Chapter 12
Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age

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Abstract This chapter focuses on Universe Story/Epic of Evolution/Big History movements, forms of science-based ecospirituality that have emerged in recent decades. One of my central claims is that these narratives tend to encourage awe and wonder at scientific information and expert knowledge as that which is most 'real', over and above direct encounters with the natural world. As such, I question whether these new myths are likely to engender the environmental values they seek to cultivate. Everyday experiences and encounters with the natural world—encounters not filtered through scientific analysis and explanation—are likely to be devalued in this worldview. This tendency is particularly pronounced in narratives that are inspired by the work of E.O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins, both of whom promote a mythopoeic rendering of scientific information as a robust and superior rival to religion. Espousing a religion based on scientific reality, some proponents of these narratives express attitudes of intolerance toward religious and cultural traditions that do not derive meaning and value directly from science, even though these traditions may embrace green values on their own terms. As a whole, these movements discourage sensory, experience-infused forms of engagement with nature that are less dependent upon and mediated by expert knowledge.

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presenting a positive vision of a new anthropogenic stage in cosmic history in which humans shape the next phase of cosmic unfolding for the better.

Prominent advocates of the New Genesis include the cultural historian and "geologist" Thomas Berry and his protégé, the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme (Swimme and Berry 1992); religion scholars Mary Evelyn Tucker (Swimme and Tucker 2011), John Grim, and Loyal Rue (2000); historian David Christian (2004); astrophysicist and science educator Eric Chaisson (2005); biologist Ursula Goodenough (1998); science writer Connie Barlow (1997); and Christian pastor and popular author, Michael Dowd (2009). These individuals frequently reference one another's work and involvement in the movement, and they understand themselves and each other as part of a more or less cohesive group. The impetus for new story-telling arose in part from conversations within the academic field of "religion and ecology" regarding the need for a profound spiritual transformation (as with Tucker, Grim, and Swimme who are strongly influenced by Berry's call for a "New Story"); some versions of it display elements of therapeutic or self-help spirituality (as with Dowd and Barlow who offer webinars on how to "evolutionize" your life). Still others in the movement, such as Goodenough and Rue, represent a trend toward an aesthetic brand of religious naturalism, a form of what Taylor (2010) identifies as "dark green religion," i.e., nature- and science-oriented spirituality that eschews and often critiques the supernatural worldviews and values of traditional faiths, notably the Abrahamic traditions. The movement also has traction outside of the academy. Journey of the Universe, a documentary film written by Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, is widely featured on public television stations, and Tucker, Grim, and Swimme hold screenings and discussions of the film worldwide. For their own part, Dowd and Barlow introduce the Epic of Evolution to children in (liberal) religious education classes or summer camps, often in song and storybook form, or in the form of ritual enactments of "evolutionary parables" (Barlow n.d.).

1These most influenced by biology tend to use the phrase "Epic of Evolution"—notably Rue and Goodenough; however, Swimme and Tucker also deploy this phrase, and Dowd and Barlow use a variety of terms interchangeably. In 1996, Goodenough and Rue co-chaired a conference sponsored by the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science on The Epic of Evolution, which featured Swimmee, Tucker, and Grim as speakers. In 1997, Barlow published Green Space, Green Time, a book that charts the genesis and development of the Epic of Evolution and features formal interviews and spontaneous conversations with E.O. Wilson, Loyal Rue, Ursula Goodenough, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Brian Swimme. Barlow later met and married Michael Dowd. Goodenough credits Rue as the inspiration for her book The Sacred Depths of Nature. Tucker, Grim, and Swimme have more recently collaborated on Journey of the Universe, a documentary film devoted to the universe story and its potential to spark a new environmental sensibility. Goodenough served as science advisor to the book and film.

2The online seminar educates participants about their biological and social instincts and explores the science of how to decode human behavior, eliminate self-judgment, and create a big-hearted life of purpose and joyful meaning. See Dowd and Barlow (n.d.).

3Taylor (2010) develops a typology of dark green religions that casts Goodenough's worldview as a form of Gaian Naturalism "whose proponents express awe and wonder when facing the complexity and mysteries of life and the universe, relying on religious language and metaphors of the sacred (sometimes only implicitly and not self-consciously) when confessing their feelings of belonging and connection to the energy and life systems that they inhabit and study." (16).
A new story is so urgently needed, the argument goes, because our culture is suffering from what Loyal Rue (2004) calls *amynthis*—the condition of being without a serviceable myth. More precisely, the stories we have, such as the narratives provided by the traditional faiths, are no longer relevant and plausible. On this view, the environmental crisis is, at root, a crisis of meaningfulness, of *storylessness*: we lack an orienting myth that will apprise us of how things *really* are and which things *really* matter. This emphasis on what is really real and really true is of central importance, and I will return to it shortly. For now, it is worth noting that this account of myths and their truth value typically assumes that religion and science are oriented to essentially the same end—namely, to give an accurate rendering of the physical world. Truth, in this context, often signals correspondence or conformity to facts. For example, sociobiologist E.O. Wilson, often credited with founding the Epic movement insists that “we must have a story to tell about where we came from, and why we are here.” Science, Wilson (1998: 6–7) suggests, is “a continuation on new and better-tested ground to attain the same end [as religion]. . . . In that sense science is religion liberated and writ large.” On this account of truth, a scientific story will, by definition, have the decisive edge.

An express goal of these movements, which have inspired numerous books, films, YouTube videos, Web sites, podcasts, and even university course offerings, is to deploy modern science in order to instill in readers and audiences a profound sense of connection with the universe, and thereby foster environmentally responsible behaviors. Our “human destiny,” Swimme and Tucker (2011: 115) argue “is to become the heart of the universe that embraces the whole of the Earth community.” Science, in Barlow’s view, can be utilized “for greening one’s deepest worldviews—that is, for nurturing coregional sentiments” (Barlow 1997: 20). For Rue (2000: xiii) the Epic gives us an account of how things are and which things matter. Its evolutionary cosmology engenders an “eccentric morality” that can “inspire grateful service to the enduring promise of life on the planet.” “Scientific understanding” of nature, such as these stories provide, can “call forth appealing and abiding religious responses,” argues Goodenough (1998: xvii). Despite the bold claims and growing influence of the New Genesis movement across a number of disciplines, there has been virtually no critical response to this movement from scholars in religious studies, environmental ethics, or other cognate disciplines.

Some proponents of the new mythology—notably, Goodenough, Rue, Dowd, and Barlow—regard insights from sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and what Wilson terms consilience as particularly relevant to the creation of a new mythology. This turn to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology distinguishes these strands of the movement from the Universe Story of Tucker and Swimme who see Big Bang cosmology—not the terrestrial evolutionary paradigm—as the scientific development that lends the universe an implicit, coherent narrative structure. For those such as Rue who see mythic potential in reductive biology, evolutionary science both explains our need for religious myth and provides the raw materials from which a new and superior mythology can be crafted. This idea too can be traced to Wilson, who calls for a way to “divert the power of religion into the services of the great new enterprise that lays bare the sources of that power”—i.e., the scientific enterprise (Wilson 1978: 193). Some New Genesis advocates have taken up this challenge with great relish, producing a narrative that is constructed to meet our need for religion while adhering to the reality disclosed by contemporary science, whether the realities of our universe at large or particular discoveries about our hominin brains. Evolutionary psychology, for example, posits a human brain hardwired with dedicated modules for language and storytelling; the new myth can be specifically tailored to meet the story-telling needs of a human brain forged in the Pleistocene and now confronted with unprecedented challenges to continued survival (Rue 2000: 91–94). Epic of Evolution proponents also take their bearings from biologist Richard Dawkins (1998, 2011) who promotes the uniquely poetic and magical quality of scientific reality. Each in his own way, Wilson and Dawkins call for mythopoeticization of scientific knowledge—recasting scientific information as a consecrated narrative and poetic vision. Feeding this call, some proponents of the New Genesis present their narrative as superior to existing myths owing to its close adherence to reality as defined by science, as well as its alleged universality. While the existing religions tell the story of particular peoples, the all-encompassing new narrative presents “everybody’s story” (Rue 2000). Longstanding myths—ranging from the traditional world religions to the sacred narratives of particular indigenous cultures—are judged to be insufficiently grounded in what science reveals to be real and true. Existing traditions thus fail to command universal assent and cannot galvanize global action. As Goodenough puts it, “this is the story, the one story, that has the potential to unite us, because it happens to be true” (1998: xvi). Religion scholar Robert Bellah, who is otherwise sympathetic to these projects—particularly as articulated by Eric Chaisson—points out the pitfalls of calling these stories “true,” where doing so implies “that all the other religions are false.” Myths can be true, but their truth is of a different sort than scientific truth and “must be judged by different criteria” (Bellah 2011: 47). Promotion of these new narratives as uniquely *true* myths entails a kind of slippage between the way that physicists use the term cosmology (a theory of the universe) and cosmology in an anthropological sense of a culture’s shared understanding or all-encompassing vision. For some New Genesis proponents, the two become conflated in such a way that science is portrayed as containing within it all that humans need to orient themselves meaningfully to the world around them.

Claims that the New Genesis presents us with “truth” and “reality” align these stories more closely with grand, hegemonic narratives of the past than with narratives that might be derived from postmodern conceptions of science. J. Baird Callicott (2002: 167) argues that “to advertise your story as a story, to call it a ‘myth,’ an

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4It is not always clear whether this diagnosis extends only or primarily to Western cultures or to global industrial society generally, irrespective of particular religious or cultural commitments. Thomas Berry, who first called for a “New Story” in an issue of *Tellurian Studies* (1978) often diagnosed storylessness as a Eurowestern problem.

1Stephen Bede Scharper is a rare exception, though his critique is now somewhat dated and takes the form of a series of astute questions rather than assertions (Scharper 1997).
‘epic,’ or a ‘grand narrative’ is to disavow any intention to make a claim of truth or to deny the possibility of cogently organizing experience some other way, of telling some other meaningful story.” He denounces the “epistemic arrogance” of devotees of materialist, reductive modern science (distinct from post-modern science) who are convinced that they have “exclusive access to the Truth (with a capital ‘T’) about Reality (with a capital ‘R’),” and who thus dismiss all other knowledge systems and cultures as mere myth and superstition (Callicott 2002: 162). Callicott has defended a middle ground between the arrogant positivism of modern science and the nihilistic hand-wringing of deconstructive postmodernism. His more modest project6 of worldview “remediation” and “reconstructive post-Modernism” invokes not the absolute and singular Truth of science, vis-à-vis other myths, but modulated criteria of “tenability.” A reconstructive approach, he believes, must “expressly eschew any totalizing tendencies and hegemonic ambitions” (Callicott 2011: 169). My contention is that, despite routinely invoking the language of myth, epic, and story, the New Genesis does not always eschew these tendencies, nor does it consistently adhere to the modest epistemological claims characteristic of post-modern, science-based mythmaking. In fact, it comes perilously close to asserting itself as the one true story for all inhabitants of our planet. This should come as no surprise when we consider that Wilson’s project of consilience—for some, the very cornerstone of scientific mythmaking—is an explicit effort to resume the aborted Enlightenment project and its overarching comprehensive narratives.7

With their claim to have accessed truth and reality firmly in hand, these new mythmakers call on us to respond with awe and wonder to what is “most real.” This entails, in some cases, redirecting our sense of awe and wonder toward the scientific enterprise and its quest for totalizing knowledge—and, potentially, away from the natural world itself. The New Genesis is made possible, proponents argue, by developments in science that lend a narrative quality to our knowledge. These range from the discovery of the Big Bang, to a deeply held belief in the unity of the sciences (what E.O. Wilson terms “consilience”). The Big Bang, it is argued, makes it possible to conceive of the cosmos as having a beginning point (and thus a narrative structure), while belief in consilience suggests that the disciplines will unite to tell a single, comprehensive story of the unfolding of evolutionary and human history. Wilson, for example, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book On Human Nature famously offers the evolutionary epic as the best candidate myth:

What I am suggesting, in the end, is that the evolutionary epic is probably the best myth we will ever have. It can be adjusted until it comes as close to truth as the human mind is constructed to judge the truth. And if that is the case, the mythopoetic requirements of the mind must somehow be met by scientific materialism so as to reinvest our superb energies (Wilson 1978: 201).

This sentiment is cited regularly in New Genesis Web sites and published material. According to Rue, the Epic of Evolution “has been inspired by the remarkable theoretical unification of scientific disciplines taking place during the course of the twentieth century. ... These advances have gradually revealed what Edward O. Wilson has called ‘consilience,’ that is, a fundamental continuity and theoretical coherence among the physical sciences, the life sciences, and the behavioral sciences.” Disciplinary consilience “now makes it possible to construct a coherent narrative of the emergent properties of matter, life, and consciousness. ... the Epic of Evolution is a product of imaginative mythmaking under the critical and watchful eye of contemporary science” (Rue 2005: 612–614).

But on this view, who can be counted on to keep a critical and watchful eye on science? Certainly not religionists, for as Wilson’s claims about scientific materialism make clear, the objective is to replace traditional religion—and the traditional study of religion—with science fleshed out in mythopoetic form. “Make no mistake about the power of scientific materialism,” Wilson (1978: 192) warns. “It presents the human mind with an alternative mythology that until now has always, point for point in zones of conflict, defeated traditional religion.” Wilson goes on to predict that science will enjoy its “final decisive edge” over religion when it succeeds in explaining religion as a material phenomenon. “Theology is not likely to survive as an independent intellectual discipline,” but the religious impulse will endure as an awe-filled response to the scientific enterprise itself (Wilson 1978: 192). Once this “transfer of spiritual assets” is complete,10 a true sense of wonder will once again infuse the broader culture, Wilson believes (Wilson 1978: 204). Building upon this vision of a society united in its awe of science, Wilson presents a fully-fledged “unification metaphysics” in Consilience (1998: 6) where he offers the enchanting quest for comprehensive, unified knowledge as our species’ greatest adventure. In a similar vein, Dawkins has long argued for the superiority of scientifically clarified forms of wonder and awe vis-à-vis “fake” wonder at perceived mysteries, puzzles, or miracles (whether emanating from the realm of religious belief or from

6“Although I have become a charter member of the board of directors of the newly formed Epic of Evolution Society, let me hasten to add that this is not exactly my project,” Callicott writes. His project is indeed more modest, more terrestrially-focused and narrowly drawn than the grander project of Berry, Swimme, Chaisson, Tucker, Grim, Rue and others; however, while Callicott tempers the truth claims of post-modern science, his project, and the comparisons between different myths that the project entails, still suggests that science and religion are oriented to the same end, that they occupy a similar explanatory slot, or that literalist/creationist views stand in for religion generally (to wit, “a grand narrative that is contradicted by the fossil record or evidence of an expanding universe” is not sufficiently “credible,” says Callicott [2002: 167]). The impulse to present science as a worldview that can function much like religion would seem itself to be a holdover of positivistic modern science. The “remediation” concept figures in a more recent essay (Callicott 2011) in which, aside from a brief reference to Berry, Callicott claims no connection to the New Genesis movement, though he makes an even more forceful argument for replacing the Abrahamic with the evolutionary-ecological worldview (while acknowledging that no worldview is, strictly speaking, true).

7See Wilson’s chapter in Consilience titled “The Enlightenment.” Wilson’s defense of Enlightenment positivism leads him to an extended critique of post-modernism’s claim that there is no “real” reality (44). Wilson’s and Dawkins’ works both contain diatribes against postmodern and deconstructive responses to science (as well as Romanticism generally). Wilson also expresses profound admiration for the logical positivists (67–71).

8The phrase is from Mary Midgley (1985, 2002: 131).
incomplete natural knowledge). For example, in *Unweaving the Rainbow* (1998) a book that purports to be about the human appetite for wonder, Dawkins argues that explanations of natural phenomena such as the rainbow are always more interesting, more wonder-evoking, than the phenomena themselves. There Dawkins chides the Romantic poets who resented Newton for destroying the mystery and poetry of the rainbow by dissecting it into light of different wavelengths. They ought instead to have rejoiced because the scientific explanation is always more interesting and beautiful than the mystery it explains away. Dawkins sees wonder as persisting—not at the original phenomenon that prompted the inquiry—but by means of making scientific explanations, and human powers of explanation the object of wonder. As Dawkins (1998: 42) puts it: “If you think the rainbow has poetic mystery you should try relativity [theory].” Thus Dawkins (1998: x) concludes that “science is, or ought to be, the inspiration for great poetry. Science banishes mystery and the miraculous, but the knowledge it returns is itself a thing of wonder.

In a more recent work, titled *The Magic of Reality* (2011), Dawkins endeavors to bring the same form of enlightenment to young audiences. Tentatively titled *What is a Rainbow Really?* in initial press releases for the book, *The Magic of Reality* is an elaborately illustrated volume that addresses many of children’s big questions, such as those they are likely to encounter in Sunday school: “Why is there night and day?”, “Who were the first man and woman?”, “When did everything begin?” and even “Why do bad things happen?” Dawkins juxtaposes beloved myths and fairytales with “lucid scientific explanation” in order to “explore myths and legends about the natural world with science” (Anon 2009). By “myths” he means everything from fairytales about the rainbow’s origin to Judeo-Christian stories such as Noah’s ark. The book’s message is essentially the same as *Unweaving the Rainbow*: what is real in the scientific sense is most deserving of wonder. In contrast to the “fake magic” that suffuses fairy tales, children’s books, or mythological and biblical stories, scientific magic is proffered as real magic. “I want to show you that the real world, as understood scientifically, has a magic of its own.” Dawkins (2011: 31) explains to his young readers, “an inspiring beauty which is all the more magical because it is real and because we can understand how it works ... The magic of reality is—quite simply—wonderful. Wonderful, and real. Wonderful because real.” By contrast, religious myths “can never offer us a true explanation of what we see in the world” (Dawkins 2011: 21). These efforts receive enthusiastic support from some proponents of the Epic of Evolution. Self-styled “evolutionary evangelists” Dowd and Barlow, for example, endorse the Epic of Evolution as a new “religion of reality” and hail the so-called new atheists as courageous “prophets of reality” (Dowd & Barlow 2010).

As I have suggested, these ideas are gaining currency in the broader culture. Dawkins’ conviction that science, as the poetry of reality, presents us with a superior form of magic, is the theme of a musical composition created by John Boswell, a professional composer and science buff. This music video, one in a series called “The Symphony of Science,” sets to music the actual words of prominent scientists (many of them confessed atheists), such as Dawkins, Carl Sagan, Stephen Hawking, and blogger and biologist P.Z. Myers. The song’s refrain “There is real poetry in the real world/science is the poetry of reality” is “sung” by Dawkins, through the miracle of Auto-Tune technology. The lyrics credit science with satisfying our hunger for religion and meaning. Another Boswell composition titled “A Wave of Reason,” whose refrain is also sung by Dawkins, includes the following lyrical advice from Sam Harris: “You do not have to delude yourself with Iron Age Fairy Tales,” planetary scientist Carolyn Porco adds that “the same spiritual fulfillment that people find in religion can be found in science/ by coming to know, if you will, the mind of God” (Boswell 2010). In their own YouTube video in which they promote and recite passages from Dawkins’ book, Dowd and Barlow include a lengthy clip from Boswell’s composition “The Poetry of Reality” (Dowd and Barlow 2011). Barlow, who teaches a scientifically enlightened version of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” to child audiences—“Now I know just what you are”—sees Dawkins as a kindred spirit in the science education of youthful minds (Dowd 2009: 91). Dawkins’ mission to convert the world—children and adults alike—to the bracing tonic of the really real has “broad implications for society along the lines that we’ve been promoting for ten years,” Dowd and Barlow note (Dowd and Barlow 2011). The *Magic of Reality* provides “a way of valuing science, the scientific method, and the entire scientific worldwide endeavor, as providing our best map of what’s real and what’s important” (Dowd and Barlow, ibid).

Clearly, valuing science is a priority. But what has all this to do with valuing nature and inculcating environmental ethics? Rather little, I would argue, and therein lies the problem. New Genesis advocates steadfastly maintain that their narratives provides a much-needed cosmological context in which environmental values can take root and flourish. A shared belief of many within the movement is that knowing the scientific story is virtually sufficient to generate the desired values and sense of connection. In other words, scientific information—if presented in sufficiently rich poetic and mythological language—can fulfill many of the functions of a religious cosmology, while also orienting us toward deeper intimacy with, and concern for the natural world. Proponents routinely disavow any intention to displacethe particular religions with universal, sacralized science. Rather, they strive to present their narrative as a “metamyth” that can incorporate diverse religious perspectives without dissolving or debunking them. Considerable lip service is paid to respecting, cherishing, and celebrating diversity—not only geo-diversity and biodiversity but also mythic diversity” even as they argue that the diversity and particularity of the existing faiths will be their downfall (Goodenough 1994: 328). Goodenough, to give just one example, portrays the traditional faiths as essentially closed systems that provide answers to questions about our origins and destiny on their own stubbornly unscientific terms. Because science can gain no point of entry, no foothold, these traditions cannot evolve sufficiently to respond to modern, global problems. Moreover, the stories they tell are too particular to be expanded into a global myth, such as the new science-based stories offer; they cannot tell everybody’s story. What they offer are competing accounts of what is true, and in doing so, they propagate conflict and strife, rather than solidarity. If we want a religion that hits all the right notes, “we’re going to have to invent one,” Goodenough (1994: 325) concludes.
In this way, some proponents portray religious and cultural diversity as sheer divisiveness. Enthusiasm for the Epic story may readily engender intolerance, as when Rue (2000: 38) disparages the world religions as an uncontrolled “hemorrhage of diversity.” The inherited traditions encourage us to live at odds with reality. “Many of the cosmological claims of traditional stories have been rendered either untrue or unlikely by developments in modern science,” Rue maintains. “And further, the failure of traditional stories to transcend cultural barriers, and their palpable lack of resources for addressing the underlying forces of the global problematique make them appear out of touch with reality Rue (2000: 39).” Rather than blending science with existing religious insights, or gathering the spectrum of faiths under the umbrella of a generic metamyth, this approach simply retools scientific worldviews to serve as a universal religion. The claim that existing traditions can be situated within the epic narrative appears disingenuous once it is understood that these religions are competing for the same slot as the new myths. This is what we might expect from storytellers who look to Wilson and Dawks, both of whom explicitly endorse science as religion’s superior rival. Wilson and Dawks insist that feelings of awe and reverence inspired by the consistent scientific worldview constitute the purest and most noble expression of the human impulse for wonder and spiritual awe. Science and religion are seen as competitors in a contest that will determine where we direct these impulses and how we define our ultimate values.

As it is typically portrayed, this competition can have only one winner—science, of course, being the projected winner—but it can have more than one loser. Nature itself may be the ultimate casualty of the worldview variously espoused by those within this movement. By that I mean that the conflation of all that is real with whatever is scientifically known or knowable encourages a disparagement of human-level, lived experience of the natural world as unreal. It asks us to look behind the scenes, beyond the senses, to what is assumed to be a more fundamental domain of reality. The result is a displacement of primary experience—encounters with a more directly sensed world—with secondary and, for the most part, abstract and vicarious experience in the form of information dictated by experts. I accept that it is problematic to claim that our sensory experiences constitute an immediate encounter with nature; nevertheless, science is not the same thing as nature, and to study the former is not to experience the latter. Nor is the study of the former necessarily conductive to seeking out experiences of the latter. Recall that, for Dawks, the real beauty and majesty of the rainbow lies in its scientific genesis, not in the more immediate experience of beholding one. The rainbow, after all, is not a “proper object,” not a “definite thing,” but an “illusion” (Dawks 2011: 147). The New Genesis in its myriad forms, offers a panem to the scientific knowledge that lies behind and clarifies what we experience in our everyday worlds. This radical privileging of scientific reality puts environmental values on shaky ground. It estranges us from what we experience as real, meaningful, and beautiful. Why attach ourselves to this world of illusion?

Commenting on the disparagement of sensuous reality that our modern discoveries and inventions have encouraged, David Abram notes that relegating our ordinary experience of the world to a secondary, derivative realm increases our reliance on experts to inform us of what is real and true about the world, what is worthy of our wondering response.11 It seems to me that this is where the New Genesis is headed, if it isn’t already there. Abram (2010: 5) writes: “Since we have no ordinary experience of these realms [e.g., the cosmological big bang or the nuclei of our cells], the essential truths to be found there must be mediated for us by experts, by those who have access to the high-powered instruments and the inordinately expensive technologies (the electron microscopes, functional MRI scanners, radio telescopes, and supercolliders) that might offer a momentary glimpse into these dimensions.” Environmentalism built upon this privileging of scientific information over everyday experience and felt connection with the natural world is unlikely to ignite the passionate concern for the environment that these new myths aim to promote.

Moreover, the almost unfathomably broad sweep of cosmic events narrated in these stories seems ill-suited to elicit or encourage positive responses to particular, local places. An assumption embedded within Tucker, Grim, and Swimme’s Universe Story project, for example, is that humans—all of us—grapple with a sense of alienation, that we do not feel sufficiently “at home” in nature. Granting for the sake of argument that this diagnosis is correct, it is not altogether clear how exposure to the grand narrative of the universe will rectify the situation. Ultimately, this story situates us not so much in place as in space. There is something distinctly dislocating about the story’s all-encompassing scope. The sheer scale and remoteness of the universe vis-à-vis everyday life and lived experience may interfere with rather than foster a sense of being meaningfully connected and emplaced in our natural environments. In educational materials that accompany the Journey film, Tucker and Swimme shift the focus to local environmental efforts (design of ecological cities, environmental justice movements, etc.), by way of illustrating the practical application of the story, or merely to offset the potentially disorienting impact of the story’s broad sweep. But it remains unclear why the story of the universe is necessary in order to ground the environmental concerns and forms of activism highlighted in these local vignettes. (Are we to infer that these efforts are somehow insufficient without the Universe Story as their cosmological grounding? Or is the implication that these efforts are directly inspired by knowledge of the universe? If environmental activism is grounded in, say, biblical imperatives, are its motivations suspect?) Tucker and Swimme are vague on these points, and thus it is difficult to see how the normative project of Journey is justified by knowledge of the universe. To be clear: my contention is not that scientific information is irrelevant or unimportant to the project of valuing and preserving nature, or in the effort to cultivate wonder generally. On the contrary, I believe science to be indispensable for guiding and informing our ethical interventions in the natural world. Seen in its proper perspective,
science may help to underwrite a sense of humility and wonder at vast and ancient processes of which human beings are a small part. Nor do I wish to discount the importance of scientific discoveries in realms inaccessible to our unaided senses. I do, however, reject the claim—a claim that finds support in some iterations of the new story—that science enables alignment with Reality (with a capital R), and an ultimate encounter with Truth (with a capital T). Scientific data is critical to environmental ethical decision-making. But the elevation of science to the role of a sacred new mythology, or virtually self-sufficient normative guide, is problematic in itself and—especially—as a starting point for affective, and effective, environmental engagement. Moreover, scientific religiosity of the sort found in some of these narratives encourages an apotheosis of scientists and the scientific endeavor. Reverence for science—a seamless transfer of spiritual assets—is precisely what Wilson hopes to cultivate. In casting the Evolutionary Epic as the best myth for our times, Wilson recognizes that “every epic needs a hero.” What candidates does science offer? Wilson (1978: 203) proposes the human mind to play the starring role in the epic drama: “the mind will do.” Barlow (1997: 292) similarly depicts the Epic as a story that is “basically an equal celebration of the universe and celebration of the human mind discovering how to know about the universe.” There is a certain irony here. Our exhaustive journey through the vast and numerous universe, through the whole riveting drama of our planet’s evolution, finally leads us back to profound admiration of ... ourselves.

This privileging of scientific information has practical implications for university education as well. It suggests a hierarchy of the academic disciplines—a consistent “vertical integration”—wherein disciplines that do not grant access to ultimate reality (thus conceived) are rightly subordinate to the sciences. In *Consilience*, Wilson argues that unity of knowledge offers the best way to “renew the crumbling structure of the liberal arts” (Wilson 1998: 13). Berry too forecasts that the humanities will experience a “grand renewal” within the comprehensive, unifying paradigm of the New Story, because the “amazing new discovery by science of the story of the universe would be recognized as a supreme humanistic achievement” (1988, 128). Wilson goes a bit further, predicting that disciplines oriented to the study of human culture will eventually fall out into science, Wilson (1998: 12): “The humanities, ranging from philosophy and history to moral reasoning, comparative religion, and interpretation of the arts, will draw closer to the sciences and partly fuse with them.” In the consilient vision of education, the humanities might yet earn their keep as disciplines that serve science by embellishing its narrative with poetry, art, or other forms of creative expression. As Wilson explains in an interview conducted by a rapt and admiring Connie Barlow, science provides the (superior) content and the humanities obligingly give it form:

So what we must have is poetry within the scientific, physical worldview. That means we need the humanities, too. The humanities could in effect continue to do their thing, but they

would have vastly richer material to work with—grander themes—because the real world, the universe—from black holes to the origin of consciousness—offers far more complex and grander themes than does traditional theology.13

The heady promise of Wilson’s consilient, reality-based agenda has inspired a new wave of scholars eager to see evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, or neuroscience confer order and coherence to humanities disciplines in presumed disarray. These critics typically portray the humanities as vacuous, obscurantist, and irrelevant—and humanities scholars as consumed by envy and resentment of scientists, their big grants, their indisputable real-world impact.14 Representatives of the New Genesis are at the forefront of efforts to reform education along lines suggested by consilience. Goodenough and Rue, for example, argue for a consilient curriculum that introduces students to the Epic as the integrating theme of their entire college experience.15 “Any story of human nature not firmly grounded in the sciences does not merit the attention of youthful minds,” they maintain. “One world calls for one story” (Rue and Goodenough 2009: 181). A number of universities around the country, including Harvard University and Washington University in Saint Louis, now offer courses on “The Epic of Evolution” or “The Universe Story.” These courses introduce students to a grand narrative whose meanings are already given, whose options for student self-understanding are, to a large extent, already scripted: “Inherent in this story is a rich and satisfying account of who we are, where we have come from, and how we might become fulfilled,” Goodenough and Rue confidently assert. (Rue and Goodenough 2009: 181)

What, if anything, finally commends the New Genesis as a global myth and new creation story for our times? Might the stories it generates be amended so as to lessen their seemingly pernicious implications and hegemonic ambitions? A movement away from the abstract scale of cosmic evolution to particular, local places as the primary focus of story-telling, along with a de-emphasis on the Epic myth as embodying truth or reality would certainly help. Doing so would lessen concerns about these stories as metanarratives that displace or pronounce false all rival stories, and that deride other ways of knowing and experiencing our world. Many of the more hubristic implications of the New Genesis might be mitigated by retuning the claim that a comprehensive, unified body of scientific knowledge—consilient integration—undergirds the story. This hubris is especially discernible in versions of the Epic that uncritically embrace Wilson’s agenda; however, even on Swimme’s more humble reading, human’s discovery of the “comprehensive

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1Wilson offers this observation in an interview conducted by Barlow (1997: 27). Oddly, his assumption appears to be that the humanities are currently getting their material from “traditional theology”—an indication, perhaps, of Wilson’s inadequate knowledge of how either the humanities or theology do their thing.

1See, for example, Slingerland and Collard (2011); Slingerland (2008) and Gottshall and Wilson (2005).

1Goodenough co-teaches such a course at Washington University, alongside a physicist and geoscientist; no humanities faculty are required, despite the claim that the course explores the “implications of the epic for philosophy, religion, global polity, and environmental ethics.” Detailed course information is available at http://epsc.wustl.edu/courses/epsc210a/
narrative” stands as “one of the monumental accomplishments of the human species, a crowning intellectual achievement” akin to our ancestors’ discovery of fire (Swimme 2004: 38). However much the downsides and potential pitfalls of these new myths might be mitigated by recasting them along the lines I have just suggested, to my mind there remains no compelling reason why science’s story ought to be adopted _qua_ sacred myth. These myths might be augmented, revised, or interpreted in various ways that make them more meaningful and relevant to our present or local circumstances and crises; they may be interpreted in ways that render them less hubristic, less anthropocentric, or more tolerant and inclusive of values of diversity or multiculturalism, less overtly hierarchical and authoritarian.

But of course, precisely the same can be said of existing religions, major and minor, all over the globe. Are there compelling enough reasons to trade in our existing (flawed) worldviews—whatever they may be—for the new (flawed) worldview that science has to offer?16

I remain skeptical. It seems to me that much of the good work that is done by existing faiths and local green movements—say, permaculture activists in Bloomington, Indiana; environmental justice workers in Los Angeles; Hindus protecting sacred forests in India; or Christians battling mountaintop removal in Appalachia—can be accomplished just as well (and perhaps better) without invoking the imprimatur of the New Genesis as metareligion and overarching rationale.17 Of course, anyone who finds the story compelling, fulfilling, and satisfying as a new myth should be free to adopt it. My point is that I see no reason that anyone—much less everyone—ought to adopt it.

References


16The entire New Genesis project appears at times to rest on an assumption that our present environmental crisis is actually being caused by the traditional faiths; sometimes this claim is made explicit, as in some of Rowe’s work, and sometimes the charge of guilt is restricted to the Abrahamic faiths, as Callcott seems to indicate. But this assignation of guilt is far from obvious.

17Tucker and Swimme have recently stressed that the New Story and the Universe Story are simply “a” story of the universe, not “the” story, and they deny that the story must be universally adopted. Such disclaimers keep certain criticisms at bay but also distance them from their project’s animating rationale. Berry underscored the singular nature of the story and the imperative for all to embrace it: “Only through this story are we able to integrate any integral manner to overcome our alienation from the natural world,” Berry argues (1999: 83). “Both education and religion need to ground themselves within the story of the universe as we now know it through our empirical ways of knowing” (ibid.: 71).

Of course, much hinges on what it means to “ground” one thing in another, but insofar as Berry and his followers offer their story as a sacred cosmology, the legacy religions appear as competing (and less functional) cosmologies.

Rue L (2000) Everybody’s story: rising up to the epic of evolution. SUNY Press, Albany