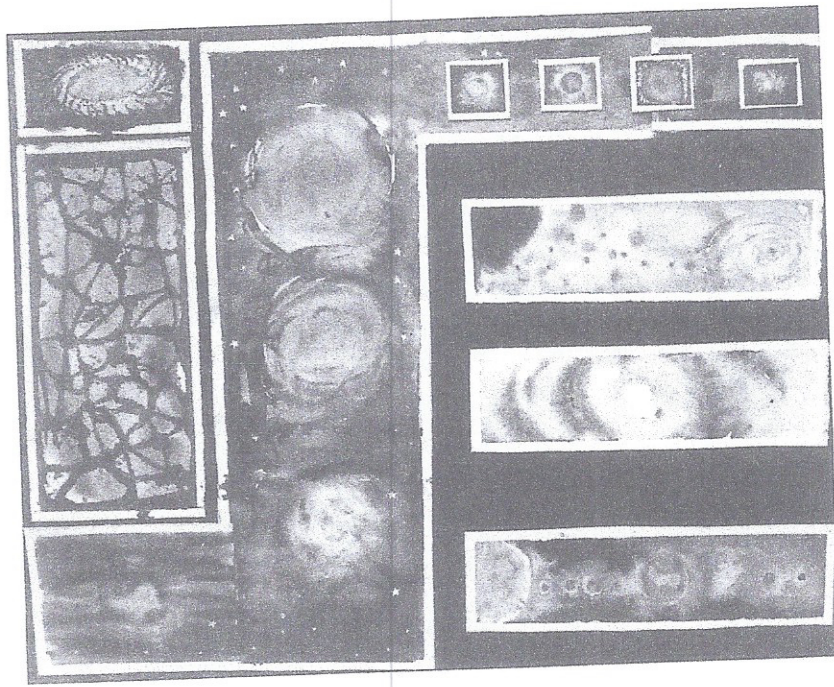


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• TEACHING BIG
HISTORY



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Lauren Guittard, *Abstract Comic (Big Bang and Thresholds 1-4)*, 2012.
(Photo: Lynn Sondag)

Teaching Big History or Teaching about Big History?

Big History and Religion

Harlan Stelmach

You can't teach religion without taking a religious stance: if you think you are avoiding one, you just end up taking an anti-religious stance.

ROBERT BELLAH

When "teaching" what is known as Big History, an answer to the question posed in the title of this essay is paramount. What appears to be a subtle distinction is at the heart of clarity about the subjects of Big History and religion. Teaching, rather than just teaching *about* a subject, assumes, if not agreement and commitment, at least deep sympathy for the subject. Some might even say it assumes a kind of "participation" in the subject. Not to understand this will lead to confusion on the part of our students and those of us teaching Big History. I was reminded about this distinction in a series of poignant conversations with my colleagues at Dominican University. I said, "We need to be clear about *teaching religion* in our curriculum." A literature professor challenged me, saying: "I hope we do not teach religion in our curriculum. Students should learn *about* religion but we should not *teach religion*." I asked two professors in the religion department if they "teach religion." Both suggested that in a university curriculum, unless one is teaching theology, one should only teach *about* religion.

This disagreement has two sources. First, there are differing assumptions about what we mean when we use the word "religion." The second is about the teaching itself. That is, what are we doing when we "teach" any subject about which we are passionate? This kind of teaching inspires others to appreciate and to explore something fundamental about their humanity as part of a larger community. A poet from our English faculty was clear that she was not just teaching *about* poetry; she was *teaching poetry*. My science colleagues all asserted, "I teach science." Of course they do. And of course they also teach *about* science. We do both.

The founder of modern Big History, David Christian, is clear in the assumption of "agreement and commitment" to one's subject in his book *Maps of Time*. In his introduction, subtitled "A Modern Creation Myth?" he forthrightly answers that question.¹ According to Christian, "this new myth" based in "modern science . . . can help us answer some of the deepest questions we can ask concerning our own existence, and that of the universe through which we travel."² The myth, he writes, answers the questions "Who am I? Where do I belong? What is the totality of which I am a part?"³

By offering *memorable and authoritative* accounts of how everything began—from our own communities, to the animals, plants, and landscapes around us, to the earth, the Moon and skies, and even the universe itself—*creation myths* provide universal coordinates within which people can imagine their own existences and find a role in the larger scheme of things. *Creation myths* are powerful because they speak to our deep spiritual, psychic, and social need for a sense of place and a sense of belonging. (emphasis added)⁴

Christian is clear that he is offering, with his "Big History" story, just such a "memorable and authoritative" account of how everything began. He reiterates this position in his coauthored textbook, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*.⁵

This chapter will explore the implications of the following questions: How should we address the issues that emerge when we teach Big History and teach *about* Big History? And does the presentation of Big History as a "universal worldview" render it a modern "religion"? If there is even a remote chance of that, we need to articulate the issue clearly and deal with it explicitly. In addition, because practitioners of the academic study of religion have developed approaches both for teaching and for teaching *about* various worldviews and origin stories, the field may have something to offer for use in the Big History classroom.

When we teach "Big History" as the modern creation story, we often confront students with the issue of religion in multiple ways. For many, the Big History narrative challenges long-held personal beliefs about a religious creation story. For others, it is a welcome new story that appeals to a modern self-understanding, has little interest in "organized religion," and holds that humans are the makers—and sometimes destroyers—of their own destiny. Some students see religion as the pivotal force that, if not shaping the world for good or bad, has at least been a defining feature in how they live their lives. For them, Big History becomes problematic when many of its texts appear to assume a minor role for religion in the sweep of

cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution. On the other hand, some students welcome our teaching a story that does not *explicitly* challenge their worldviews, whether they are religious or not.

For many, students and faculty alike, it is more comfortable to simply keep religious questions out of the classroom and let them remain private. Students often just want to understand the “facts” and get on with their lives. Faculty members are often not equipped to engage students on such deep questions and want to keep the focus on the content that the students should know. But there are some useful approaches that can help educators responsibly address religious questions that arise or fail to arise when we teach Big History. Just as important, we can learn to take advantage of a teaching opportunity that cuts to the grit of the meaning of liberal education: confronting the essential question *What does it mean to be human?*

I will address how our collective learning in implementing Dominican’s Big History program has sought to deal with this issue. This journey should be instructive for others wanting to embark on a similar path of sorting out the many and profound issues around Big History and religion.

DEALING WITH DISORIENTATION

The first major issue to address is the general disorienting element of the Big History approach for both students and faculty. As the late sociologist Robert Bellah expressed in his magnum opus, *Religion in Human Evolution*, if Copernicus pointing out that the Earth was not the center of the universe was “unsettling to humans,” then “how unsettling can you get” when David Christian states in *Maps of Time*: “Our Sun, it seems, is situated in an undistinguished suburb in [the Milky Way,] a second-rank galaxy (the Andromeda Galaxy is the largest in our local group) in a group of galaxies that lies toward the edge of Virgo Super cluster, which contains many galaxies.”⁶

This story is certainly disorienting to many of our students, who come with either literal views of the creation stories they’ve learned in their religious training or a commitment to the idea that reality and meaning are not sufficiently informed by an evolutionary explanation of human life.

Some of the professors in the program have had to deal with their own disorientation. Most of us are discipline specialists now trying to teach a unified body of knowledge from astronomy, physics, and chemistry to biology, history, and anthropology. If you add teaching religion or dealing with issues of spirituality to the mix of disciplines, the task becomes even more daunting. Some professors do have a

commitment to traditional creation myths in their ethical and symbolic meaning, if not their literal meaning. If a faculty member has an alternative meta-narrative to which she or he is committed, "teaching Big History" could become the most disorienting feature of the project.

Our program has addressed the complex set of problems surrounding Big History and religion directly, through an ongoing conversation. Accordingly, our solution to how the subject of religion should be addressed in both our first-semester survey Big History course and our second-semester "Through the Lens" courses has been an unfolding one.

Once we realized that we were not addressing the questions of meaning and religion well enough in the survey Big History course that we require all our students to take, we started conversations among ourselves and discussions in the classroom. We added a specific course on "Religion *through the Lens of* Big History," which the student may choose from a list of other discipline-based options, after having taken the Big History survey course in their first semester at the university. While in the first-semester survey course we essentially are providing our students with this disorienting and decentering myth, in the second semester, a self-selecting group of students, who may have been disquieted by the first-semester course, end up in "Religion through the Lens of Big History," which I teach.

David Christian, Cynthia Brown, and Craig Benjamin begin their book, *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything*, by asserting that the new story is different from origin stories of the past. "It is a literal account of the origin of everything," they write. "It expects to be taken seriously as a description of what actually happened 13.8 billion years ago."⁷ The authors also state that it is the only origin story "accepted by scientists throughout the world." Yet they remind us that because it is a story based on evidence, "the same scientists also know that many of its details will change in the coming years. It is not a fixed or absolute story and does not claim to be perfect."⁸

In *Maps of Time*, Christian explains why there is a need for a new creation myth and what motivated him to suggest Big History as a viable alternative narrative. He has his own notion of what is disorienting in our world today: the lack of a coherent story of our origins using modern scientific knowledge has left us without a myth that "speaks to our deep spiritual, psychic and social need for a sense of place and a sense of belonging."⁹ If the new story is now offered to play this role, it is not too surprising that some of our students find it disorienting.

We try to hit this issue head on. In the first two weeks of our survey course, we seek to get a sense of how disoriented or accepting our students are feeling about

what we are presenting. We ask our students a variety of questions: How do you believe the universe began? Do you foresee any conflicts between the content of this course and any religious or spiritual beliefs you hold? Explain how you plan to handle these conflicts, if they arise. And if you do not foresee any conflicts, briefly describe your familiarity with the Big Bang theory and evolution.

Among the tenets of our program is that unsettling our students is an important goal of liberal education, one that will prepare them to cope with the uncertainty and ambiguity that are part of our complex, ever-changing world. But to leave our students unsettled without preparing them to explore the meaning of this disorientation would be to miss an opportunity for educational transformation. Mark William Roche, in his 2010 book *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* affirms with Hegel that education brings a “self-alienated spirit.” But Roche is just as insistent that we have the teaching skills to recognize and address the existential drama of this new alienated identity, if not identity *crisis*.¹⁰ Much rides on our instructors’ willingness and capability to follow up with discussions of the questions above.

BENJAMIN’S APPROACH: STUDENT-LED DISCUSSIONS

Textbook coauthor Craig Benjamin, in his reflective article “The Convergence of Logic, Faith and Values in the Modern Creation Myth,” gives us the best starting point for addressing religion in a basic course on Big History that teaches this scientific creation story.¹¹

Benjamin, a former student of Christian, embraces Christian’s perspective that Big History is about “teaching a modern creation myth.” He is also aware of how disorienting this new myth is, particularly for the new undergraduate “who walks into a classroom on the first day of her new life to be ambushed by an elegant, multidisciplinary account of origins and futures—in essence a creation myth articulating an alternative explanation of origins and *purpose* for existence” (emphasis added). This observation leads Benjamin to further remark that what he “couldn’t see at first was that when my students moved from their homes and high schools to a university dedicated to providing a secular liberal education”—he teaches at a state university in Michigan—“they found themselves confronted by a far more nuanced view of the world than the paradigm that had sustained their lives thus far.”¹²

Benjamin says he understood that the “first crisis they had to face was a crisis of faith.”¹³ He said he then had an epiphany. He felt he was not fulfilling his obligation if he ignored the faith stance of his students and pretended that there was not an

"elephant sitting in the room." Benjamin, a native of New Zealand, writes: "If I am genuinely committed to the task of fusing intellectual development with character and ethical development, surely a central goal of the great liberal education tradition of the United States, I need to concentrate on all the *functions* in my students and help them make connections. And a core *function* for most of them is their faith" (emphasis added).¹⁴ Benjamin has given witness to what many instructors in our program have come to realize: we cannot avoid a conversation about religion in our Big History classes.

In the classroom, Benjamin explains, he puts this discussion in the hands of small teams of students who lead weekly discussions. With certain ground rules of civility to address "divisions along entrenched cultural lines," he encourages "frank and mutual consideration of the inner conflict" that competing worldviews produce. He is clear that Big History is a "worldview." The role of the professor, he says, is that of a "teacher-student in a classroom of student-teachers." By this approach he begins to let go of the chief role of "myth-teller."¹⁵ This allows an "empowerment" in those hearing the myth. The assumption one would make from this approach is that not only would there be the possibility of the listener to be transformed by the myth but the conversation would also have an impact on the myth-maker. If this is so, then we really do have a classic example of transformative education, which may be mutually transformative for both the student and the instructor.

Yet we find it difficult to be influenced by our students on the issue of religion. We have our own private views of religion. We either have a bias against teaching religious issues—or even teaching *about* them—in class, or are just not equipped to have these conversations. One of the fundamental reasons no doubt rests on our personal view of religion. Quoting a fellow historian, Joel Tishken, Benjamin reminds us of the following: "Our academic definition of religion as an abstraction separate from the rest of life, is not one shared by most people past and present, but is an *invention of modernity*. . . . Religion does matter to most humans, and we must find ways to represent the power of religion by remembering that the academy's views on religion are not the global norm" (emphasis added).¹⁶

IDENTIFYING OUR OWN RELIGIOUS STARTING POINT

As Big History instructors, we must be clear about our religious—or nonreligious—starting point. It is not enough to say that we do not want to unduly influence our students with our point of view. By teaching Big History with our current texts

we are already influencing students in a certain direction in respect to religion. We owe it to them to accompany them on that path.

In 1955, Paul Tillich, perhaps the most important American Christian theologian of the twentieth century, retired from Union Theological Seminary in New York to become University Professor at Harvard. Three years later, he gave a talk to the Board of Harvard Overseers entitled "Religion in the Intellectual Life of the University: The Faculty and Its Functions; the Dual Attitude; the Religious Dimension."¹⁷ Tillich's talk illustrates both my approach to religion as a religious person and my approach to teaching religion, not just teaching *about* religion, in the university. Certainly, Harvard Overseers thought Tillich had a perspective that needed to be heard.

Tillich defines "the religious question" as the "the question of meaning of human existence and existence generally."¹⁸ He reminds us that "the word 'meaning' points to the questions: What am I for, for what do I live? Is it worthwhile to live? Is being a whole big accident, or has it an ultimate inner aim? Religion gives symbols in which these questions are answered."¹⁹ Tillich does not relegate these questions to realms "separate from the rest of life." Instead, Tillich says that these questions are "asked in every realm and on every level of human existence."²⁰ "The possibility of raising them makes man man [sic]. The answers belong to the religious traditions already discussed [such as the major historic world religions]. But the question belongs to the whole realm of human existence. Therefore, the question arises in every section of man's cognitive approach to reality."²¹

If we borrow the language of religion when we refer to Big History as "a new creation myth," then it is not surprising that Christian, and many of us, in trying to understand the profound meaning of Big History, exhibit what Tillich might call a religious sentiment. What Christian, Brown, and Benjamin have done, if we use Tillich's perspective, is to debunk current religious traditions as not expressing scientific rigor. What they have not done, and cannot do as humans, is to go against their own humanity. What makes us human is to ask, and to answer, these questions of meaning and coherence and eventually our destiny as humans. In one of the most poignant expressions of his humanity, David Christian, in a TED talk, explains why he is motivated to tell the Big History story: he wants his grandson to inherit a world worth living in.²² Christian is hoping for a story that gives his grandson the knowledge and the meaning to face what is an uncertain future.

My view of religion is close to Tillich's: religion is not an archaic tradition that can be explained away with new knowledge. Rather, it is fundamental to who we are as humans; it is what makes us human. We may express this reality of our human-

ness through various traditions, but these traditions do not, and cannot, totally define us as the fundamentally meaning-seeking beings we are. Tillich explained this view of religion in his 1959 book, *Theology of Culture*: "Religion is not a special function of man's spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all its functions. . . . [Religion] is home everywhere. . . . Religion is the dimension of depth in all of them. Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern" (emphasis added).²³

I am aware that even this view of religion is disorienting to our students. What my students appreciate is a chance to engage on these issues. I am not trying to convince them of my view. I am disclosing my view as they disclose their view. I work to have empathy for their positions. I often long for the deep conviction that my students feel about their faith, knowing that my position springs from a largely intellectual understanding. My students are inviting me to do more than teach about religion in a detached way.

Robert Bellah, whose *Religion in Human History* is framed in a version of Big History and includes cosmological, biological, and cultural evolution on the topic of religion, spoke at Dominican, helping us to deepen our understanding of these matters. His book and the many talks he gave in the years after its publication have reinforced my position that religion is essential to what we as humans do to discover meaning in all realms of our lives. Religion is not just a separate part or function of our existence. In a talk recounting his journey as a sociologist of religion, as he moved from Harvard to Berkeley, Bellah concludes:

In my teaching I treated religions in . . . the anthropological mode, that is, at arm's length, as specimens to be analyzed. I had some disturbing experiences in these early years of teaching. On more than one occasion I had a Bible-belt Protestant or a Jesuit-belt Catholic come to my office to tell me that my course had caused him to lose his faith. . . . I eventually came to realize that you can't teach religion without taking a religious stance: if you think you are avoiding one, you just end up taking an antireligious stance. . . . It was at that point that I realized that I had to teach religion before I could teach about it.²⁴

My advice is that whichever stance we take, we need to be open and honest with our students. We are asking them to deal with deep identity questions; it behooves us to share our positions in a thoughtful way at the same time.

TEACHING BIG HISTORY OR TEACHING ABOUT BIG HISTORY?

For his Harvard audience, Tillich identifies two essential components of university teaching, "detachment and participation."

On "detachment," Tillich says: "Without distance, no cognitive approach is possible. Otherwise the result is not knowledge, but emotional 'outcry.' And this detachment refers to the philological preciseness, to historical probability on the basis of documents, to a consistent use of concepts, to exact observation."²⁵ This is the so-called "rigor" that is required of all disciplines, including science.

Then he addresses "participation": "On the other hand, there is not understanding of any intellectual creation without participation. This participation is not identification with a concrete religious reality, but *empathy*, as it is demanded in all humanities" (emphasis added).²⁶

It is clear that "participation" does not play second fiddle to "detachment." Though Tillich is making a formal distinction between the two, one without the other is not possible for our understanding of knowledge in the modern world. So he explains their unity as follows: "It is a unity of participation and detachment, which could be called 'existential hypothesis.' All detached knowledge remains hypothesis. It is preliminary; but participation brings the subject matter into us or us into it. Such participation produces the eros and the passion, which inspire the teaching without destroying the scientific soberness."²⁷

Again, I think you can extend this requirement to the teaching of any discipline, including science, if it is truly "teaching" with a passion and appreciation rather than just teaching *about* something. One does not just teach about theories; a scientist participates in a community that also fundamentally teaches science. Tillich ends this essay trying to keep the scientific and the religious enterprise together: "Thus in many realms of the scholarly work of a university the religious dimension is revealed, independent of a concrete religious tradition. University education should comprise both strict scientific discipline and the opening up of vistas in which the questions of life are seen in the light that scholarly endeavor sheds upon them. This is what our best students are looking for; they should not be disappointed."²⁸

A Big History course has the capacity to be the type of endeavor that Tillich is suggesting our "best students are looking for," if we are clear about what we are teaching. We need to recognize that we do not only teach *about* Big History, but that we teach Big History as, at least, the functional equivalent of a modern religious perspective. What kind of "religious sentiment" is our Big History teaching communicating? The answer to this question will continue to unfold.

DOMINICAN'S APPROACH: AN ONGOING DIALOGUE

Thanks to an open process of exchange of ideas in our innovative weekly Big History faculty development sessions and annual summer institutes, we have taken on the vexing question of how to educate our students and ourselves about Big History and its implications. We have endeavored to address the question of teaching religion, from which secular university education in general most often backs away. It has taken us four years to arrive at our current level of conversation.

Cynthia Brown has been our resident Big Historian. She has engaged the Big History faculty on the topic of religion and the perceived limitations of her own *Big History*, and those of the textbook she wrote with Christian and Benjamin, with great sensitivity. All our positions have evolved as a result of this crucial dialogue. A yearlong exchange of views with key faculty members was an illustration of open communication. Our dialogue has culminated in a thoughtful critique of the materialist approach of the early founders of Big History.

In addition, we have opened our campus to the discussion. We have invited guest speakers to provide alternative perspectives, in order to expand and deepen our conversation. The speakers have included sociologist Robert Bellah, cosmologist Brian Swimme, theologian Ted Peters, Big Historian Fred Spier, and a representative from the Vatican Observatory, Father Paul Gabor. We have hosted student-faculty panels on religion to address the "elephant in the room." We organized a Big History faculty retreat on the topic to help faculty appreciate the variety of perspectives on religion that exist among them, but which, without a safe environment in which to express them, had remained inchoate. These perspectives ranged from "religious naturalism," to orthodox theistic positions on the self-described religious or "spiritual" side of the conversation, to materialist and atheistic positions on the so-called "nonreligious" side. The religion question has also had a serious hearing at the International Big History Association (IBHA) conference. Our colleague Scott Sinclair proposed an anthology on Big History and religion in 2012; and at the 2014 conference, several panels addressed religion or meaning.

The result of all these activities has not led to complete agreement on how best to address religion in Big History. Nor has it led to agreement on whether Big History as a worldview should be taught as a functional equivalent for religion. Nor has it concluded whether we should teach Big History or just teach *about* Big History. At this stage of our journey, it has at least led to better clarification of individual positions on religion. We are at a new stage of development that is allowing

us to continue to deepen the conversation. It has certainly forced me to be more specific about who I am as a religious being and how I should “teach religion.”

A FEW KEY OMISSIONS OF RELIGION IN BIG HISTORY CONTENT

For students taking my “Through the Lens” course, I spend time reframing the Christian, Brown, and Benjamin textbook. A couple of problems must be addressed to make this perspective as coherent and consistent as possible.

First, the story as it is told in *Big History: Between Nothing and Everything* does not incorporate the latest theories from neuroscience about religion. Theories are emerging that suggest that humans, after our long evolutionary development, are “hardwired” not just for morality but also for religion, certainly for meaning creation and belief. Whether this rises to a scientific consensus or is an adequate formulation will no doubt take time to sort out. But to not treat it in what is purported to be the modern “scientific” creation story—including cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution—is a lacuna. In an approach that seeks a unified knowledge, this missing ingredient needs to be included.

Second, because the subtitle of the Christian, Brown, and Benjamin textbook is *Between Nothing and Everything*, the slim discussion of religion in human history is also a mystery. Even if one has a negative view of religion because of the often violent role various religious traditions have played in history, one cannot deny that under the banner of religion humans have also conducted their affairs to help them reach to their highest ethical ideals. There are also theories about religion as being “adaptive” in our evolutionary struggle. David Sloan Wilson’s book *Darwin’s Cathedral: Evolution, Religion and the Nature of Society* is one excellent book that expresses this thesis.²⁹

Religion is often accused of finding its reason for existence in the “gaps” in our scientific knowledge. This is a fair criticism, as far as it goes. But taken on its own terms, science often fails to acknowledge moments where such gaps are explained by pure speculation. Often we are told that we do not really know why certain physical events happen, but it is only a matter of time before we will be able to understand. This mantra is not science; it is belief. It is a faith. There have been and always will be deep mysteries that will never be totally explained by our knowledge of science. Our students deserve honesty and clarity on this issue.

What I am suggesting is a different view of religion that is missing in the work of many of the Big History authors with whom we are most associated in our pro-

gram: religion is part and parcel of what defines our humanness and cannot be separated out from the deepest sense of our being. My position also assumes that we have not outgrown religion and become a new type of human being. In fact, even in science our religious nature is being affirmed.

APPROACHING THE ELEPHANT IN THE CLASSROOM

Where does this leave us? What is the best approach to educating our students and ourselves on the topics of Big History and religion? First, I believe we should acknowledge that we are teaching a *quasi*-religious stance when we teach Big History. This is the fact of our modern life, and we must deal with it. Let us be clear that we are at this moment in this intellectual and religious space in the modern world.

There are viable options that I call *content* approaches. As long as we are clear and open about which approach we privilege, all are equally viable as points of departure for a critical discussion in the classroom. We could also present all of them as options, making clear which one or ones we have the most sympathy for. Here are examples of these types of content approaches. There are, no doubt, other possibilities. For each option I suggest that the topic of religion be integrated into the content.

In summary form:

1. *Science*: This approach stays self-consciously within the domain of science. But the emphasis is the branch of neuroscience that is emerging as neurotheology. This branch seeks to explain the development of our species as being "hardwired" for meaning. Here we would have to address the notion that even the idea of being hardwired may be too reductionist. The key works for teaching this approach include those by Andrew Newberg. I have used his coauthored book *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* in my classroom.³⁰
2. *Symbolic Representation*: This approach gives a modern understanding of religion as the discovery of and search for meaning through the symbols we create to express this meaning. It is the product of religious thinkers who have gone beyond the literalism of various faith traditions in their conversation with science. In a sense this approach understands modern science as a demythologizer of religious creation stories, but then uses myth to

reformulate our relation to truth. The previously mentioned works by Paul Tillich and Robert Bellah would fit this approach. This is my approach. Needless to say, it is not an approach my literalistic-oriented students find compelling.

3. *Creation Stories*: An approach that is much appreciated by my students is that espoused by Ted Peters and his colleague Martinez Hewlett in their book, *Can You Believe in God and Evolution?*³¹ This book tackles all the various religions' responses to neo-Darwinism, from those proposing intelligent design to theistic evolutionists. The book is clear about the claims of science, philosophy, and theology. I have used portions of this book to really get at the elephant in the room.
4. *Religious Naturalism*: Religious naturalism, as I define it, is when one finds meaning in nature itself or just finds "awe and wonder" in nature and the splendor of our humanness. Much more can be said about this approach. I am most drawn to a more sophisticated version of this approach that appears in the work of Brian Swimme, although he does not identify with this label. His book and full-length film *Journey of the Universe* best exemplify this approach.³²
5. *Philosophy*: Philosopher of religion John Hicks's work helps tease out the implicit philosophical and religious stances that scientists often gloss over. His book *The New Frontier of Religion and Science* is a must read for all wanting to be in conversation with religion and science.³³
6. *Science Fiction*: The ideas emerging from what is called "singularity theory" are worth mentioning. The basic notion is that what we now understand as our current humanness will evolve, resulting in a new kind of human being; that without this evolution—or emergence—we will not be able to cope with our current level of complexity; and that, far from our world being random, we will be able to master our future in more predictable ways. This is becoming a serious discussion within science. It needs to be engaged and not left out of the discussion (as much as I personally think it is another version of the hubris that has been with us throughout human existence.) The work of Stanford University archeologist and Big Historian Ian Morris is representative of this approach. His book *Why the West Rules—For Now: The Patterns of History and What They Reveal about the Future* deserves to be read by all teachers of Big History.³⁴

There is a seventh option, which is methodological, rather than focused on content. It is what I would recommend from my own experience as the most appropriate approach, given that we are treating deep identity issues for our students. This approach can complement any and all of the above content approaches.

The point is to start with where the students are. We need to give them a safe space in which they may reflect on their religious position. In a sense, this would be a Socratic and inductive approach. The goal is to encourage them to discover their deep "religious" self. This discovery would include, but be more than espousing, the given "beliefs" of their received traditions. How do we do this? It is not easy. What has worked for me is to get students to articulate moments of profound meaning in their lives. When they see that they have ritualized these moments in other parts of their life and that they can tell stories about these moments, they seem to get that religion is not a separate part of their lives but is part and parcel of the totality of it. Further, they then begin to understand how these rituals and stories become systematized in rational thought, and then to better understand how their faith traditions have evolved.

In order to establish this safe environment, the instructor needs to allow students to express very early in the course the key issues in their minds and hearts. These issues may range from the idea that Big History is "destroying my faith" and "I don't believe in evolution" to "I am not religious anymore, but I am spiritual" and "I want to believe, but I find it difficult." These discussions also allow students with nonreligious perspectives to become comfortable with expressing their positions, especially in the "Through the Lens" course, where their position is in the minority. They need to feel safe to say that Big History has given them the coherence that they find meaningful. Or that they find science more worthy of their attention to address the complex issues of our future than other fields.

Inspired by Benjamin, we at Dominican have formed student-led "exploration/discovery groups." These groups allow the students to take the lead in defining what is important to them. They get to think together on the issue, exploring the various positions within their peer group in some depth. Eventually, Benjamin suggests, they help educate the whole class as they share how their positions have evolved or deepened, often with greater conviction and well-constructed arguments. It is at these various moments that they become more authentic about themselves as "religious" beings—or, in other terms, about "what it means to be human." With this method we are able to keep our focus on being respectful of our students' evolving identity.

Big History is among the most identity-demanding courses of a college career, and it challenges our students at almost every turn. Our students are faced with this

challenge in their first year! Teaching this course is a teacher's dream, but it is also a great responsibility. The method I have outlined also demands that we as instructors be open to expressing our own identity. This is a crucial standpoint from which the course needs to be taught. We have to be willing to explore existentially the meaning of the course for our own religious stance. This is more than just a statement about our rationalized position, such as one of the following: agnostic, atheist, religious naturalist, or from a received and considered tradition such as Christian, Buddhist, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Pagan, or Humanist. At best, what these labels express is the final journey in our self-understanding. But, too often, they express a quick, unexamined position or a hiding behind a label. The student wants to know how we got there and why. It is the same thing we are asking of them. Where are you now? How did you get there? Where are you moving with your new knowledge? We are asking them to explore and express their deepest thoughts. This method demands that we return in kind.

Over the years of teaching Big History and its relationship to religion, I have stumbled on this approach with the help of many colleagues. The ingredients of this four-year process have been: (1) discussing the scope and content of our Big History text with the help of our resident Big History author; (2) numerous faculty retreats on every subject in Big History; (3) debates about the meaning of materialism and religion among faculty and students; (4) students' courage to express their concerns about these issues; (5) faculty assessment processes that include focus groups with students; (6) writing a book about Big History pedagogy, which really means reflecting on the content we teach and what this says about how we should teach it; (7) well-organized extracurricular lectures on most aspects of Big History; (8) specific retreats on the religious views of the Big History teaching faculty; (9) my own research on a "constructive religious ethic" that was essential to clarifying my position on religion; and (10) specifically for me, the influence of Robert Bellah's book *Religion in Human Evolution*, which walks a complex route through cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution on the topic of religion.³⁵ In short, my own stumbling has taken place in the midst of a profound intellectual community seeking answers to this complex set of questions. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a large intentional community to address how to teach religion in the academy. Like all knowledge, it takes participation, as Tillich pointed out to the Harvard Overseers. Without participation in a collective learning community of Big History, this journey would have been impossible and sterile.

Science debunks only certain historic religious practices and stories that claim a literal truth. Yet even on its own terms, science also is beginning to explain that, for

humans, "religion" will not go away. Science can also help us understand the origin of religion in our evolutionary past as rooted in such theories as parental nurturing. Religion can be understood as compatible with, maybe even complementary to, science — for each, in its most narrow and formal sense, addresses different realities and uses different methods. Further, in the reality of a unified life that we live every day, these realities overlap, for both religion and science tell us a story about the deepest meaning of our humanness. Though science is most comfortable with materialism and reductionism in the so-called physical world, and though this approach has given us many new physical insights and technological breakthroughs, human consciousness continues to escape this kind of reductionism. Many of my students have come to see an origin myth such as the Abrahamic Genesis story to be more than a mere physical science tract, but rather a theological and anthropological perspective. They begin to see that these old myths speak to them in new ways. The world is big enough for different approaches and perspectives.

The goal of our instruction is to explore these many perspectives in an honest and open way. Sorting out which content approach is most grounded in the totality of our humanness will take a method that fosters this conversation. We must recognize that even when we are teaching *about* religion we have assumed a religious stance. A religious perspective has been unwittingly expressed. Assuming that we can only teach *about* something at first seems like the most tolerant thing to do, because we do not want to privilege one religious tradition over another. Yet addressing religion in this fashion actually becomes the most intolerant thing to do. We can do better. The more we examine in an open and honest way any meta-narrative, the better for the quality and the usefulness of that meta-narrative. I would agree with David Christian's challenge in the opening sections of *Maps of Time*, when he says that he is offering a story as coherently as possible with hope that together we can improve on it. Let this be our challenge.

NOTES

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6. Christian, *Maps of Time*, 52.

7. Christian, Brown, and Benjamin, *Big History*, 14.
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10. Mark William Roche, *Why Choose the Liberal Arts?* Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 2012. 160–162. Print.
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12. Ibid.
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14. Ibid.
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35. Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2011. Print.