

## The Jesus Story vs. Other Messianic Stories

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### Introduction: What Story Do You Live In?

Why is there conflict with Christianity? Where can we expect opposition? I want to argue that it's because people want to live in their own stories, and be their own heroes. Let me begin by asking you, 'What story do you live in?' All of us live in a story. We have a storyline running through our heads. And we play a major role in it. Let me give you some examples.

Do you live in the hero story? This is a story where someone who makes a difference in the world and makes a name for himself or herself. You start off with some kind of hidden talent. You face obstacles, adversity, mountains and valleys of hard work, only to overcome in the end. What matters is the quest, the challenge, and the victory. It is the story of Harry Potter, the unlikely hero who is given a burden that no one else could carry, who fulfills his destiny. It is the story of King Leonidas, who gives his life against King Xerxes and the Persian Empire. Here's a clip from 300 on that. [clip from Scene 17, where Xerxes is calling Leonidas to submit to him.] Notice how the threat of Xerxes is to wipe out Leonidas' story. But as we know, the story is being retold by Dilios, who finishes his story on a new battlefield. As he finishes his story of the 300, he says, 'Here they stare now, across the plain, at 10,000 Spartans, commanding 30,000 free Greeks,' who are now united behind Sparta. Did you know that that story was retold in World War II. In the Battle of Britain, Winston Churchill called for British soldiers. He said the British were the 300 at Thermopylae, because the massive Nazi army had conquered Europe and was now coming for them. Every British schoolboy knew that hero story, and it gave them courage to stand against the Nazis. That is the power of the hero story: the superhero who beats the villain, the scientist who finds the cure in time, the criminal investigator who uncovers the truth and protects the innocent, the trial lawyer who persuades the jury and brings justice, the teacher who inspires the inner city students to beat the test, or the parent who sticks with the child and rescues that child. Any time you live in a story that has good triumphing over evil, then you live in a variation of the hero story. Is that the story you live in?

In the Islamic world, the superhero motif is also coming through. Tufts alum Dr. Naif al-Mutawa authored a new comic book series called 'the 99.' The 99 superheroes in the series were created based on the Islamic concept of the 99 qualities of God. The idea for the comic series was to create superheroes who embody universal values that can be appreciated by young people across the globe. 'The 99' was named by Forbes as one of the 'Top 20 Trends Sweeping the Globe' in 2007.

We are story-telling creatures. And these are good stories, aren't they? Regardless of what story we live in, we tend to want a happy ending. The question for tonight is, as we advertised, 'Will it happen to me, too?'

### But Why Do We Expect a Happy Ending At All?

Most stories in most cultures in most times did not believe in a happy ending. If you could talk to those people, they would ask you, 'Why would you think there is a happy ending for you?' There's either a tragic ending or a circular non-ending, like in many Asian stories. Just look out at the world. The sun rises, and then sets. The seasons come, and then go. People are born, and then they die.

The most natural conclusion you would have to reach about the world is that good never triumphs over evil. Just look out at the world. There is good and there is evil. In particular, in us! Good and evil. So let's not be abstract. Let's get very specific, and look at one faith in particular: Hinduism. On Wikipedia, there is an article called the *Problem of Evil in Hinduism*. It says: 'This shows the existence of earlier cycles of creation, and hence the number of creation cycles is beginningless. Thus Sankara's resolution to the problem of injustice is that the existence of injustice in the world is only apparent, for one merely reaps the results of one's moral actions sown in a past life...On the higher level of existence, however, there is no evil or good, since these are dependent mainly on temporal circumstances. Hence a jnani, one who has realized his true nature, is beyond such dualistic notions.' If you lived in that world, then that part of you that dreams of a more just world is a lie. There is no victory of good over evil. Either good and evil are eternal principles that just fight each other forever (as in Zoroastrianism), or aspects of the same God (as in

Hinduism) and therefore just constructs in our own minds (as also in Buddhism). Once again, in these circular stories, what's the point?

So that's why family became all-important. You keep trying to break through the circularity through your children, and your children's children. For a while, I believed that family was the most important thing in life. But I had to change my mind. In college, I saw all these super rich kids, and they were pretty spoiled. So I realized that my kids might turn out the same way. So there must be something larger than family, something deeper we are looking for and hoping for. Our purpose in life might involve family, but family is not our reason for being. The Chinese classic called *The Dream of Red Mansions* says as much. It's a story about family struggle that just keeps going around in circles, in cycles. All the family's hopes of regaining their honor rests on one boy, Pao-Yu, who can do it if he passes his government exams. All the family politics, the alliances, the betrayals, the affairs, happen around him. And then he fails. Tragic ending, or a circular non-ending. That is the way of the real world.

Some movies, when made for a European audience, have a tragic ending, like *Fatal Attraction*. It's not exclusively American, but it seems particularly American to have a 'happily ever after.' Why is that? What is it about American culture that has this expectation? I'll return to that question after a bit.

### **The Pattern of the Messianic Story**

For now, I want to briefly explore the history of the happy ending. Where did it come from? The happy ending comes from one place: Judaism. The Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament was the first literature to expect a happy ending. Everyone else – Homer's *Iliad* from Greece, the *Atrahasis Epic* from Babylon, the *Avesta* story from Persia – were all circular. Hinduism and Buddhism are circular. If you could plot the story visually, it would be a circle. The Greek tragedies were based on this circular plot arc. You're born, you die. Empires are born, and they also die. Everything goes back to where it came from. The way things were – the way things are – the way things will always be. Life is circular.

Israel was different. The Jewish people alone had a linear perception of life. There are two reasons for this. First, they experienced their God as someone who made a promise, and then fulfilled it. That gave rise to a linear sense of history. You could mark things in time. All times are not the same. God makes things different. Second, they believed that their God was good, and that He would ultimately triumph over evil. Good and evil were not equal entities or equal principles in the world. Therefore, they would not keep going around each other, cycling through forever in a yin and yang kind of pattern. No. God would actually triumph over evil one day. And that period of history that all Jews hoped for, longed for, was called the Messianic period. It was the happy ending. Jewish monotheism, belief in one good God, created the idea of the happy ending. You can read Thomas Cahill's book *The Gifts of the Jews* if you want to a very readable book on this.

But in every linear story, or hero story, or happy ending story, there is a problem that is overcome. What was the problem in the Jewish story?

- Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart (Dt.30:6)
- Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. (Ps.51:10)
- I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it... (Jer.31:33)
- I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you... (Ezk.36:26)

Israel documented the problem: a corrupted human nature. It was an internal problem. The evil is in us. How did they discover that? Partly because they just looked around and asked, 'Why do we keep screwing up?' Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, were social critics. They looked at urban injustice, corruption, and oppression of the poor. They asked, 'Why do we sin?' Not because we need better circumstances: We're in the promised land and it doesn't get much better than this. Plus, it's mostly the rich who commit these crimes, and do they need *better circumstances*? No, we can't blame that external factor. Can we blame our laws? Do we have bad laws? No, we have God's laws, and they're pretty good. So we can't blame that external factor either. The problem is not external to us – it's internal. So Jeremiah and Ezekiel understood that the God of Israel would one day change their hearts. He would write His laws on their

heart (Jer.31:33) and give them a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezk.36:26 – 36). In the view of this God, human nature had to be changed. The evil was in each human being.

Jesus inherited this diagnosis. He said, for instance, ‘Out of the heart comes evil...’ (Mt.15:18 – 20). In the Christian story, Jesus was God come in human form, meaning that he took human nature to himself. And he fought it from within, never giving into the self-centeredness and rebellion from God that we give into all the time. He crushed the corruption that was in his fallen human nature, and killed it and purged it out of his own body by crucifying it. If Frodo had succeeded in throwing the Ring of Power into the fires of Mount Doom on his own, we would have an analogy to Jesus throwing the fallen human nature into the judgment of God. Then Jesus rose again as a new kind of human being, a fresh, God-drenched, God-soaked human being that had transformed his own human nature. And he can share his Spirit – the Spirit of his new humanity – with anyone who asked, so they could be transformed in a relationship with him.

The old Jewish prophecies said that ‘out of Zion would come a message of salvation.’ Zion – or Jerusalem – would be the epicenter of a renewal that would ripple across the whole world. God’s happy ending was another step closer to its fulfillment. Jesus sent his people into the whole world to proclaim a message that they were joined with him spiritually, and that anyone who wanted to be joined to him could be, by believing in him. And one day God will triumph over evil when Jesus returns, and things will just get better and better and better.

The early Christians were radicals for Jesus. They rescued babies left out on Roman doorsteps. They went into plague infested cities and cared for the sick and buried the dead. And whenever a Roman army official waging war on someone else wanted to become a Christian, they would say, ‘That’s great, but you’re going to have to find a new job because Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, and we don’t think you can do that while you’re killing them.’ That’s really important, because later Christians compromised that.

So to back up, the Messianic story was a story of two basic elements: (1) a suffering hero who (2) brings salvation to the whole world. From Jesus to the rest of humanity. From Jerusalem to the rest of the world. I want you to keep those two basic elements in mind, because we are now going to see what happened to that story.

### **The Narrative of Divine Law**

The remainder of the Jewish community, as well as the Islamic community when it emerged, focused on bad laws as the problem to address. So they went from an internal to an external problem. Let me focus on Islam for the sake of simplicity.

The Islamic view of Allah is that Allah is too pure to touch humanity, which is corrupt. How this problem can be fundamentally resolved goes unmentioned in the Qur’an. But what is for certain is that Allah does not come in person, in any kind of human body, to create a new kind of humanity, as the Christian story understands Jesus to be. Instead, Allah keeps an infinite distance. This means that the problem being dealt with is external to humanity: we don’t have the right laws. God’s role is to give the divine law. Mohammed is the last of those messengers, and those laws are important because this is what human beings have to do. And one day, Allah will send the prophet Jesus to bring in the new age. Our role, in the Muslim story, is to receive the law and spread it.

This leaves a number of questions. The biggest one is: Is this what the Qur’an really says? Having drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, doesn’t the Qur’an also carry the basic insight that human nature must be transformed? If you trace the progression of those men the Qur’an calls ‘the prophets,’ you come up with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. What did God do with Adam in Surahs 7 and 20? God covered Adam’s shame and humanity’s shame with clothing. It raises the question, ‘What is there that is shameful about us?’ It seems like there is something about us that needs covering. Then what do we learn with Noah in Surahs 7 and 11? He provided the ark as a way of rescue from the flood; but Noah’s son tried to rescue himself by climbing up the highest mountain. Did he succeed? No: he drowned. What does that tell us? It seems like it’s saying we cannot climb our way out of our problems with our own good works or religious observance; we have to accept God’s way of saving people, and just trust Him. Then with Abraham, we learn how to become righteous. At the height of Abraham’s story, we learn that God

provided a sacrifice for Abraham. A sacrifice that cancels out anything we could offer, so God could make us righteous. Then with Moses, we learn that God helps Israel make a Passover sacrifice of a lamb, so God could deliver them from bondage. So all of this is pointing to God offering a sacrifice so that humanity could be re-clothed, would not have to rely on our own good deeds, could be delivered from our own evil and be reconciled with a God who loves them. That sacrifice of God is Jesus.

Unfortunately the earliest Muslims followed the way of military conquest and putting Qur'anic laws in place over the nations they conquered.<sup>1</sup> Converting nations to Islamic law seems to have been more important than bringing individuals to it. This move, however, put Islam right back into the cycles of sin and conflict that many today are seeking to avoid.

### **The Narrative of Western Nationalism**

In the West, something very strange happened. Essentially, when the West started to reject Jesus himself, Western philosophers wanted to hold on to the happy ending, but without Jesus. After all, who wants to go back to a circular story? That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. That's boring. That's fatalistic. That's repetitious. If I repeated that enough times, it would drive you crazy, and that's what they didn't want to admit. They didn't want to go back there. So they kept a linear story. I believe that the West, starting from Spain, was parodying Islam and the ideal it had of a divine lawgiver and a nation-state.

How many of you are philosophy majors? Do you study Enlightenment philosophy? The interesting thing about Enlightenment philosophy is that it isn't just philosophy. It's story telling. Hegel told a story about conflicting ideas that merged with each other and culminated in his philosophy, which would spread to the whole world. Adam Smith told a story of how capitalism can and will produce wealth for all nations, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Marx told a story of revolution and socialism, starting in England and spreading to the rest of the world. Social Darwinism told the story of European civilization becoming more and more complex, like life apparently, over time. So it became the 'white man's burden' to 'civilize' the rest of the world. Freud and Nietzsche told the story of people in Europe realizing that God is dead, an idea which would then spread over the rest of the world, a world that was only primitive and superstitious. We protest those stories today, we argue with them, and yet we still live in them. I'll show you how.

The poet T.S. Eliot wrestled with that. In 1922, after the devastation of World War I, people started to realize that the story that Europe told wasn't true. The story of European civilization bringing the world to a better place was shown to be a false story. So T.S. Eliot, for example, wrote *The Wasteland*, which many believe to be the greatest poem produced during the 20th century. Listen to the destruction that the poem describes, Europe and the world lie in shambles:

And bats with baby faces in the violet light  
Whistled, and beat their wings  
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall  
And upside down in air were towers  
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours  
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.  
In this decayed hole among the mountains

Not only is it filled with imagery of despair, but *The Wasteland* is not a story. It's a poem, a circular poem. That is key. One of the things Eliot understood was that the story told by Western philosophers is not true. It wasn't a story about Europe bringing the world into glory. It was a story about injustice. It suppressed other people's stories, like ethnic minority stories.

Let's think about American culture for a little bit. I asked earlier why is the happy ending so much of American culture? There is an American story, and it is a parody of the Jesus story. 'We are bringing

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Stark, *Discovering God: The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, HarperOne, p.378 – 379; Frederick Schweitzer and Marvin Parry, *Anti-Semitism: myth and hate from antiquity to the present*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p.267-268

democracy and progress to the world.’ That’s a Messianic story, minus Jesus and minus Jerusalem. Just substitute in ‘the United States.’ **The story is that there is a form of salvation that has been worked out, not in the physical body of Jesus, but in the social system of the United States, and now it’s going to spread over the whole world.** This is why we are often completely surprised when the facts tell us that we’re wrong. What about the internet? Did you know that child pornography and prostitution were virtually eliminated around the world until the internet? What about the environment? Did you know that, at this rate, by the time we are grandparents, we will not have any polar icecaps? What will that be like? What about the growing gap between rich and poor? What about the Native American and Black American stories? What about urban poverty and violence? What about how quickly are blowing up people and using up resources so that there will be nothing left for our children? Notice how movies are more critical of U.S. involvement even in World War II: *The Good German*, with George Clooney, and Clint Eastwood’s movies *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and *Flags of our Fathers*. Years ago, no one would have criticized U.S. involvement in World War II or explored our national self-interest in the War. World War II was the War where the U.S. was unquestionably good. Yet now, we are not at all certain about that.

But there are still many people who are Western Nationalists. They are the neo-conservatives on campus. We need to help them separate Western Nationalism from true Christianity. They are not the same. Not just for our sake, but for their sake and for the sake of the world. Jesus called the Jews right off the bat to love their enemies, the Gentiles, and especially the Romans. Nazareth was the home of a Roman garrison and it was a hotbed for Jewish rightwing nationalism. Jesus goes right up against that. You see, there are people in the U.S. who think that 1 American life is just worth more than 10 Iraqi lives, or 10 Afghani lives, even though Jesus says all human life has equal weight. Or they think it’s better to kill, but Jesus shows that it’s better to die, to be killed, than to kill. It’s better to forgive your enemy and love your enemy than to fight against them. The early Christians believed that even though they existed in multiple nations, they were a real nation and a real community. In Western nationalism, the real community is first the nation, and all ethics bend around the nation. You kill and die on behalf of the nation. But that means the nation is a false god and an idol. The early Christians would not have tolerated that.

And then there are the problems your future children will face because of the Western story. The Christian story emphasized God’s love for each human being, therefore we had human rights, and Christians were guided by that for a long time. The Western story emphasized only citizens’ rights. At first, only white, male, landowning taxpayers had rights. Everyone else not in that category had to fight to gain citizens’ rights. Even though we use the language of human rights, and love the idea of human rights, we’re really not committed to it. I could talk about illegal immigrants, or abortion, or people in the Middle East. But let’s talk about your future children. Your future children are not citizens yet, because they’re not here yet. So what say do they have? None. In the Western story, the future has become very cloudy. How will the Western story end? Or unfold? We are now facing the global water crisis, the global food shortage, the global energy crisis, global warming, environmental pollution, massive government deficits, and so on. This seems to be because in the West, only ‘individual citizens’ rights’ matter, and our descendents really don’t matter because they’re not individuals yet. Your future children are not citizens. This is what the West just has not been able to deal with. This is why the West pushes off to the future all these crises. The truth is: we have not inherited this earth from our parents; we are borrowing it from our children. And we are leaving nothing left for them. It’s taxation without representation across time. The idea of ‘individual rights’ is likely to be the fatal flaw of the West, especially since we give huge corporations more ‘individual rights’ than our future children. The Western story is showing itself to be circular.

The Western story and the Islamic story are butting heads today. The reason is because Western Nationalism and the Islamic story are derivations of the Messianic story. They are competing for the same conceptual space, physical space, and economic space. But the West is filled with exhausted wells and exhausted stories. And we need to engage people with that.

### **The Narrative of the Liberal Campus**

Here is where the Secular Liberal Campus enters in, at least in the U.S. In South Africa, the racial legacy of Apartheid is being dealt with within the government, through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, because Christians like Bishop Desmond Tutu have been invited into national positions to have a national process based on Christian principles and allowing Christian people to publicly express their faith in the

reconciliation process. Christian faith has played similar roles in other countries. But the same is not true in the U.S. In the U.S., the government has never formally apologized for genocide, land seizure, slavery, or segregation. Instead, it pushed that discussion to the Secular Liberal Campus. That's why there is a felt tension between a mostly conservative government and the Secular Liberal Campus.

So in the secular liberal story, what is the problem? Oppression and injustice. What is God's role? God – or at least organized religion – is actually part of the problem. God – or organized religion – is what makes people ignorant, resistant to science, prejudiced, resistant to each other, so belief in God is one of the factors that causes conflict and war, in Christianity and Islam in particular. So what is our role, if we are secular liberals? It's to strip God out of people. It's to educate people out of the superstition. So let's look at this story.

The first tension of being the Secular Liberal Campus is that it says it teaches the truth, even though it sometimes doesn't want to. One of the implications of the Enlightenment atheist story is that organized religion started wars. So once we get rid of religion in general, we would have peace. We have all heard of this story. It claims to be a happy ending story. Yet it is not clear that atheism is leading us to a happy ending. Look at the 20<sup>th</sup> century: 108 million war-related deaths, starting with the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, World War I, World War II, Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot in Cambodia, North Korea, etc. That's more than the previous 19 centuries put together. And the cause of the 20th century deaths was nation-building and organized atheism. That's more than just a correlation. It's causal: atheism was national and rational; religion builds community in a way that is not just national, and supposedly irrational, so it weakens nation-states; in order to strengthen nation-states, you want people to become atheists. That's what many tried to do, which is why, in the 20th century, you have a lot of forced starvations, purges, genocides, and death by machete.

So secular humanism, or secular liberalism, tries to correct the trajectory of the larger atheist story. But can it? Before World War II, the secular humanists believed humanity was basically good, but afterwards, they thought they could no longer assert that, so they changed the Humanist Manifesto. And furthermore, secular liberalism doesn't seem to be effective in places like India where human rights are denied to the dalits, the untouchables. John Gray, Professor of European Thought at London School of Economics, for example, notes that secular humanism is a Christian heresy. It only arises in places that Christianity has been before, because human rights is an aspect of Christian faith, rooted in a God who loves and values every person. But Nietzsche said that if you cut the root, you lose the fruit. If you cut out a God who loves every person, how do you maintain the value of every person?

Which brings us to the second tension of being the Secular Liberal Campus, and back to race issues on campus. Does your campus really address race and justice? In the U.S., university campuses used to be part of the white power structure, but now they are advocates of racial justice? Even though they admit White students on the basis of legacy admissions so they can maintain a wealthy donor pool? Ironically, 'the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) found that, far from being more qualified or even equally qualified, the average admitted legacy at Harvard between 1981 and 1988 was significantly less qualified than the average admitted nonlegacy.' That comes from an article called *Why Are Doves of Unqualified, Unprepared Kids Getting into Our Top Colleges? Because Their Dads Are Alumni.*<sup>2</sup> So how can the Secular Liberal Campus really speak with integrity?

And the third tension of being the Secular Liberal Campus is that it can't persuade the careerists of something higher. Since Obama got elected, the number of racial incidents on campuses and everywhere else went up. At many campuses, there's an incident every year when someone has too much to drink, and it becomes a racial incident, like at Tufts in 2009. Or someone sprays racist graffiti, like at Trinity College in CT in 2008. And people then express all this outrage, but it feels more like a helpless outrage. Because we assume that more education would make people better, when educated bigots are around, we feel helpless and the story falls apart. Education doesn't seem to be enough. Often, having more education becomes part of the problem. If you think you're smart, you start looking down on other people. The

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<sup>2</sup> John Larew: *Why Are Doves of Unqualified, Unprepared Kids Getting into Our Top Colleges? Because Their Dads Are Alumni.* Washington Monthly, June 1991.

European Enlightenment thinkers thought they were smarter than everyone else. Perhaps the deeper problem with people is not that we need more information but that we need a change in human nature!

At Boston College, and probably other campuses, there are social justice speakers that come onto campus because someone invites them: speakers about repression in North Korea, sex trafficking in Cambodia, Latino immigration, and AIDS in Africa. And who comes? The same people over and over, because most people on campus are self-centered careerists who just live in their own stories. The Liberal Campus has no concrete challenge for the careerists. Study after study confirms that students who say they'll become civil rights lawyers doing lots of pro-bono work just become corporate lawyers.<sup>3</sup> Students who say they're 'idealists' who want to change the world become cogs in the machine maintaining the status quo. If you cut the root, you lose the fruit. And we're back to circularity.

### **The Narrative of Personal Narratives of Personal Advancement**

That brings us to the last story: the narrative of personal advancement. This is the person who looks at all the larger stories and says, 'I don't know about larger stories. I only know about my story.' So I still want to live in a happy ending story, and the problem I'm trying to beat is pain or boredom or loneliness. This is the person who blames other people, or looks around for fulfillment through a relationship or career. God, if God exists, is just a means to an end of personal happiness; and usually this person just wants God to provide inner peace, without ever challenging their finances, career, or sexuality.

But can this personal, individualist story deliver? How many of you have seen the movie *Office Space*? I worked for Intel Corporation in California and it was like *Office Space*. I graduated in 1994 from Stanford, and got a job at Intel during the high-tech boom when Intel stock was doubling every 18 months. You would think people were really excited about what they were doing in Silicon Valley in the 90's. But you'd be surprised. I worked in an internal management consulting group. We consulted all the major chip design projects, so the Pentium II, III, and IV – I worked on all those computer chips. It was so repetitive. Every week I had to collect the same data from the same database. I had to run the same analysis. I had to go to the same meetings and present the same basic information week after week. It was pretty boring. If you think you'll find ultimate meaning in work alone, I think you're fooling yourself. How do I know that? Because I majored in Industrial Engineering. I was trained professionally to make organizations efficient and independent of any one individual. That means that there are a lot of people with my training who deliberately organize your job as a routine, so that if you leave, someone else can take your place pretty easily. Really: You will become replaceable. Even if you're the CEO of something, you'll wonder, 'Why do I have this grueling travel schedule just fundraising and lobbying for my organization?' Well, it's because you can't be entrusted with too much, because even a CEO has to be replaceable. Circularity again.

I think this is true in other areas of life. If you put yourself first, I think you're shooting yourself in the foot. Because no one else will be as committed to you as you are. Even your future spouse will not be as committed to you as you are. So you're setting yourself up to be disappointed and pissed off at everyone else. The paradox of life is that you have to give your life to something larger than yourself, a larger story, in order to find real relationship, joy, and meaning. Otherwise, your life will be circular.

### **Coming Back to the Jesus Story**

The happy ending – will it happen to you? People have an opposition to the Jesus story because they live in some other story. They're oriented along some other plot line. They think they can bring a kind of salvation to the world or to themselves through some other way, and they are deeply invested in that plot. They are the main character, the Messiah, that story. That's where opposition to the Jesus story comes from.

I think it's impossible to have a happy ending to your story without Jesus. Whether I think about it personally or more broadly, the story of Jesus is the best story I know. On all kinds of levels and for all kinds of reasons. With Jesus, God has taken one more step to the happy ending. He is the hero, so the hero

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<sup>3</sup> Herant Katchadourian and John Boli, *Cream of the Crop: The Impact of Elite Education in the Decade After College*, Basic Books, 1994.

story is filled to the full with him. And yet he calls us alongside him to share in it. He is the one who needs to be seen for who he is, and he also sees us for who we are. He is the one who restores the family of God, and we, as we are brought in, and called to invite others as well. But most importantly, I am simply drawn to Jesus as a person. He has changed my life and my story, and I've found that it is far better to be a minor character in his story than to be the star in my own.

That's why people question their stories. They'll feel at points that their story is oppressive, or arbitrary, or just plain wrong. They feel like there is no hope in their story, just no happy ending to look forward to. That is the issue here, and now. You have the opportunity to SWITCH STORIES. Let me repeat that: I invite you to SWITCH STORIES. DO YOU THINK THERE'S SOME BETTER STORY OUT THERE???? Or, I invite you to reaffirm a choice you made earlier in your life, to truly live in God's story. Some of you try to live in more than one story fundamentally. Now of course on the level of practice, there is some overlap. I'm a Christian, and I value democracy but I'm not neo-conservative. I value education but I'm not a liberal secularist. I value having job skills but I don't live in the story of personal advancement. Fundamentally, I live in the Jesus story. And I want you to live in it, too. If you're trying to straddle stories, STOP IT. People are getting confused when they look at your life and listen to you. SO STOP DOING IT.

Another point to make here is about evangelism. If you are a Christian who feels embarrassed about evangelism, don't be. Everyone is an evangelist about something. Look at each of these categories. People in each camp believe something about evil and how to address it, so that's how they're doing it. They are the Messianic figure in each of these stories. I think the Christian response is the most effective and realistic, because we are not the Messiah! But if someone tells you that it's arrogant for Christians to do evangelism, just say, 'Look, everyone is an evangelist about something. We all want captives to go free in some form or fashion. We all think we have a story in which good triumphs over evil. It's just that I like Jesus a lot! I like him better than what you're offering.' So be straightforward, don't be embarrassed about Jesus, and call out other people's stories.

Step fully into the Jesus story. What other story could you live in that is more real and more awesome?