DISCUSSED | secularism, narrative, reason, modernity

Telling a Better Story: *Reasoning about God in A Secular Age* | BY ZANE G. YI

Is it possible to reason about belief in God in a secular age? We live in a time when belief in God is no longer, in many places, a cultural given. Secondly, and perhaps relatedly, we are increasingly aware of and sensitive to reason's limitations in the face of religious, cultural, and ethical plurality. In such times, it's tempting to react to these shifts by either *aggrandizing* or *abandoning* reason. One might pine for days when people were more reasonable, and rehash familiar arguments for or against God's existence. Or, alternatively, one could celebrate the demise of reason's hegemony, reveling in reality's unknowability. A philosopher who opts out of both extremes is Charles Taylor who, in his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, attempts to reason about belief in God by reasoning differently—by telling a better story.[1] In what follows, I want to examine his argument, clarifying both it and its significance.

The Inevitability of Master Narratives

One of Taylor's obvious goals is to offer a new master narrative of Western modernity; immediately, this gives rise to some legitimate reservations. Master narratives are comprehensive explanations of who we are, how we got here, and where we are going. One influential description of the times in which we live is as one characterized by a general "incredulity" toward master narratives.[2] This suspicion is based on a two-fold concern. One stems from how such narratives have been used to legitimate oppressive agendas that marginalize and brutalize others.

Beyond this, historians note that master narratives provide sweeping, generalized interpretations that seem much more interested in a *telos*, i.e. interpreting how events are leading to a certain goal, instead of providing an account of actual historical causality. This leads to overlooking important details, or forcing details to fit a pre-conceived narrative arch. So, instead of sweeping accounts of history on a macro-scale, academic historians today focus on studying specific people, events, or time periods.

Despite their misuses, abuses, and short-comings, it turns out that master narratives are unavoidable: "We all yield them, including those who claim to repudiate them," notes Taylor.[3] One reason for this persistence is psychological. As humans, we continue to draw on them because they shape our individual and communal sense of identity; where we've come from and where we are going. The stories we tell of our own lives are embedded in a sense, although not always explicit, of some grander arch (or, perhaps, collapsing of one).

Responding to the claim that the age of grand narratives is over, Taylor argues: "[T]he post-modern writers themselves are making use of the same trope in declaring the reign of narrative ended: ONCE we were into grand stories, but NOW we have realized their emptiness and we proceed to the next stage."[4] In other words, making such a claim involves a performative contradiction.

It turns out that opting out of the conversation leaves a vacuum eagerly filled by others unaware (or perhaps, sinisterly, fully aware) of the dangers of master narratives. As Thomas McCarthy points out, "it has proven dangerous to leave this field to those who misuse it."[5] Moral and intellectual responsibility, then, calls for telling *better* master narratives, rather than denying or ignoring them.

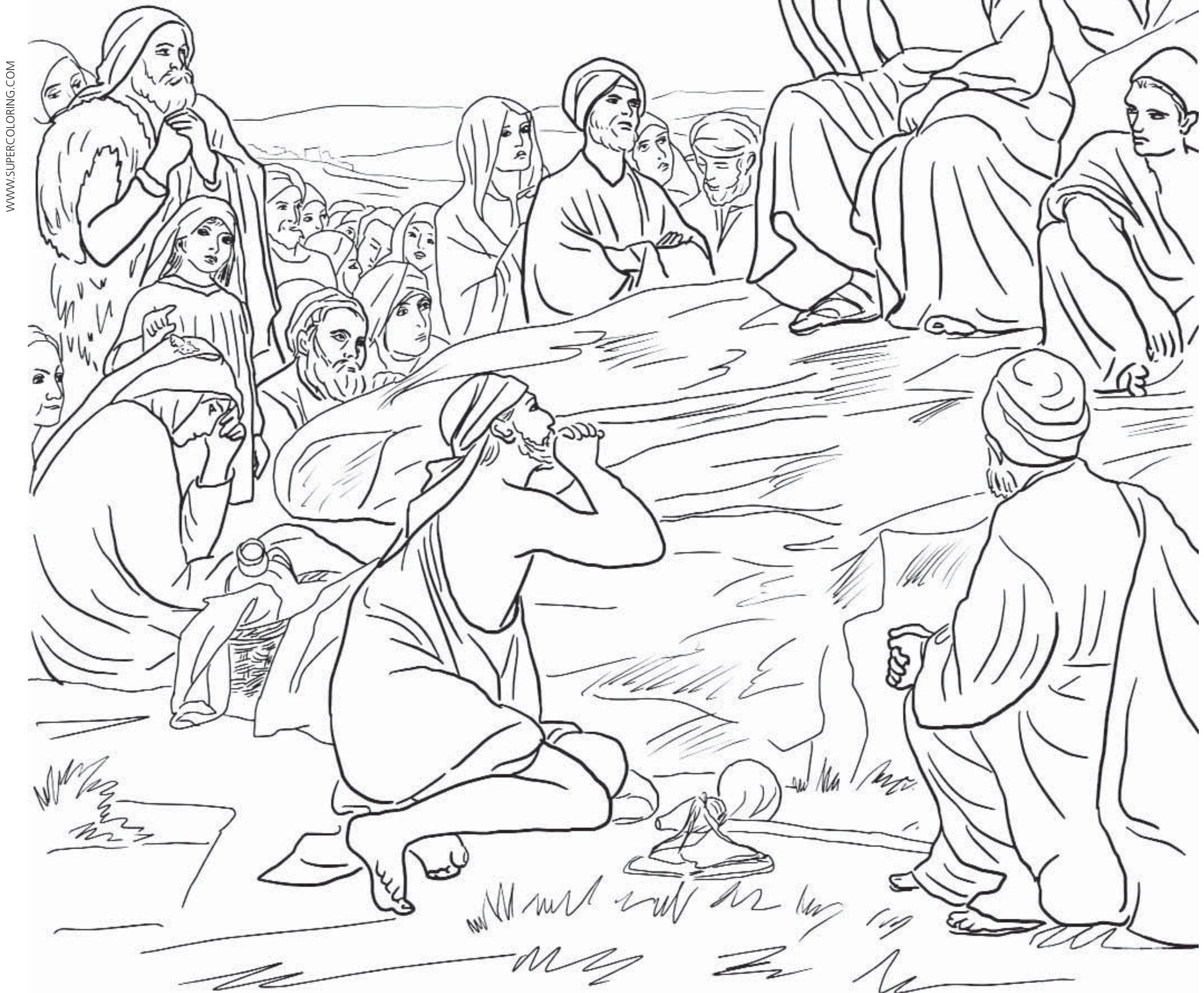
The Epistemic Significance of Master Narratives

Beyond these psychological and ethical considerations, however, master-narratives are also epistemically significant, and thus of special interest to philosophers like Taylor. Narratives shape our attitudes toward our beliefs. They can make beliefs seem more or less plausible in at least a couple of ways. First, certain beliefs can be viewed as a threat, or as aligning with one's personal identity and

values. Second, certain beliefs can be viewed as an epistemic regression or gain in relation to this master narrative. Narratives can also lend a sense of legitimacy for certain beliefs, making them seem obviously true or as an advance over previously held, but erroneous beliefs.

Narratives are epistemically significant at a more fundamental level. Narratives affect the experience of reality itself (rather than just beliefs about reality). This has been pointed out by philosophers working in the phenomenological tradition, who attempt to carefully describe and analyze human experience. Such analysis has shown that all experience has a temporal structure to it. According to Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, consciousness of an object at a given point also involves the consciousness of the experience that preceded it. This form of memory, called "retention," is distinct from explicit recollection. Take, for example, the experience of listening to a musical melody. Hearing a particular note involves an awareness of the note that preceded it, although, perhaps this may not be a focused awareness.

Furthermore, according to Husserl, perceptual



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experience also involves an expectation of what will happen next. He calls this "protention." To continue the analysis of listening to music, hearing the note of a melody involves the anticipation of the note that will follow it. Once again, as in the case of retention, this may not be explicit. The important point is that both retention and protention are constitutive of experience in the present. In other words, there is a temporal structure to experience. The idea of a 'pure' sequence of isolated events, as David Carr puts it, may be "thinkable or conceivable, but it is not experienceable."[6] Perception, at a fundamental level, has a "protentive-retentive" structure to it.

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Our experience of each moment is shaped by our sense of what has come before it and what will come after. One might argue that this awareness stretches both ways into the more distant past and future. This is why master narratives are so significant. They explain the past and forecast the future. Think about this on a personal level. One's confidence, or lack thereof, of their ability to tackle a challenge they are facing is shaped by the sense he or she has of the trajectory of their life. If it is one that is riddled with past failure and expected to end in similar fashion, one experiences the present circumstances as insurmountable or oneself as incapable. "I can't do it," one might conclude.

Both our experience of reality and beliefs about it are shaped by the narratives we tell or implicitly affirm. This includes experience or non-experience of the divine and belief or disbelief in God. According to Taylor, the general sense of history provided by "the subtraction story" often functions as an "unchallenged axiom"[7] that makes the claims of religion seem pre-reflectively implausible. He points out:

> *The narrative dimension is extremely important, because the [attitude many people have toward religion] comes less from the supposed detailed argument (that science refutes religion, or that Christianity is incompatible with human rights), and much more from the general form of the narratives, to the effect that there was once a time when religion could flourish, but that this time is past.*[8]

Subtraction stories of modernity refers generally to a variety of master narratives that share a similar structure, explaining religion to be part of a problematic past and modernity as being the result of a sustained process of progress over irrationality.[9] This can make belief in God seem antiquated and antithetical to intellectual and social progress. Such narratives also predict the decline and inevitable demise of religion. Obviously, if affirmed as true, such tales can shape one attitudes towards religion, generally, the beliefs associated with it, and even experience of reality itself; God really seems dead before I even begin thinking about it.

The Reform Master Narrative

So it seems that reasoning about belief in God today involves re-examining, contesting, and retelling the stories of how we got where we are. How did we become a society where belief in God is no longer a given? Although the length, scope, and details of Taylor's response to this question are daunting,[10] the basic thesis he advances is fairly simple: a significant, but unacknowledged, historical force driving Western secularization are the reform movements that originated in the late medieval ages. On this account, religion was a driving force behind secularism, rather than its opponent or victim.[11]

Taylor argues that secularism required a transformation in the way humans collectively thought of themselves; a new anthropology. Instead of viewing themselves as passive, "porous" subjects, embedded in a social or cosmic fabric, humans had to grow more confident in their abilities to create a flourishing social order, eventually coming to understand themselves as active, "buffered" agents.[12]

While Taylor acknowledges other important factors, i.e. Stoicism, Renaissance humanism, the scientific revolution, etc., he claims that Christian reform movements "which aimed to remake European society to meet the demands of the Gospel, and later of 'civilization'," played an essential role in making this new self-conception widely plausible.[13] Originally these reform

movements started out as attempts to improve monastic and clerical practice, but grew to include the laity as well. For example, in 1215, the Lateran Council demanded "a regime of moral and educational standards of the clergy; this was the first of numerous attempts to raise once-yearly confession, absolution and communion on all lay people."[14] Taylor's Foucauldian thesis is that these attempts gained momentum, resulting in more ambitious reform movements that attempted "to change the habits and life-practices, not only religious but civil, of whole populations; to instill orderly, sober, disciplines, productive ways of living in everyone."[15]

Over time, the relative success of these early reform movements picked up steam and became more ambitious. Attempts to reform movements started with the elites of society, but were eventually imposed on others. New initiatives of educating and "civilizing" the public were complemented by new laws. All this resulted in many individuals developing "disciplined, sober, and industrious" lives as a second-nature and an increased confidence in the human ability for self-transformation, as well as the transformation of society.[16]

This new found confidence culminates in a new understanding of human nature, one understood to be motivated by benevolence on a universal scale:

> *It [i.e. exclusive humanism] was accompanied by an increased sense of human power, that of the disengaged, impartial, ordering agent, or of the self-giver of law, or of an agent who could tap immense inner resources of benevolence and sympathy, empowering him/her to act for universal human good on an unprecedented scale.*[17]

Taylor claims that the creation/discovery of such moral sources is "one of the great realizations in the history of human development."[18]

All this leads eventually leads to the emergence and widespread acceptance of an ethical stance Taylor terms "exclusive humanism"; this is "a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything beyond this flourishing."[19] Ultimately, the result of these reform movements, originally motivated, ironically, by religious ideals, is that they created the conditions of possibility for a purely immanent understanding of reality. A secularized anthropology, it turns out, is the pre-cursor to a secularized view of reality, rather than vice versa.[20]

So one of Taylor's goals in offering this narrative is to correct what he takes to be significant oversight when it comes to the past. If Taylor's story is correct, Western secularism is the byproduct of a deeply religious past. It was Christian ideals, efforts, and impulses that originally motivated the drive to transform society and resulted in making it seem not only possible, but for many, the ultimate ethical *telos*.

But beyond correcting erroneous sweeps of history, Taylor is out to further complicate matters. Taylor's narrative continues to include an analysis of exclusive humanism's spread, as well as fracture, to generate new varieties of belief and unbelief, i.e. movements like Romanticism, existentialism, and Nietzschean anti-humanisms. These inevitably influence Christianity, which also morphs and melds into a plethora of new forms. As José Casanova points out, the reform master narrative avoids simple, cost-free claims of supersession. Taylor "pays equal attention to the grievous losses, the Christian self-mutilation, and the homogenizing conformity that accompanies the triumph of secularity…"[21] Christianity, because of its shared past with exclusive humanism, is fraught with gains, achievements, losses, costs, and tensions.

As humans, we continue to draw on them because they shape our individual and communal sense of identity; where we've come from and where we are going.

Evaluating Master Narratives

This is one of the reasons Casanova claims that Taylor's account is "the best analytic, phenomenological, and genealogical account" of modernity he is aware of.[22] The analysis informing Casanova's accolade, helps us understand ways one might go about evaluating master narratives (which, as has been pointed out, are not forms of historical scholarship). One can access them

by comparing them with one another.

There are four basic types of master narratives of modernity:[23]

1. the triumphant secularist progressive stories of enlightenment and emancipation from religious institutions and norms;
2. inverse negative philosophies of history, counter-Enlightenment narratives, traditionalist defenses of a lost normative age;
3. the positive identifications of secular modernity as a process of internal secularization and progressive institutionalization of Christian principles and norms; and
4. Nietzschean-derived critical genealogies of modernity, which question the legitimacy of the modern secular age because of its bastard Christian lineage.

Our experience of each moment is shaped by our sense of what has come before it and what will come after.

Subtraction stories, which Taylor is trying to challenge and displace, belong to the first group of narratives. Taylor's reform narrative, however, cannot be classified as belonging clearly to the latter three categories. His account is distinct from the second type of narrative offered, for example, by Alasdair MacIntyre[24] or John Milbank,[25] who both put forth largely negative assessments of modernity. Although, like Nietzsche, Taylor's account acknowledges that the ethical ideals of modernity are derived from religious/Christian roots, he does not see this as being problematic.[26] Taylor's narrative comes closest, perhaps, to the third type of narrative, yet is distinct because of the way it incorporates the valid insights of each of the other three accounts, and avoids their one-sided over-simplifications.

In addition to comparison, another way to one might evaluate a master narrative is indicated by Robert Bellah, another prominent sociologist of religion, who identifies three major defects that characterize most master narratives.[27]

1. There is the tendency by those who offer them to draw radical dichotomies—"us" versus "them," civilization versus barbarism, etc.
2. This dichotomy can be drawn temporally between earlier and later points in history, with one's own culture or position representing a higher degree of development or progress than others.
3. Past or present injustices are justified as the necessary preconditions of a better future.

A master narrative might, thus, be evaluated by examining whether it avoids or exemplifies these characteristics. It seems that Taylor makes concerted efforts to avoid these defects with his narrative; the reform master narrative avoids radical dichotomies, progressive views of history, or justifications of past injustices. On the other hand, many subtraction stories exemplify the defects pointed out by Bellah. So, beyond meeting the minimal standard of plausibility, Taylor's reform master narrative avoids the negative characteristics traditionally associated with this genre, and when compared to more simplistic subtraction stories, can be affirmed, for this reason, as being qualitatively superior.

Telling Better Master Narratives

Through this engagement with Taylor, I have tried to clarify a way of reasoning about belief in God in an age where such belief is no longer a given and the powers of reason are contested—by telling better stories. There are numerous reasons to revise or reject a subtraction story of modernity if one affirms a version of it in light of the reform master narrative; regardless of what one views are on this particular matter, Taylor models a way to tell better stories generally. The master narratives we use about other matters are often fraught with some of the defects Bellah identifies and Taylor avoids—we make clean distinctions between "us" and "them", identifying our views as a higher form of development/progress than others, and even justifying our own problematic policies and (non-)actions in light of this narrative. Such narratives close us off from others, and ultimately, reality.

This being the case, in order to make further

progress in our pursuit of truth, rather than just providing direct arguments for or against various viewpoints on a given topic, we have to learn to tell better stories: messier ones—ones that, like the one Taylor offers, may highlight contributions and advances, but avoid simple, cost-free claims of supersession. We can learn, paraphrasing Casanova, to "pay equal attention to the grievous losses, the self-mutilation, and the homogenizing conformity" that accompanies our own histories. Ones fraught with gains, achievements, losses, costs, and tensions.

The details of what such a story might look like will differ amongst individuals and communities, but would, in the end, be ones that would not only be more believable when shared, but most likely closer to the truth. ■

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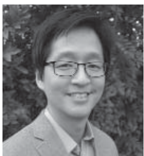

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1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

2. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Post-modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), xxiv.

3. Taylor, 573.

4. Ibid., 717. Emphases are in the original.

5. Thomas McCarthy in *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge, 2009), 42–68.

6. David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Indianapolis, 1986), 24.

7. Taylor, 590.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 569–580. Take, for example, the recent best seller by Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, 2007).

10. According to one commentator, who captures the feeling of many who attempt to seriously engage Taylor's 851-page work, "the book evokes the same sort of awe and bewilderment that we might feel about a map of the world that was the same size as the world." See Christopher J. Insole, "Informed Tolerance: How to Deal with Disagreements about Truth in an Age of Fragmented Realities," Review of *A Secular Age*, by Charles Taylor, *Times Literary Supplement* (February 1, 2008): 3–5.

11. The term "secularism" can be used to refer to the decline of religious beliefs and behaviors or, socio-politically, to refer to the decline of the role and prominence of religious institutions in the public sphere. Taylor uses it in a third, epistemic sense, one where theism is no longer a given. See Taylor, 1–3.

12. Ibid., 27. A "porous" understanding of the self is the view that humans are vulnerable to external spirits and powers.

13. Ibid., 61.

14. On the significance of this council, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), 58, 116.

15. Taylor, 244.

16. Ibid., 228.

17. Ibid., 261–262.

18. Ibid., 255.

19. Ibid., 18.

20. For a similar, and more recent account of modernity see, Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

21. Jose Casanova, "A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight," *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2013), 268.

22. Ibid., 266.

23. Ibid., 267.

24. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, 1984).

25. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 2006).

26. See also David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, 2010).

27. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2011), 597–600. Bellah cites Thomas McCarthy in *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 42–68.

28. Casanova, 268.

This new found confidence culminates in a new understanding of human nature, one understood to be motivated by benevolence on a universal scale.