BECOMING AWARE

IN THE FALL OF 2012, I introduced a new course at Indiana University called “Pleasure, Pain, and Peak Oil.” I created this course after spending a few months immersed in the distressing literature on global resource depletion and climate change. The class is centered on the question of what it means to live “the good life” in an era of energy descent and impending catastrophic climate disruption. The reference to pleasure and pain is meant to highlight what I see as a pressing need to reevaluate our culture’s dominant
notions of happiness and convenience—or what Rob Dietz aptly calls “the tyranny of comfort” in our lives (2011). What are we sacrificing in order to maintain the status quo of our supposedly good lives? How did our culture arrive at the insane proposition that the convenience of, say, the single occupancy vehicle outweighs the value of vital local communities or a habitable planet for our children? No more mincing words. I wanted this course to get right to the heart of the matter. You may think a course like this sounds heavy-handed or doctrinaire, and you might have a point. But I have come to believe that these are some of the most important questions we should be asking ourselves in the academic community, and, indeed, in every community. All available evidence points to the conclusion that the future is not going to resemble the past, in terms of economic opportunities or the stability of the planetary biosphere. We owe it to younger generations to hold a frank conversation about this reality.

The period that I spent acquainting myself with the phenomenon of peak oil1 was a dark time for me, and for those in close proximity to me. I existed in a state of constant disaster preparedness, of quasi-survivalist mobilization, from which I have not fully recovered. At home, I would follow my husband from room to room, keeping up a tedious monologue about solar panels and rain barrels; transition towns and task forces; woodstoves and food security. I read up on seed-banking, chicken- raising, and general re-skilling. It was overwhelming. My stomach was in tatters. Friends and family had begun to regard me as something like a cult member—a prepper, a doomer.2

And so I am. My experience will sound familiar to many peak oil believers.” Discussions of peak oil routinely rehearse the similarities between the process of becoming “peak oil aware” and the stages of grief. Most of us remain mired in denial, according to the literature, but for those who push past the initial stages, the trauma can be so acute that it has garnered the attention of therapists, a subset of whom now devote

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1Peak oil refers to the point in time when global production of oil reaches its maximum rate, after which production will decline. However, here, as in my course, I intend “peak oil” to refer to peaking resources generally, as well as the recent application of new methods of extracting unconventional sources such as oil sands, deep sea drilling, or shale gas and oil recovered through hydraulic fracturing—methods we are now turning to as sources that are more easily and cheaply accessed begin to decline. These energy developments are inextricably bound up with climate change, because continuing to tap into new (or declining) sources locks us into catastrophic climate scenarios.

2One peak oil prophet offers a short YouTube video about how to have “the peak oil conversation” with your current love interest who may not share your beliefs. He advises broaching the subject early in the relationship—“Give ’em one more chance, watch The End of Suburbia” with them—and then parting ways if your partner fails to get on board with your agenda. I share this video with my class—it is important to throw in a little humor—but I certainly appreciate the serious point. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hc_9bAkiRw (accessed September 10, 2014).
themselves to helping individuals and couples cope with the psychological impact of peak oil. Conscious of these impacts, I have built into my syllabus an open and minimally therapeutic discussion of the psychology of peak oil and climate change—denial, anger, grief, hope, action. In my own experience, it is a cycle that never ends.

Happily for me and my disaster plan, my university is located in Bloomington, Indiana, an officially recognized Transition Town. The Transition Town movement originated as a grassroots endeavor in the United Kingdom in the early 2000s, where it was popularized by a group of permaculture experts. It aims to prepare communities for the daunting challenge of transitioning to a postcarbon future. In 2007, the Bloomington Common Council, with the support of our mayor, passed a resolution establishing a Peak Oil Task Force. Charged with assessing the town’s vulnerability to energy instability and climate disruption, the Task Force outlined strategies to protect and strengthen the community in the face of an uncertain future (Bloomington Peak Oil Task Force 2009). Bloomington boasts a large and vibrant farmers market; a strong commitment to community gardens and local food is evident, on and off campus. Bicycle awareness and cycling infrastructure are gaining attention and resources here. Indiana remains a coal-fired state, but there are reasons to be hopeful in Bloomington, and I try to steer my students toward some of the brighter spots. Students in my course engage in service learning activities that connect them, in a direct and hands-on way, with a range of issues that are central to community resilience and the themes of the class: food production, waste management, energy consumption; transportation, travel, and leisure options; historic preservation; and local economic vitality. Covering these topics with any credibility is a tall order for someone trained in religious ethics—even environmental ethics—so I incorporate guest lectures from colleagues in a variety of disciplines, as well as local sustainability leaders.

I have been teaching and writing about environmental ethics for about fifteen years, and have identified as an “environmentalist” for most of my life. Bloomington has been my home, as a student and later a faculty member, for the better part of thirty years. I am dug in. So it is surprising that only with the onset of my peak oil obsession did I truly begin to connect with Bloomington and Indiana University’s sustainability movement in a way that went beyond the detached, cerebral engagement we often cultivate and reward in our profession. In the last

couple of years, I have worked closely with my university’s Office of Sustainability, an institution of which—it shames me to admit—I had been only peripherally aware. I have joined other weary foot soldiers in a painfully slow, long-overdue effort to establish an interdisciplinary BA in environmental studies at my university. I have clumsily assumed improbable roles—leading faculty workshops on sustainability curriculum, for example—for which I am ill-suited by training and (somewhat asocial) temperament. Despite the difficulties, these developments have been transformative, personally and professionally. I have gained a lot of respect for people in my community who do things with their hands, and not just with their big brains. (As Wendell Berry has often lamented, university culture—the much-vaunted life of the mind—encourages little appreciation for what we might call the life of the hand.) The gap between what I believe and what I actually do—or ask my students to do—has narrowed a little. Granted, I remain all too tethered to the grid. Nevertheless, I feel like something important has changed.

For better and for worse, the last few years have brought me face to face with the power of fear—my own fear, certainly, but also that of other environmentalists. In my peak oil course, we spend a lot of time talking about the key motivators of change, both on the individual and societal level. Does fear motivate people or does it only induce greater denial? Is sacrifice the wrong way to frame calls for change? When does hope actually become obstructionist? Looking back, it is clear to me that fear, far more than hope, was significant in motivating me to set some new priorities. I worry about the noticeably ideological turn my fear-fueled thoughts have taken—the way in which a sustained orientation to crisis can engender an insular, oppressive atmosphere; the tendency of ideology to take on a life of its own. I have also become more aware of similar developments in the broader discipline in which I work. For the remainder of this article, then, I take up the question (as opposed to the answer) of how, as scholars and community members, we might begin to respond to a crisis of this magnitude. In order to illustrate what is disconcerting about certain aspects of an emerging environmental discourse, I turn to two responses to impending crisis with which I am especially familiar.

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4See, among his other works, Berry (2000) which mounts a scathing critique of Edward O. Wilson’s vision of “consilient” interdisciplinary education and the modern university.

5For a fascinating discussion of peak oil as a quasi-religious, apocalyptic movement, see Schneider-Mayerson (2013).
TRANSITIONING

The first example brings us back to the Transition Town movement, in a roundabout way. Many environmentalists (not just Transition advocates) view the environmental crisis as a product of our dysfunctional cultural myths or narratives. A prime example is the narrative of infinite growth and progress that undergirds our consumption patterns and is currently propelling us into disastrous climate change. The role of storytelling is crucial, as Rob Hopkins notes, and we need to get our stories right: “Our dominant cultural stories speak of the ability of technology and human inventiveness to overcome challenge, and of perpetual economic growth, unfettered by living on a finite planet. In these less certain times, we need better and more appropriate stories” (2008: 229). It was precisely these prevailing and wrongheaded myths of the good life that I wanted my peak oil course to challenge. My plan, or so I thought, was not so much to present or promote an appropriate counter-narrative _myself_ as to create the kind of forum in which students could examine the conventional wisdom about growth, progress, consumption, convenience, etc., and articulate their own visions of a good life. But somewhere along the way, I experienced a vague uneasiness. I was bothered by certain portraits of future, “post-peak” societies—even (perhaps especially) those proffered as hopeful visions, as opposed to the dystopian or apocalyptic visions often found in fiction or film. The Transition movement is a self-consciously upbeat, energetic, optimistic alternative to the sort of doom-and-gloom reportage characteristic of peak oil prophets like Richard Heinberg.6 Hopkins, who pioneered Transition, repeatedly stresses the joyful and creative dimensions of collectively envisioning a better future and taking steps to make it a reality. There are a great many things I admire about the Transition agenda. However, the proffered visions of postpeak life (as well as some real-world success stories of community transition) often present us with communities that seem disturbingly homogenous and uniform, particularly in terms of the intellectual and spiritual landscape of the culture, but also with regard to particulars such as the range of occupations or vocational interests its inhabitants pursue.

Hopkins, for example, presents a vision of postpeak communities in the year 2030 (2008: 104). His optimistic portrait is fairly comprehensive, describing, or prescribing, not just the expected changes in food procurement, energy infrastructure, or urban design, but also a complete overhaul of education, including university education. Reading this, my

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6Heinberg has produced a steady stream of ominous-sounding titles on peak oil and economic collapse: _The Party’s Over, The End of Growth, Power Down, Blackout_, and _Peak Everything._
students were troubled, as was I, by two features of this postpeak community. They were not happy about the predicted loss of travel to distant places in a world drained of cheap and abundant oil. Rightly, and to their credit, they worried not only about lack of leisure opportunities, but also about the cultural ignorance and insularity that might ensue with so many people so closely tied to a regional existence. Many were also disturbed by the description of university education in the world of 2030. Essentially, universities would reinvent themselves as hubs of vocational training—centers of the “Great Reskilling,” in the phrase of Transition advocates. Here students would learn the finer points of farming, woodworking, sewing, solar panel manufacture, chisel sharpening—as well as a bit of “conflict resolution” (watch out for those sharpened chisels!) (Hopkins 2008: 111). It makes sense that a low energy existence would entail greater reliance on our hands and bodies. It is easy to imagine a continuing role for the sciences—or at least their practical application—in a postpeak society intent on ramping up innovative, sustainable agriculture and appropriate technology. But where were the historians and philosophers in Hopkins’ world of 2030? The religion scholars and artists? What of the novelists or journalists, the cultural critics? There is no mention of these individuals, their training, or their value. A transition of this magnitude, it seems to me, would surely demand and absorb the talents and expertise of a whole wave of academics and intellectuals (professional or otherwise) eager to document, analyze, fictionalize, criticize, theorize—or openly dissent from—the prescriptive details of what transitioners call The Great Turning.

As Todd LeVasseur notes in his introduction to this roundtable, a lower energy future will likely mean that academics cannot continue business as usual. It now appears likely that many of our current practices—jetting around the globe to conferences or research sites, or recruiting university students from long distances—may cease to be tenable in the not-so-distant future. Many campuses or research sites, as LeVasseur predicts, may become damaged or inaccessible due to the effects of climate change and geopolitical upheaval. Perhaps some of our extravagant habits should go by the wayside. Still, we can hope, and I do hope, that books and lectures with lively, robust intellectual content will continue to flow from these modified centers of learning—and that the writers and lecturers will not be speaking in one voice. We can hope, in other words, that the university as we know it will not be wholly displaced by Trade Schools of the Grand Narrative—vocational hubs dispensing Transition ideology, in the form of “appropriate stories” specially crafted for the chastened citizenry of a postpeak world. I do not disdain trade schools. I support learning-by-doing and I think that practical skills and
community engagement should be integrated into all facets of university education. Moreover, society can and should arrive at some agreement regarding the definition and implementation of appropriate technology. But appropriate storytelling? No, thank you. I prefer to choose my own texts.

Transitioning to a postcarbon society will call on the wisdom of a diverse range of thinkers and actors as its members navigate the rocky shoals of the transition and whatever lies beyond. Am I being unfair to enthusiasts such as Hopkins and his postpeak university? He does not appear to lament the loss of these disciplines, any more than do many university presidents nowadays. Probably, the most likely candidate—currently in existence—of what a Transition university might look like is Schumacher College. Located near the original transition town of Totnes (Devon, UK), Schumacher teaches “Buddhist economics” and offers postgraduate degrees in “Holistic Science.” The college web site boasts, somewhat paradoxically, that its students “immerse [themselves] in the richness and diversity of like-minded students coming from across the globe.” Faculty members appear to be rather like-minded as well. Schumacher’s recent course offerings include “The Economics of Happiness” (focusing in part on the Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan) and “Journey of the Universe—a New Story for Our Times,” led by religion scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim.

WHAT PRICE HAPPINESS?

This brings me directly to my second example. Turning to some of the transition town success stories, we find some similar models of insular—or generally oppressive—cultures on offer. The Kingdom of Bhutan is lauded by Transition advocates, and critics of the growth economy, for its commitment to sustainability and cultural preservation. Bhutan has gained

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8A much-touted example of transition success is the story of Cuba’s peak oil crisis, following the end of Soviet subsidization of Cuba in the 1990s. Cubans refer to this time as the “Special Period.” Cuba has a more multiethnic population than Bhutan (discussed above), but it is not the ideal agrarian paradise that transition advocates sometimes claim it to be. While Cuba’s transition to organic farming and dramatically reduced consumption was spurred by grassroots efforts, harsh austerity measures and strict rationing were enforced by a sometimes repressive socialist machinery (food rationing continues to this day). The darker side of Cuba’s transition, and its undesirability (or inapplicability) as a model of transition, is downplayed in a documentary endorsed by transition advocates, The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil. Clearly, politics (and religion) play a huge role in determining how a given society will weather the shocks of peak oil and climate change. These are issues in which more academics ought to take an interest; doing so requires taking these scenarios seriously rather than imagining the United States as immune to them.
considerable fame in environmental circles owing to its implementation of Gross National Happiness in place of standard indicators like the Gross Domestic Product that measure rates of production and consumption rather than (critics say) genuine well-being and happiness. A documentary film, *The Economics of Happiness*, showcases Bhutan’s efforts to ward off the destructive impacts of globalization by holding fast to a harmonious vision of society rooted in shared values and a more holistic assessment of well-being than GDP offers. Bhutan’s economy is intended to serve the country’s Buddhist spiritual values and to preserve its natural beauty. Gross National Happiness is built upon four “pillars” that reflect these commitments: sustainable development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of cultural values, and good governance.9

I have screened *The Economics of Happiness* in my class and even led a public discussion of the film at my university. As with the Transition movement generally, there are many important insights to be gleaned from Bhutan’s articulation of the good life and its rejection of the growth economy. With Bhutan as one case study, the film makes a compelling argument for the psychological, ecological, and cultural benefits of economic localization in contrast to the many destructive consequences of our deregulated global economy. A number of surveys taken in different countries suggest that increases in income do not correlate with increases in self-reported happiness, once people’s basic needs are met (Layard 2006). The Bhutanese seem to understand this. But Bhutan is no fairy-tale kingdom. The country’s religious and ethnic minorities, notably the Lhotshampa (ethnic Nepalese who practice Hinduism), have been subject to systematic discrimination—forced to speak Bhutanese and to wear traditional Bhutanese dress, and forbidden from creating their own temples and media outlets. Many were coerced into signing migration forms and others have fled as refugees to India or the United States. Though Bhutan became a constitutional democracy in 2008, the government has not extended full civil rights to all the Lhotshampa or allowed all who were expelled to return. Bhutan has managed to promote social cohesion and to preserve a dominant narrative that sustains its cultural and environmental heritage—but at what cost? Transition advocates, it seems to me, rarely ask this question.

Suffice it to say, I have acquired some critical distance on Transition Towns and the blissful Bhutanese. I now encourage a far more critical approach in my students—though I have not revised and have no intention

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9See, for example, “GNH Centre Bhutan,” [http://media.gnhcentrebhutan.org/four-pillars-9-domains/](http://media.gnhcentrebhutan.org/four-pillars-9-domains/).
of revising my presentation of what I take to be the alarming facts about energy depletion and climate change. Some of my students now lament that the course is “even-handed” in its presentation of solutions to our crisis. I consider that a promising sign. A principal reason that I became troubled by the homogenous, somewhat monistic portrait of community life depicted in some of my course materials was this: it finally dawned on me that these visions of a postpeak culture guided by better and more appropriate, consensus-driven narratives bore certain parallels to a set of religious environmental movements about which I have been making some critical observations (Sideris 2013). In order to explain what I mean, and why I think it matters, I turn to one final story from my personal and professional archives. I hope it is clear that I offer this story as a cautionary tale about the need for open, diverse, critical scholarly inquiry, even—especially—in these times of impending crisis and uncertainty.

ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT CONSENSUS

A target of my own scholarly criticisms is a constellation of movements that variously go by names such as The Universe Story, The Epic of Evolution, The New Story, or The Great Story (and sometimes Big History).10 Through a variety of media—books, films, web sites, podcasts, YouTube videos—these movements present a grand scientific narrative of cosmogenesis—the unfolding of the universe, from the moment of the Big Bang to the present—as a modern sacred story and orienting narrative for all people. However differentiated, rather than monolithic, this cluster of movements may appear to those working within them, each of these initiatives undertakes a project of religiopoesis—the crafting of a new religion grounded in a myth that comprehensively explains our origins and destiny.11 I am well aware that advocates of the new cosmology may attempt to deflect critiques such as mine by claiming that they conflate distinct approaches; however, it is incumbent upon those who promote the new cosmology to clarify their projects’ foundational assumptions and to specify where and in what ways their approaches differ importantly vis-à-vis one another, if in fact they differ. I also want to

10Iterations of the new cosmology have been crafted by disciples of the cultural historian Thomas Berry, notably, Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker (2011) who see deep cultural significance in Big Bang cosmology. Epic of Evolution proponents who draw from evolutionary paradigms, among other sources (including, sometimes, Berry), include Rue (2000), Barlow (1997), Goodenough (1998), and Dowd (2007). Big History is promoted by Christian (2004). For a more detailed discussion, see Sideris (2013).

11See Sideris (2013) for more detail on the links between these initiatives.
reiterate that my objection is not to engaged scholarship but to the narrowing of forms of engagement to one particular mode and vision.

Proponents of these new narratives argue that environmental neglect is perpetuated by traditional narratives that undermine the value of the physical world and, for a variety of reasons, have ceased to be functional myths in the finite and fragile world we actually inhabit. The hope is that a new, functional cosmology will align us with the scientific realities of our universe and planet; properly inspired by a sense of belonging to this grand and true narrative, we will live more sustainably on earth. Some of these advocates are at the forefront of efforts to reform education along lines suggested by the new scientific cosmology. Their educational philosophy calls for a whole new kind of university built around a core narrative that effectively grounds the curriculum. Thus, biologist Ursula Goodenough and philosopher of religion Loyal Rue argue for a consilient college curriculum that introduces students to the Epic of Evolution as the integrating theme of their entire university experience. “This Epic of Evolution is the biggest of all pictures, the narrative context for all our thinking about who we are, where we have come from, and how we should live” (Rue and Goodenough 2009: 180). A number of universities—not just outliers like Schumacher College, but institutions such as Harvard University and Washington University in St. Louis—offer courses on The Epic of Evolution or The Universe Story. These courses introduce students to an overarching narrative, an all-encompassing cosmology whose meanings are largely given in advance, whose options for student self-understanding are essentially pre-scripted: “One world calls for one story” (Rue and Goodenough 2009: 181).

12 Typically, the “western” or “Abrahamic” traditions are considered particularly problematic. Thomas Berry is one of the original sources of the call for new narratives, though proposals for a functional cosmology or new myth now appear in a variety of permutations, some of which combine Berry’s ideas with insights gleaned from modern science, whether Big Bang cosmology, sociobiology, or evolutionary psychology (Berry 1978).

13 This idea too was suggested earlier by Thomas Berry who repeatedly argued for a unified paradigm of universe education at the college level. “The entire college project can be seen as that of enabling the student to understand the immense story of the universe and the role of the student in creating the next phase of the story” (Berry 1988: 98).

14 Consilient curriculum refers to E. O. Wilson’s book, Consilience (1998) in which Wilson proposes that all the disciplines will ultimately unite to form a seamless, unified body of knowledge. Wilson coined the phrase “Epic of Evolution” in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book On Human Nature (1978), proposing that the evolutionary epic is the best myth we will ever have.

15 Examples and discussions of curricular integration of the Universe Story/Epic of Evolution can be found here: http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/conference-at-yale/. For yet another recent example of a university curriculum that combines elements of “Big History” with screenings of Journey of the Universe, see http://nchronline.org/news/people/california-college-helps-place-humans-universe-story.
Proponents of this new cosmology routinely disavow any intention to displace the traditional religions with consecrated science, even as they predict that the particularity or dysfunctionality or lack of realism of existing religious stories will likely be their downfall. We pay the old stories “respect,” Brian Swimme explains, while acknowledging that they have been “surpassed.” The existing traditions cannot be expanded into a global myth; they cannot tell “everybody’s story” (Rue 2000). The old stories may retain some status as quaint relics, narrative throwbacks to a less enlightened time. But now “a new integrating story has emerged,” one that “changes everything” we know and believe about who we are and even how we should live (Swimme and Tucker 2011: 2–5). One of my concerns is that enthusiasm for this new, “functional” myth may shade into intolerance toward existing traditions, as suggested by Swimme’s assertion that their narratives have been surpassed or by Rue’s harsher disparagement of the world religions as creating a “hemorrhage of diversity” (2000: 38).

That these projects and their underlying ethos perpetrate a closed ideology is also vehemently denied by proponents. In public presentations and published materials on the Epic of Evolution and the Universe Story, or screenings of the accompanying film Journey of the Universe, adherents often present it as a modest offering, a conversation starter. Yet the unspoken assumption would appear to be that in times of crisis and uncertainty, it is imperative that society conform to a unified discourse and shared narrative. Even scholarly discourse within the field of religion and ecology (distinct from “religion and nature”) may have to bend to the new scientific-spiritual narrative. This point was recently driven home

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16 In Swimme’s supersessionist account, religious narratives and empirical scientific accounts perform essentially the same function, and the old stories simply cannot compete: “The stories of the past we regard as important, and we pay a lot of respect to them but we know that they don’t actually give us a careful, accurate depiction of the universe. We’ve surpassed that level of knowledge that we had at that time.” See Swimme (2006), “The New Story” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Tykk_0ov10 (accessed September 10, 2014).

17 Again advocates will claim that, as a meta-myth, their narrative allows room for diverse interpretations, but a significant degree of cultural conformity and homogenization seems inevitable, and perhaps desirable, in the society they envision. Often the degree of desired conformity corresponds to the intensity of the apocalyptic vision of the future.

18 Here, I mean to distinguish “religion and ecology” from “religion and nature.” The former signals initiatives such as the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology which aims, through numerous publications and conferences (notably those hosted by the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University), to “mine” the major world religions for green resources and sustainable lifeways. As Bron Taylor notes, “Within the wider American Academy of Religion, critics of the religion and ecology group have argued that religion and ecology scholars are more engaged in green religion and ‘missionary’ work than in scholarly analysis” (2005: 1374). A number of religion and ecology scholars promote the consecration of scientific narratives such as the Universe Story inspired by Thomas Berry. By “religion and nature,” I mean to designate initiatives such as the establishment
to me when I presented a lecture that raised pointed questions about this new cosmology and its agenda. My lecture was drawn from a book-length project, a critical assessment of these and other movements that has occupied me for the past few years. The forum, organized by Universe Story enthusiasts, included several prominent religion scholars, many of whom write as green apologists for the world traditions. All of them spoke eloquently and passionately, to a decidedly elite audience, about the striking parallels and remarkable affinities between the traditional world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism, and Confucianism, among others—and the new cosmology as revealed by up-to-date science. The idea that there might be tensions or inconsistencies among the traditional stories, or between those stories and the new scientific narrative, was not seriously entertained (my own remarks notwithstanding). Nor were any qualms whatsoever raised about the proposition that science can and should provide an overarching narrative and normative, universal framework.

The full suite of lectures was videotaped and archived on a web site that promotes the Universe Story and its associated products (books, lectures, films)—or rather, all but mine are archived there, mine having been cut from the lineup before the lectures were posted.\textsuperscript{19} I should not be surprised by this outcome, a fellow lecturer at the conference later explained to me, given that the objective of the web site is to promote the project, and my lecture was not in the spirit of uncritical promotion. Moreover, I

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\textsuperscript{19}As of March 2015, my lecture (which took place in June 2013) had not been posted. See http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org/conference-at-chautauqua/. Videotaped interviews with all other conference speakers were also conducted at the conference site and are posted on the web site for the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, http://fore.research.yale.edu/multimedia/conversations-on-religion-and-ecology/. I want to stress that the details and merits of my critique are far less important than the point I wish to make here about these efforts to impose uniformity and cover over disagreement. However, I do think the response my criticisms engendered lends additional support to the very points I have raised. The lecture is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78A3DBNWGI4 for anyone interested in assessing its merits.
was told, the venue in which I presented those critiques was not a scholarly one and thus not appropriate for critical engagement.  

Attempts to impose conformity and erase critique seem to me part and parcel of the atmosphere of crisis and uncertainty regarding the future of the planet and the most efficient means of averting disaster. As some scholars have noted, a distinctly apocalyptic tone set the stage for the Harvard series on *Religions of the World and Ecology*. The series foreword asserts that the “human community” as a whole is searching for a new relationship to nature “amidst an environmental crisis that threatens the very existence of all life-forms on the planet” (Tucker and Grim 1997: vi). It is accurate, I think, to view ourselves as headed toward environmental catastrophe (if not wholesale extinction of all forms of life, which seems unlikely in the near future). However—and this is my point—*what we do* with this frightening perception is something about which we should all speak and write more openly and honestly. I agree with environmentalists who claim that the “myth” of infinite growth is fundamentally incompatible with the known natural limits of our planet. But should those who propound such myths be censured and shunned? Should we similarly shun adherents of religious myths and cosmologies that are not fully compatible with current scientific “realities”? How do we navigate among the received myths, and who gets to decide which stories merit preservation or promotion? We are all invested in our professional projects, but it would be a mistake to allow our fears about the future to dictate that disagreement and diversity are luxuries we can no longer afford, or that critical engagement is an obstacle on the road to eco-salvation. Must agreement about the planetary crisis take the form of a global religious or religious-like cosmology? If indeed storytelling is key, then perhaps we need stories that are multifarious and flexible if we are to face the coming shocks with resilience—a favored term of the Transition movement. Think of it as the diversity-stability hypothesis applied to narratives.

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20Ostensibly scholarly conferences devoted to the Universe Story or Epic of Evolution, of which I am aware, have also produced very little in the way of critical responses, in part because the presenters are often there by invitation only and invitations tend to be extended to those who support the project; an open call for papers would likely produce a more varied set of responses.

21I have argued at length that religious environmental ethics needs to incorporate scientific perspectives (Sideris 2003). However, I am wary, and have always been wary, of any claim that science should function as a religion or that the traditional faiths need to be jettisoned.

22In biology, the diversity-stability hypothesis states that species diversity correlates with community stability and ability to respond to change. It is odd and interesting that even (or especially) proponents of the new myth who are deeply invested in the evolutionary paradigm take a jaundiced view of diversity, while celebrating monoculture.
In addition to the underlying fear and uncertainty that animates these monolithic and vaguely authoritarian forms of environmental engagement, there is something at work here that is perhaps unique to the study of religion and the environment (broadly construed). For decades, the field has grown up against the backdrop of some surprisingly simplistic finger-pointing: if the wrong cosmology caused the problem, then finding the right cosmology must surely be the solution. Or as Lynn White famously put it, “Since the roots of our [environmental] trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not” (1967: 1207). For many scholars of religion and ecology, White’s original diagnosis seems to provide a ready mandate for a broad and uncritical imposition of an essentially religious dogma (“whether we call it that or not”) advanced for the supposed higher good of the planet.23 At the very least, scholars might first endeavor to establish in some empirical way that religious worldviews actually are the environmental culprit, before dismissing the inherited traditions as dysfunctional or refashioning them to serve as subplots to a generic, science-reverencing myth—graceless and kitschy as it is—as our best strategy for survival.

To borrow a line from my favorite critic of the misuses of science, Stephen Jay Gould: “If I sound sharp or bitter” in critiquing these movements, “indeed I am,” for I have experienced their tactics firsthand (Gould 1983: 259). But these dynamics matter for reasons that go far beyond the drama and intrigue of internecine scholarly squabbles or academic career-making. They matter because who gets to have a voice in sustainability matters. At the campus level, for example, my engagement with sustainability has landed me in more frequent, and more intense, conversations with scholars of other disciplines—especially scientists—than my forays into interdisciplinary scholarship ever have, and probably ever will. Transdisciplinary conversations of any sort tend to bring out all the misinformation and mistrust that permeate the gaps between our disciplines; when the topic is the future of the planet, the tensions, and the stakes, can be high. Clear, critical thinking matters (is that not what we teach our students?). Who will represent the discipline of religious studies in these critical conversations about how our academic institutions and our communities respond to the prospect of an energy-depleted planet?

23One version of the critique of “religion and ecology” is that it promotes a confessional, theological agenda that has no place in religious studies. My claim is slightly different: the religion and ecology framework is ideologically driven not just by theology but by naively normative appropriations of science. Science, not just religion, can be put in the service of ideology, as critics like Midgley (2002) have helpfully pointed out.
that is four-degrees Celsius warmer? Will it be the acolytes of a standard-
ized sacred cosmology? Proponents of the vocational university and its
celebration of like-mindedness? Devotees of “Buddhist economics” or
New Age “science”? I sincerely hope these perspectives will not come to
represent religious studies’ main contribution to the sustainability discus-
sion, not only because I question their value as scholarship, but because
they may well prove unwelcoming24 to other proposals. The majority of
my colleagues in other disciplines have little idea what religion scholars
do—though many have a vague impression that we mine a confessional
vein or pursue pedagogical paths of indoctrination in our classrooms.
I cringe sometimes to think what these colleagues would make of reli-
gious studies should they get wind of some of the projects currently
gaining traction in our discipline.25 Religion scholars concerned about
the environment—a category that should include us all—must make a
more concerted effort to engage in a genuine discourse—an open, in-
formed, truly interdisciplinary, and critical dialogue about the myriad
causes and myriad possible solutions to our environmental crisis. I do
not claim to have adequate knowledge of all those causes and solutions.
This, my friends, is a conversation starter.

REFERENCES


Berry, Thomas 1978 “The New Story: Comments on the Origin,

Berry, Wendell 2000 Life Is a Miracle: An Essay against Modern

24See Laurie Zoloth’s arguments in this roundtable about the need for a risky form of hospitality in
addressing the climate crisis.
25On the other hand, some of our colleagues in the sciences might well be gratified to see the
humanities reflexively assume a subservient position vis-à-vis the sciences, as they do in the science-
reverencing myths of the new cosmology.
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