

**Book Review Essay by Benjamin L. Hartley:
Robert E. Webber, *Who Gets to Narrate the World? Contending for the Christian Story in an Age of Rivals*, Intervarsity Press, 2008.**

The image of Professor Webber that remains etched in my mind from my student days at Wheaton College in the late 1980s is of a man with a bullhorn at a student protest. This book is the literary equivalent to that bullhorn, and it deserves to be heard even if it is prone to overstatement and sometimes fails to consider important factors in our narration of the Story at this point in history.

This short book is a cry from the heart for Christians to remember that they are part of a dynamic and powerful story – God’s narrative. This narrative, Webber rightly points out, is often reduced to sound-bites of privatized “principles” which fail to adequately shape Christian disciples. For this reason, some readers will be tempted to skim the very first chapter that introduces this “cosmic dimension” of God’s story out of a belief that they already know this story and an eighteen-page rehearsal of it is a waste of time. That would be precisely the wrong response. Webber’s life of teaching, writing, and living was and is a testimony to the importance of rehearsing, remembering, and embodying God’s story as Christian disciples. Read carefully, one will hear the Christian story in new ways through this book and be better prepared to resist the idolatries of modernity and post-modernity that Webber rightly condemns.

The book is not without its problems, however. For starters, I was concerned with the way the book framed the problem as one of rivalry between the classical Christian story and Radical Islam. To be sure, there is much to be deeply troubled by with regard to Radical Islam and Webber mostly explains this well. Too many readers, however, may equate “Radical Islam” with “all Muslims” even though Webber warns his readers

not to do so in the introductory chapter. Webber's uncritical adoption of the worldview promoted by Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* does not help either.

Huntington's text is too simplistic in its vision of a bi-polar world. The complexities of cultural interaction caused by migration movements – to name just one problem with the Huntington thesis – simply must be more carefully considered.

Finally, I was struck by how little attention Webber paid to the world Pentecostal movement or even to world Christianity in general. Empirically speaking, Pentecostals more than any other group of Christians are the ones who *are* narrating the world by the sheer magnitude of their numbers and rapid growth. The bullhorn is in their hands on busy street corners from Sao Paulo to Manila. American Christians would be wise to listen carefully to how God's story is being narrated by Pentecostals. That too will give us cause for both celebration and concern.

The book would be a good fit for a variety of local church study groups. Each chapter concludes with both a short list of books for further reading as well as exceptionally well-crafted summary "bullet points." Readers who are looking for philosophical speculation about post-modernity will find the book wanting, but Webber would have it no other way. It is the rich history and liturgy of the Christian church that points the way forward.