



May 2023

## Old Myths, New Bottles

### Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

Lisa Sideris

A familiar, iconic image anchors David Christian's "new" [vision](#) of the world and human history: Earth as seen from space. The "whole Earth" image has been hailed as a milestone in human consciousness by everyone from patchouli-scented hippies to public crusaders for science and reason. This image is commonly read, as Christian reads it, as symbolizing global unity and planetary fragility. This "capacious" perspective will inspire motivation and hope for a better future, as humanity confronts unprecedented environmental challenges. A grand and collective challenge calls for a grand and collective story. Big History aims to provide it.

Christian's bedrock assumption is that any vision of ourselves, our history, and our planet that fails to take up the widest possible lens is "cracked," "splintered," "compartmentalized," "myopic," and "blinkered." His turn to these and other negatively valenced terms suggests that some original wholeness has been sundered or radically constricted. Big History promises to recover this underlying unity, transforming humanity in the process.

In Western intellectual and religious history, the drive to locate unity in dizzying diversity has resurfaced again and again. The dream of oneness animated Platonic philosophy, Christian monotheism, Enlightenment positivism, and—closer to our time—grand syntheses in biology, to name a few watershed moments.<sup>1</sup> Unifying stories are also, often, origin stories. That the world presents to us a uniform structure suggests a unity in its first cause. God's oneness ratifies a belief that the coherence of all knowledge reflects God's creation and governance of lawlike nature. Thus, belief in an underlying unity, even when promoted as a secular project, puts us in the realm of something like religion. Big History is no exception.<sup>2</sup>

Christian is explicit about the mythic potential of this ostensibly secular story. He identifies parallels between the function of longstanding creation myths and Big History, noting that both offer authoritative and attractive origin stories. Both proffer a universal map that makes visible the deeper connections between the personal and the universal. Today, however, those inherited myths have lost their power and credibility. Big History responds to a psychic and spiritual longing left in religion's wake, by restoring continuity and harmony between microcosmic and macrocosmic scales. For its narrative to function as more than a lifeless chronology, a concatenation of random events, it must somehow gesture toward an eventual closure or completion. A telos of sorts. This familiar gesture typically involves a moralizing turn toward the future, the outcome of which depends upon collective human action.

That critical, pivotal moment is here: evolution has led us to the point where directing the future course of the planet is now a live option. Humans have evolved a shared, collective, networked brain, a development Christian hails (with other thinkers, both secular and religious) as the noosphere, or planetary mind.<sup>3</sup> *Homo sapiens'* unique capacities for collective learning distinguish us from other lifeforms. We alone are positioned to write the next chapter of the grand epic, providing a powerful check on current dire trends.

Christian believes that Big History provides something that the narrow lens of conventional education routinely misses: a diagnosis of how we got to the perilous moment known as the Anthropocene. On this diagnosis, humans, unlike other creatures, do not merely fill evolutionary niches; they mobilize their knowledge and creativity to expand into new niches. With this expansion, human impacts on nature proliferated, as creative technologies and novel social arrangements enabled us to manipulate life and transform virtually every inch of the planet. Thus did we become Earth's dominant and most powerful species. This story expresses the kind of "dynamic, interconnected knowledge that a younger generation will need as it faces the daunting challenge of maintaining a livable planet," Christian argues.

Looking toward the future, Christian suggests that humanity's "unmatched creativity" will continue, as it always has, to turn up novel solutions to unprecedented crises. But how does this story of humans' rise to dominance point the way *out* of a crisis whose origins seem to lie in humans' propensity for domination and control? Christian invokes the image of the chrysalis—a

symbol of radical transformation—to express a new world emerging from the old. With Big History as our guiding myth, a new human creature will be born.

Yet, as a narrative of continuity that extrapolates from our evolutionary past to plot the course of our planetary future, Big History provides no clear basis, no mechanism, for the radical metamorphosis it foretells. Radical change is treated as a simple matter of knowledge accumulation—an intellectual, rather than moral, conversion. Christian emphasizes novelty in thinking, at the expense of genuine moral reflection. Thus, the storyline suggests, paradoxically, that doubling down on the very same traits that created our global environmental predicament—a species-wide penchant for innovation, collective learning, and manipulation and control of our environments—will inaugurate sweeping change. Knowledge will become wisdom. Yet, the anticipated pivot from an old world to a new one, our conversion from often destructive domination to wise maintenance of a “livable” planet, is simply assumed rather than explained.

Christian believes that Big History, symbolized by the whole Earth image, will “shock us” into a new consciousness. But we have been gazing on this image for over half a century. The image that once astonished astronauts is now ubiquitous—and shopworn. Eagerly appropriated by greenwashing global corporations and billionaire technocrats in the thrall of interplanetary colonialism, the whole Earth image has lost its power to gobsmack us into anything new, different, or better.<sup>4</sup>

Might the same be said of Big History? Despite its purported novelty, Big History often reads as a mash-up of plot devices and discursive habits inhering in the ancient religious narratives it treats as defunct. Humans, it suggests, can redeem themselves from alienating conditions of fragmented knowledge and blinkered perception—call it sin?—through retrieval of an original, underlying wholeness. Humans will emerge, godlike, as a providential planetary force, the Anthropos of the Anthropocene. *Homo sapiens*, humans made truly wise, will emerge at last to complete the cosmic arc.

We have heard these stories before. Indeed, Big History is a close cousin of “Universe Story” and “Epic of Evolution” narratives offering similarly panoramic but unified and integrated stories of human, planetary, and cosmic history.<sup>5</sup> In both their old and “new” forms, these storylines remain

indebted to a recognizable template that was created and handed down to us from secular and religious thinkers from another place and time. Contrary to promises of human agency fulfilled and realized in the Anthropocene, these myths of human-directed planetary evolution appear to be directing and ruling over us. To remain embedded in these recurring narrative structures, wittingly or otherwise, is to acquiesce in the face of their all-too-conventional “cosmological temptations,” the belief that the response to every new global crisis requires a new ethical or religious framework.<sup>6</sup> The danger in doing so is that we continue to learn nothing new at all.

## Endnotes

1. Vassiliki Betty Smocovitis, *Unifying Biology: The Evolutionary Synthesis and Evolutionary Biology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
2. Ian Hesketh, “What Big History Misses,” *Aeon*, December 16, 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/we-should-be-wary-about-what-big-history-overlooks-in-its-myth>.
3. David Christian, “What Scientific Term or Concept Ought to Be More Widely Known?,” *Edge*, January 1, 2017, <https://www.edge.org/response-detail/27068>; Clément Vidal “What is the Noosphere?,” *Human Energy*, accessed March 30, 2023, <https://humanenergy.io/projects/what-is-the-noosphere/>.
4. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, “A Tale of Two Utopias: Musk and Bezos in Outer Space,” *Metapolis*, March 2022, <https://metapolis.net/project/a-tale-of-two-utopias-musk-and-bezos-in-outer-space>, quoted from *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).
5. Lisa Sideris, *Consecrating Science Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).
6. The phrase is Willis Jenkins’s: “It is almost conventional wisdom that unprecedented challenges require religious and ethical thinkers to narrate a new story or retrieve a forgotten moral vision in order to reorient humanity’s moral consciousness . . .” from *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 4.

---

## About the Author



Lisa Sideris is a professor in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research focuses on the ethical significance of natural processes and how “environmental” values are captured or occluded by perspectives from religion and the sciences. Her books include *Environmental Ethics*, *Ecological Theology*, and *Natural Selection*, *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World*, and the edited collection *Rachel Carson: Legacy and Challenge*. She holds a PhD in religious studies from Indiana University.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Lisa Sideris, “Old Myths, New Bottles,” contribution to GTI Forum “Big History and Great Transition,” *Great Transition Initiative* (May 2023), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/big-history-sideris>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As an initiative for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.