

Introduction to Christian Education 1

Which Story? Whose Story?

Identifying the big story that shapes the life and curriculum of a school or college

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Summary

The ultimate goal of Christian education and mission is life-long disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who disciple others. To be a disciple is to be a participant in the unfolding big story, which centres in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These big stories desperately matter because:

- there is no neutral area of life – every aspect of school life and curriculum is embedded in one or another (or some mixture) of big stories.
- fundamentally they are religious, or faith stories – but we will call them *worldview stories* to emphasise that *everyone* lives in one of these stories.
- commitment to these worldview stories will have serious consequences – for good or ill – for the individual, community and wider society.

In Westernised societies today, teachers have become the main professional story-tellers and the school curriculum as a whole is the big story they tell. So one of the most important questions we face as teachers and school leaders is “Which big story (worldview story) is being absorbed by the children in our school?” “In whose story will they be participants?”

Challenging and replacing worldview stories requires much hard work, but we are called to that task if we are serious about Christian education.

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1 Setting the Scene

1.1 The ultimate goal of Christian education and mission is life-long disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, who disciple others. To be a disciple is to be a participant in the unfolding big story, which centres in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

1.2 Some of us are not in situations where we can have a fully Christian educational programme. But we should never forget the ultimate goal. A bottom line criterion for everything we do should be: “Does this take us toward that goal or, at the very least, leave that way open and unobstructed?”

1.3 But there is a very strong incentive for action. These big stories matter because:

- there is no neutral area of life – every aspect of our school or college’s life and curriculum is embedded in one or another (or some mixture) of these big stories.
- fundamentally they are religious, or faith stories. We will call them *worldview stories*, because, in common usage, ‘faith’ is often limited to religious people (Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, Muslims etc.) whereas *everyone* is governed by these stories, even those who claim to be ‘secular’ or ‘not religious’.
- the commitment to these worldview stories will have serious long-term consequences – for good or ill – for the individual, community and wider society.

2 Stories

2.1 A well-known Western Educator is professor Kieran Egan, who was born in Ireland in 1942, but now lives and works in Canada. In 1988 he published a famous book *Teaching as Storytelling*. He points out that stories are a cultural universal, “everyone everywhere enjoys stories.” (Egan 1988: 2) He argues that in Western societies, and in all other societies influenced by the West, teachers are, today, the main professional story-tellers and the school curriculum as a whole is the big story they tell (In fact, it might be better to call these stories *dramas*, because we are all active participants). The problem is that most teachers are not aware that their school or college is telling a big story and that everything they teach is like a ‘little story’ – a part, or contribution to the big story.

2.2 One of the most important questions teachers and school leaders must face is:

Which big story is being absorbed by the children in our school? In whose story are they being trained to be participants?

There are many other important questions wrapped up in this one:

- *Will our pupils and students learn that life’s purpose and meaning flow from loving God with all that they are?*
- *Are they being prepared for life-long Christian discipleship?*
- *Are those who are, or become Christians, being trained to survive and flourish as Christians in college and university and in their careers?*

- *Are they being equipped to answer those who challenge or ridicule the Christian faith? (cf. 1 Peter 3:15)*
- *Will they fulfil the occupations of their working week to the glory of God?*
- *Will they bring Biblical insights to bear on everyday home and work issues?*
- *Will they provide Christian leadership in their fields of work and within the professions?*
- *Will they develop resources that set the standards in their fields?*
- *Will they work for peace, justice, and the common good through their various callings?*
- *Will they commend the Gospel of the Kingdom in word and deed?*

In short, will they be those who are not moulded by the secular culture around them, but equipped to play their part in transforming the culture for Christ.

2.3 It doesn't matter which subject we teach. Whether maths, or language, art or science, what we are teaching, and how we are teaching, will be reinforcing one worldview story and undermining others. This is the key issue. Children come to school already equipped to understand and use stories. They may struggle with maths, or history, and forget most of it as soon as the exams are over, but they will have absorbed the underlying story. Since that story will rarely, if ever, have been identified for them – and thereby been brought into the open for questioning – they will have been *indoctrinated*.

2.4 We must ask and answer the question: “Which big story are we teaching?” “Which big story are the children absorbing in our school?” “Is it a Christian story?” “A Hindu story?” “A Muslim Story?” “A modern secular story?”

We will be defining ‘secular’ more carefully later; for now it is enough to think of it as *living as if God does not exist and as if faith is not relevant to everyday life*.

The issue is not whether or not we think (‘believe’) God exists, but how we *live* – and *teach*.

2.5 This is the first of three introductory papers on Christian education. The aim of this paper is to introduce the big stories. It is not an easy task because they do not feature in most school and college curricula. Most students go through school and college without ever being asked to consider the beliefs and assumptions – the worldviews – that undergird the teaching they receive and the learning they undertake. This is fundamentally a dereliction of proper educational duty. If they have never been shown the relationship between worldviews and their curriculum – never been taught to recognise and critique those worldviews – then they are fundamentally uneducated. It is then very difficult indeed to redress that lack after they have left school or college.

2.6 It is rather like tackling lateral thinking puzzles. The puzzles can be great fun, but they carry a very important educational lesson. You may know that they are lateral thinking puzzles. You may know that you cannot do them unless you question

your assumptions and identify (and bracket out) irrelevant information. But for most people they are still very difficult to solve. The situation with worldviews is much worse. The dominant worldview is a person's or community's 'default setting', their 'common sense'. If you are immersed in one, it is very difficult to recognise it, let alone replace it. It will take a lot of hard work, but we have no option if we are serious about Christian education.

2.7 The other two papers seek to give substance to these general comments. The second looks at the influence of secular worldview stories on public life in the West. In the Western world, religion has been relegated to the private world of family and community, whereas the public world, including education, is ruled by secularism. The result is *dualism* – that people may live according to a religion in private, but in public they live as secularists. But the public secularism is dominant, especially in the media and education, and thereby undermines religious belief. We see this in the UK where it has become very hard indeed for parents to pass on their Christian faith to children raised in a strongly secular environment (see the second paper for references). Because the Western secularism has spread throughout the world, those same influences are found everywhere else. They may not yet be as strong, or as developed as in Western Europe, but, spread by the media, they are present and growing. The third paper then considers the differences between Christian and secular curricula.

2.8 There are of course other influences around the world, especially from Hinduism, Buddhism and Animism (Shamanism). But these have little influence on the nature of school and college education. The reason is that none of these religions provides a perspective on the direction, goal, or meaning of human earthly life, history and culture.

Animism provides neither a story of origins (creation) nor of our final destiny. It tends to be focused on present and worldly interests – on material benefits, health, business success and a long, happy life.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, there is no distinction between Creator and creation. Salvation is an individual matter and the emphasis is on withdrawal from everyday earthly life – freeing the self from the illusory world of senses, desires and interests – rather than on social and communal engagement and development.

In their different ways none of these religions provide a basis for theoretical thinking or for the development of technology and science. Their presence in – and influence on – the school or college curriculum is minimal. BUT they may still be very influential in home and community culture, shaping a person's way of thinking and way of living. The result is the same encouragement of *dualism* as in the Western world – living according to religion in family and community, but according to secularism in public life.

2.9 In Nepal, for example, secularism is not as dominant as in the West, but the impact on a religion like Christianity, which has a very short history of communal and cultural development, is significant. How many of the Nepali Christian children, who go through secular schools and colleges, are becoming committed Christian adults who know how to apply their Christian faith in their working life? Are the Christian

schools training people to develop a Christian community and culture in Nepal that impacts every area of life and work for the Kingdom of God?

2.10 It is the over-arching worldview story that makes sense of life for our students. It is that big story, which puts their own life story and that of their family and community into context and gives them meaning. It is the big story that gives coherence and integrity to the whole curriculum. If that framework of meaningfulness is absent, or if the big story implicitly present is not capable of making sense of life, then that, more than anything else, will account for the great inefficiency and ineffectiveness of Western-style education.

2.11 There are two other important implications that will be considered in other papers. The first is that Christian education will not work if it is simply a matter of the school curriculum. The Christian story must be seen in the whole life of the school and church community. If the community is shaped by the Christian story and the rich wholesomeness of God's Kingdom-life is embodied in its culture, then the Gospel will be both attractive and believable. The work of the Christian teacher will then be much easier and much more effective.

2.12 The second is to emphasise the importance of all the little stories. The tools of learning that children use to make sense of the stories of our culture – in the UK stories like *Cinderella*, *Treasure Island*, Shakespeare's plays, or the C.S. Lewis *Narnia* stories – are in place by age five. Those tools of learning can be used to make sense of the most profound things of history, or maths, or science. Children *will* understand if you teach them through stories. More will be said about little stories across the curriculum in other papers.

3 The Big Stories Embody Our Worldview

3.1 The big stories make people what they are and they are taken very seriously by those who hold them. Of course, above all, the stories flesh out and transmit a person's or community's faith or religion – their worldview. They are the prime means by which worldviews are passed to the next generation. Hence worldviews are not confined to academics or intellectuals; they are primarily "a matter of the heart, of spiritual orientation, of religion." (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008:18) They are common to *everyone*. Without them we cannot think or act at all. Worldviews are like 'spectacles behind our eyes' – we look (at the world) *through* them, not *at* them. But those 'spectacles' give a particular colour to everything we see. It is crucially important to have the right spectacles!

3.2 But, as already noted, people today are generally unaware of their worldview story. Their worldview is often not a matter of what they say they believe – and maybe not even what they think they believe! Their worldview is revealed in how they actually live and in how their community actually functions.

"To hold a doctrine or an opinion with the intellect alone is not to believe it. A man's *real* belief is that which he lives by. ... What a man believes is the thing he does, not the thing he thinks." (George MacDonald, 1885, as quoted by

Phillips 1990:20. MacDonald was a huge influence on C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien)

3.3 So this is our problem. Most teachers are not aware that they are teaching a worldview story. Very few, even of Christian teachers and educational leaders, could correctly identify their school's big story. In our society today, most people go through education without ever considering (or even being asked to consider) the relationship between faith and life. Consequently most people do not even know that they have a worldview story – they have simply absorbed theirs unawares from their environment – from family, peers, teachers, media *etc.* Unsurprisingly, therefore, many (most?) Christians absorb secular perspectives and most Churches provide no tools for discernment.

3.4 Of course, if our students cannot identify and articulate the dominant worldviews – and if they cannot compare and evaluate them against a Christian worldview – then can we really claim that they have received a Christian education? Are we actually indoctrinating them into another faith? Sadly, we are doing just that in Britain – as we shall see in the other papers.

4 How the Big Stories Work

4.1 Worldview stories operate by giving us the answers to the big questions of life and society:

- (1) What is ultimate reality? (What is really real? Is there a God?)
- (2) Where are we? (What is this world we are in?)
- (3) Who are we? (What are human beings?)
- (4) What are we here for? (What is the human task/role?)
- (5) What's wrong? (Why is there evil, hardship, suffering, oppression?)
- (6) What's the remedy? (What can be done to put matters right?)
- (7) Where are we going? (What happens after death?)
- (8) What time is it? (Where are we at in the story? Where do we belong in it?)
- (9) How do we know? (How do we know what is true?)

4.2 Of course other questions could be included, and these questions could be phrased differently (even using the singular 'I', instead of the 'we' I have used, makes a significant difference!).

4.3 The point is that what we teach, and how we teach, are like little stories that provide our students with answers to those questions. Those answers are weaving for them a big worldview story. They may soon forget the history and geography, the science and maths, but they will absorb the big story and many will live by its values for the rest of their lives. We'll look at how this actually works in society and schools in the next two papers.

4.4 As most people are unaware of their worldview story, it is usually no good asking people these questions (**4.1**) as they stand. Rather we need to ask them about (or, better still, observe) how they live, how they behave. If their worldview is really Christian, then how should they behave and act? What kind of lifestyle should we

observe? Remember that it is all too common for people to profess one worldview when challenged, but confess another through their daily practice.

5 Christian Big Stories

5.1 Two big stories compete in the Western world today:

- Christian story
- Western secular story

5.2 The Christian worldview can be summarised in the traditional Creation → Fall (into Sin) → Redemption (Salvation) → New Creation storyline. If we use the image of spectacles, then:

“To look at the world through Scripture is, in fact, to look at the world through three lenses at the same time: as something created by God, twisted by sin, and being redeemed by the work of Christ. Remove any one of these lenses and the biblical worldview is distorted.” (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008:63)

5.3 It must be emphasised that although the fourfold Creation-Fall-Redemption-New Creation timeline is dependent at every point on the Biblical Grand Story, *it is not the story itself* (Wolters and Goheen 2005:127). It (and similarly for the secular worldview below) sets out the basic worldview categories (or basic assumptions) of the Biblical Grand Story. It acts as a systematic shorthand representation, or reminder, of the story, *but it is not the story itself*.

5.4 The story itself is much, much richer (Bartholomew & Goheen 2006). For example, the four point timeline does not do justice to the OT history of Israel, the life of Jesus, the history of the early church, or to the long period between the end of Acts and the return of Christ (the era in which we live), which is also part of the story. In order to do the story justice we must soak (marinate) ourselves in the Biblical story and in our Christian history so that we can truly own it as our story, and be continually discovering more and more about its events, characters and lessons.

5.5 Any person’s or Community’s telling of the story will be shaped by their historical and cultural context – by their access to, and understanding of the Biblical and historical sources. So there are many Christian Big stories, but through adherence to the Biblical worldview, through the reading of the books by Christians of past ages and other places (see Lewis 1970) and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they share vastly more in common, than they do differences (Lewis *ibid*).

5.6 In the Bible story, Christ is central. To understand the work of Christ we need to see his place in the story as it has developed (*Genesis to Malachi*) to his incarnation in human history (*Matthew to John*) and has then developed since (*Acts to Revelation* and in Christian history). But we also need to see the whole story in the light of Christ – as God He is *before* the story and *over* the story as well as *in* the Story:

6 Secular Big Stories

6.1 Secularism is rather like vegetarianism. If someone tells us that they are vegetarian, it tells us at least some of what they don't eat (e.g. red meat), but not what they do eat – or how they live. Do they eat eggs? Or dairy products? Or honey? Or only fruits, nuts and seeds? Or only uncooked food? Is their practice purely dietary, or do they not use animal products of any kind (no leather, or woollen goods for example)? In other words we need to know what kind of vegetarian they are. Similarly with secularism (and atheism for that matter): it tells us some of what people *don't* believe, but not what they *do* believe. What kind of secularist are they? That is what we need to know.

6.2 Of course they may claim that secularism is neutral – that secularists don't privilege any worldview, ideology, philosophy or religion. But neutrality is a myth. Even maths or science is always embedded in a worldview. And that worldview will be the expression of a philosophical view of reality (see Clouser .2005, Jones, 1999)

6.3 Today the dominant secular philosophy is *materialism*, with a close linking of the two meanings of that key word:

- *Materialism1* – physical nature is all there is;
- *Materialism2* – enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

6.4 The secular Big Story, like the Christian Gospel, makes an absolute claim on the whole of life:

“The story that shapes our Western culture is likewise a comprehensive story which makes totalitarian claims. There is an incompatibility between the gospel and the story of our culture. Every culturally embodied grand narrative will seek to become not only the dominant but the exclusive story. If we as the church want to be faithful to the equally comprehensive biblical story we will find ourselves faced with a choice: either accommodate the Bible's story to that of our culture, and live as a tolerated minority community, or remain faithful and experience some degree of conflict and suffering.” (Wolters and Goheen 2005: 134)

6.5 *Materialism1* – physical nature is all there is

Materialism1 (also known as *naturalism* or *physicalism*) is the belief that ultimately only matter and energy are real. The Big Story is that of 'Nothing to Nothing'! In the beginning was nothing, which gave rise, spontaneously, to energy and matter. After billions of years of random change, from energy and matter life arose. After more millions of years, intelligent life arose (us humans!). But it is all to no purpose and it will all eventually decay and die, returning to nothing.

Given that Big Story there can be no immaterial realm beyond physical detection. There is no spirit, soul, angels or gods. There is no independent human mind, only the mindless chemistry of the brain. There is no intelligence, design or purpose behind, or at work in the universe. There is no objective or universal moral order. There is no ultimate meaning to life. Indeed some conclude that there can be no human free will; free will must be an illusion created by the deterministic processes of

evolution and brain chemistry. None of these things can have any ultimate reality; they will not be part of any final explanation of the universe.

6.6 Incidentally this is the real significance of Darwinism in the modern world. Darwinism is not simply the idea of natural selection applied to the origin of living organisms. For both Charles Darwin and its leading modern proponents, like Richard Dawkins, Darwinism is the *materialist* theory of the origin of living organisms. As such it is origins story of almost all secular worldviews.

6.7 Given *Materialism1* secularists will remove from their stories God, faith, miracles, ultimate purpose, objective moral order and ultimate meaning. They will explain human beings and their histories solely in terms of environmental, biological, psychological, social and economic factors.

6.8 *Materialism2* – enjoying material possessions is all that matters.

To *Materialism1*, is added *Materialism2*, which (despite postmodernism) tells the myth of progress, the modernist story of Science, Technology, Economics and Consumerism (see Walsh, 1992).

- How do we gain true knowledge? Through science – by asking the elite scientific experts to share their wisdom.
- Why do we want that knowledge? So we can develop the technology to control the world (including human life and behaviour).
- Why do we want to control the world? So we can have constant economic growth.
- Why do we want constant economic growth? So we can all live in a consumer paradise.

6.9 If the material world is all there is then the enjoyment of material things is about the best that anyone can hope for in this fleeting life. Consumerism is a social expression of scientific materialism.

Materialism2 can fairly be called *The Western Religion*.

6.10 A very important point to note is that secular worldviews are very reductionist and impoverished in comparison to a Christian worldview, denying much of the richness of human life. Our worldview antennae must be fully extended and active when engaging with secular resources. Any account of a topic or event will reflect the worldview of the teller. Where worldviews differ strongly, the resulting accounts of the ‘same’ subject can show stark differences.

7 Conclusion

7.1 In human life there is no worldview neutrality. As we grow up we all absorb a worldview story (or, most likely today, fragments of big stories). That big story (or mixture of stories) is learnt and nurtured through lots of little stories. These little stories transmit the priorities and beliefs of the big story (stories) to the next generation.

7.2 What can we do?

- We must – in home, church, school and work – identify and challenge the dominant secular worldview stories, evaluating their implications and consequences.
- We must identify all the little stories in the syllabi, textbooks and resources that reflect and nurture secular worldviews.
- We must work to embed the Christian worldview in every aspect of the life of our school or college.
- We must ensure that – throughout the curriculum and the whole life of the school – we weave little stories that nurture the Christian story and transmit it to the next generation.
- Throughout we must explain to the children what we are doing and why it is important.

7.3 It is a hard and difficult road. May God give us the strength and grace to reach the goal.

“Teaching Christianly may well be the hardest job in the universe”
(John Van Dyk 1997:9)

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