator, but with so little to do He eventually disappeared from this story. This led to the view that all reality, everything we experience or can think of, human behavior, human history, the way everything came into being - all could be explained in purely material or physical terms.

It seemed for a time, that this was a pretty good, tight storyline and that the human race would go on to solve its problems and plot out its own glorious future. But as time went by, cracks began to appear. There was widespread unrest, endless armed conflicts, including the two global wars. The modern nations founded most directly on those humanist principles ended up being

some of the most vicious and murderous in all of recorded history. And what's more, it became obvious that this story did not live up to its billing - it was supposed to explain absolutely everything. But the fact is, the scientific, humanistic version just doesn't account for things like beauty and justice, nor answer the deep questions of people's hearts.

Thousands of different solutions to this failure in the plot have been attempted over the years, with all kinds of twists, theories and trends. Room has even been made for religion or a vague 'spirituality', but the scientific humanism that defined this story from its beginning is still there as the dominant theme in most so-called modern societies today.

Animism

A second, very different, story is often called animism. Actually, like our first illustration, there are some things that we can say to describe an animistic worldview, but in reality it is a broad term for a great many stories that share some major features. Animism is the worldview of many traditional or 'tribal' societies - usually those who've had the least contact with others.

The story of animism in many ways is the opposite of the scientific, humanistic story. For animists, the material, physical world is closely intertwined with the unseen spiritual world. The worlds of the living and the dead are not clearly distinguished, and because ancestors remain active in the physical world, it is up to the living to appease or find ways to solicit their help for survival. Without traditional access to the technology of reading and writing, animistic beliefs are often passed down in the form of myths, chants, incantations and dramatic dance. While the scientist in a lab coat or the reporter for the nightly news is the storyteller for scientific humanism, animism's narratives are told by the local shaman or healer. Power, and therefore the right to say what is true or not, is held by those who are seen to have the answers for survival in a perilous physical/spiritual world.

Animistic beliefs are fluid and adaptable in order to explain events and incorporate new ideas that come along. For this reason we often find animism mixed (syncretism - a combination of different beliefs) with other dominant worldviews. Many traditionally animistic societies have taken on the overarching stories of a world religion to take care of the big questions of life and death, but have retained their smaller, traditional animistic stories to try to make sense of their day-to-day human needs.

So what can we say about these two seemingly very different worldviews or Stories? And what general lessons are there for us as tellers of God's true Story? We can see, first of all, that having some way to explain and make sense of life is a compelling need for everyone: it's the same for a person surrounded by cutting-edge technology in a modern city or someone whose

culture has changed little in hundreds of years. Having rejected God's Story, humans take it on themselves to tell their own versions of reality - they really have no choice but to do this. Stories that are accepted widely are based on some claim to authority; dreams and visions, ancient writings, religion, science or even human reasoning itself. But regardless of their starting point, they fail. Gaps always appear. They always fall short of claims to make sense of it all, to answer the most important needs of human beings.

At the beginning of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, he vividly describes the process of people rejecting God and His Account of reality - what Paul calls 'trading truth for a lie' - and he talks about the devastating results in every area of human existence. But in that same passage, Paul also talks about the Answer. This Answer is what drives him, motivates him, and gets him up in the morning. He has been entrusted with God's True Story - a Story that, in the very telling, has the power to convince and change people's thinking and lives.

As tellers of God's Story we must first of all be convinced that it can back up its claims. That it has the inherent authority and power to replace all other Stories that humans have told. We must feel the same obligation Paul describes - of telling God's Story clearly and carefully to anyone who will listen, regardless of who they are or where they come from. And we must be willing to understand the narratives of their lives - to respect, empathise and care for them as those for whom God has given His All. Because they are those He is seeking, so He can tell them His Good, True Story that will answer the deepest needs of their hearts.



DISCUSSION POINTS

The Stories we tell

1. Picture describing yourself within your cultural setting to someone from another planet. Start from the "widest-angle" and gradually narrow it down to observations about any cultural sub-groups you would say you're part of.
2. Briefly describe some of the most important points about the "Story" our culture has accepted and tells itself. (1) Who or what are the Main Storytellers? (2) What is accepted as the purpose of our lives? (3) What are the really big problems we face? (4) Where do we look for the solutions?

- (5) What happens after death? Do you feel that, in general, you are conscious of God communicating through Creation?
3. Do you have any friends who are not believers with whom you regularly discuss the “deeper things” of life?
If so, describe the kinds of conversations you have with them: e.g. Are they interested in what you tell them about your faith or are they antagonistic towards Christianity? How do you respond?
If not, what do you think the reasons are? Is it because you don't have friends who are not believers? Or you do but they, or you, are not comfortable talking about those kinds of things?



ACTIVITIES

The Stories we tell

1. Watch a successful movie from the last 10 years taking some notes about the underlying worldview that comes through in the storyline and dialogue.