

Is the World's Story True?

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by Rev. Jeremiah Montgomery

"You tell me *God* told you to move away – to leave the country! – and I'm not supposed to worry?"

Imagine you were the one asking that question. Imagine that the person on the other end – the one claiming *God* had told them to emigrate – was a dear friend, or even a member of your own family. Imagine they had never before shown any signs of radical religiosity. What would you think? What would you do?

Most of us would probably assume our friend or relative was unwell. We would try to slow them down and get them to reconsider. And we would probably call for others to help: other friends, other family members, respected coworkers – perhaps even an ambulance.

What would you say if I told you that a story just like this one is foundational to the story of the Bible?

It's true. In the book of Genesis, chapter 12, verse 1, we are told, "Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." A few verses later, we are told simply: "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him." Prior to these verses, nothing is said that makes us think Abram was particularly religious. In fact, a much later passage of the Old Testament tells us that Abram was originally no more religious than anybody else in his family or community (see Joshua, chapter 24, verse 2).

So what could possess a man like Abram – later renamed 'Abraham' – to make him become so suddenly (dangerously?) serious about *God*? Something obviously changed in him. What was it?

The question is more than a historical curiosity. Today we live in a world that, for all of its technological sophistication, is still very religious. Though mainline expressions of religion may be on the decline in Western societies, evangelical and 'fundamentalist' expressions of both Christianity and Islam are on the rise globally. (If you are skeptical about this claim, I encourage you to consult the works of Dr. Philip Jenkins.) Out of sight is *not* out of mind. Whether we particularly like it or not, we are living in an *increasingly* religious world.

So what is it that drives a man like Abraham? What is it that has captivated the hearts of millions of believers worldwide? What is it that continues to change thousands of lives around the world daily?

More secular readers will be tempted to dismiss most, if not all, of such religious enthusiasm as a collapse of critical faculties, a lack of rational capacity, or perhaps even an expression of superstitious cowardice in the face of hard scientific realities. But this is pure condescension. Moreover, it doesn't explain the fact that many believers are highly intelligent and rational people.

If we want to truly understand the phenomena of religious belief, we have to go deeper. The answer is not a simple matter of reason versus irrationality. Rather, the answer lies in the realities of competing "world stories."

Every culture tells its people some story about the meaning of life. This story, whatever it may be, is woven into the fabric of our personal and public life. Societies always use some "big idea" to glue their people together: to explain life, to help us cope with difficulties, and to give us hope. A culture's "world story" becomes the lens through which its members see the world and process life. The reason many secular people today have trouble understanding religious believers is because *they don't see their own story*.

The prevailing world story among secular people today is something that philosopher Charles Taylor labeled "exclusive humanism." Exclusive humanism has two basic tenets: 1) there is no reality beyond the physical universe, and therefore: 2) there is no final goal beyond human 'flourishing' in this life.

Can you see why such a belief structure would make religious belief seem insane? Most of the world's major religions begin with the belief that there is quite a lot of reality beyond the physical universe – the exact negation of the first tenant of exclusive humanism! It should not surprise any of us, therefore, that both believers and non-believers often find one another mutually incomprehensible. We are looking at the world through dramatically different lenses.

So which lens is true? It will not surprise my readers that, as a Christian, I believe the Bible's lens is uniquely different and superior to that of any other religion – including secularism. But why do I believe this? It's not just because I was raised in a Christian family and an evangelical church (though both facts are true). It's because I also believe the biblical story best explains reality.

I believe that there are three big cracks in the mirror of exclusive humanism – three major questions that it cannot coherently answer. These cracks are: 1) the order of the physical universe and our intrinsic faith in its reliability, 2) the universe experience of conscience despite our efforts to coerce it, and 3) the problem of evil and the deep human fear of death.

I find the Bible's answers to each of these questions compelling. The order of the universe is evidence of its design by the Creator, and my intrinsic faith in this order – I cannot seriously doubt the laws of gravitation – is proof that I know He is there. The experience of conscience – those transcendent moral standards that won't let me off the hook, no matter how much I rationalize – is the reflection of God's own character etched on my heart and mind. The problem of evil and the fear of death demonstrate to me that what the Bible says about sin and suffering – that they are enemies, invading parasites that are not part of nature's original design. And in the cross of Jesus Christ I see a compelling answer to evil: a God so determined to eradicate evil and sin, without eradicating all sinners, that he experienced its darkest expression and consequences personally – in my place.

Maybe you prefer exclusive humanism. But what of the cracks? Is the world's story true?

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