From the moment I started teaching big history I was struck by its impact on students. Here was a course that in a single semester explained the origins and evolution of virtually everything, and did so in a way that provided context for all of the apparently random events of history. Students were swept up into the epic recounting of the evolution of the universe from a tiny sub-atomic seed into an unimaginably vast entity of 100 billion galaxies. Yet, just as the scale threatened to reduce humans to insignificance, big history began to hint at the possibility of a crucial role for *homo sapiens* as the most complex entity that we are thus far aware of in the cosmos. As that possibility took shape--the idea that rather than unmasking our species as a meaningless spec big history offers a tentative argument for our fundamental significance--students achieved a moment of orientational enlightenment that many of them described as life-changing.

David Christian has emphasized the potential for big history to provide meaning and context by describing it as a Modern Creation Myth, and comparing it to the traditional creation stories of earlier cultures. ‘Who am I? Where do I belong? What is the totality
of which I am a part’ are questions he poses in the introduction to *Maps of Time*. He reminds us that: ‘In some form, all human communities have asked these questions. And in most human societies, educational systems … have tried to answer them. Often the answers have been embedded in cycles of creation myths’.¹ In the twenty-first century, however, many of us believe that we have outgrown the need for creation stories, particularly if they are associated with the word ‘myth’. Indeed the word ‘myth’ makes professional historians most uncomfortable, because myth and history are seen as antithetical.

Post-modernists like Jean-Francoise Lyotard have argued against the representation of any phenomena, in the form of a metanarrative, be they historical accounts or scientific paradigms.² Post-modernists suggest that the recounting of the history of *anything* in the form of a coherent story (a story which is not natural but human constructed) will turn history and science into dangerous mythologies that will serve only to reinforce the power of the myth spinners – generally white, educated males, members of the academy and the political elite. For post-modernists however, the real danger in articulating a sense of continuity between past and present, or between the fundamental forces of nature, is that this disguises an existential reality of chaos, fragmentation and meaninglessness.

The response of big historians to this charge is that humans, as much today as at any time in the past, need the sense of orientational security that creation myths once provided. As Christian puts it, creation stories ‘speak to our deep spiritual, psychic and social need for
a sense of place and a sense of belonging’.iii Furthermore, the lack of a modern creation myth is actually harmful to our species because without it we are left only with an overwhelming sense of disorientation and purposelessness that Emile Durkheim referred to as ‘anomie’.iv This is hardly a danger for the post-modernist however, who would argue that this desire to fit in is precisely the problem. It is much better to embrace a naturalized state of disorientation than to seek false comfort in an artificially constructed paradigm that has been developed, at least partly, for the purpose of reinforcing the power of its authors.

My experience in the college classroom has shown, however, that as the big history version of creation unfolds across a semester, any power engendered in the myth-teller (the professor) is matched by the sense of empowerment that the tale generates in the listener, undergraduate students only recently embarked upon their great college adventures. These are the students who have been raised in the glorious isolation of their own bedrooms, and the enfolding security of their family’s creation myths. With very little warning of the disorientation that is about to occur, at the age of eighteen they leave their homes to live in large residences in the midst of their peers, away for the first time from the daily, personal influence of their parents and the other champions of the creation stories of their childhood. The contrast is even more pronounced for the unsuspecting big history student, who walks into a classroom on the first day of her new life to be ambushed by an elegant, multi-disciplinary account of origins and futures--in essence a creation myth articulating an alternative explanation of origins and purpose for existence.
Even more unsettling, of course, is the immediate realization of the one really profound difference between the myths of yesterday and this new account--there are no gods in it!

Where is the Sky Woman of the Iroquois who fell to earth and sprinkled dust in the air to make stars? Where is the Father of All Spirits of the Australian aboriginals who woke his wife the Sun Mother with the words, ‘Mother, I have work for you. Go down to the earth and awake the sleeping spirits. Give them forms’? Where is Ban Gu of ancient China, who awoke from a sleep of 18,000 years to crack open the great black egg of the universe with an axe? Most striking of all for the majority of students in Australia and the United States is the absence of the creator deity of Genesis; the god who hovered above the formless, empty and dark surface of the deep and said, “Let there be light”, and there was light! In the modern creation myth, they, and he or she, are nowhere to be found!

Now, for anyone raised in a liberal humanist tradition, the idea that the universe can be entirely explained without reference to a creator deity is hardly earth shattering stuff. But this meant that I was completely unprepared for the reaction of so many students during my first semester of teaching big history. As much as I tried to steer the conversation in another direction, the central issue for many was the absence of a creator in the creation myth. The problem was important enough that it became impossible to make progress in tutorials without confronting the question head on. And the discussions that ensued were disturbing enough that students found their entire belief system, even their previously understood purpose for existence, being challenged.
What I couldn’t see at first was that, when my students moved from their homes and high schools to university dedicated to providing a secular liberal education, they found themselves confronted by a far more nuanced view of the world than the paradigm that had sustained their lives thus far. What I quickly came to understand was that, for undergraduate students embarking on this journey from a dualistic to more nuanced worldview, the first crisis they had to face was a crisis of faith. Once this realization dawned it was I that had an epiphany: I am ignoring my obligation to these students if I ignore their faith, if I try and pretend that it isn’t the elephant sitting in the room. 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 of the functions in my students and help them make the connections. And a core function for most of them is their faith.

That this all came as something of a revelation to me demonstrates how much I had been ignoring the increasing significance of religion worldwide. It also unmasked my ivory-tower smugness in assuming that most rational people thought the same way I did! But this is a view widely prevalent in the academy, I think. Joel Tishken reminds us of this when he writes:

‘our academic definition of religion as an abstraction separate from the rest of life, is not one shared by most peoples 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’.
The number of students in the United States who enter university convinced that Darwinian evolutionary theory is just plain wrong, and that God created the universe 6,000 years ago, dismayed me when I first became aware of it. How should historians handle the persistence of debates between creationists and evolutionists when every fiber of our souls is offended that anyone could still doubt natural selection in the twenty-first century? Should we ignore it? Should we go on pretending that sincere religious belief is something that existed only in the historical past? In our classrooms we boldly address all manner of controversial topics, but rarely attempt to seriously engage the religious beliefs of the majority of our students. In so many spheres of public and pedagogical life we academics praise ourselves for our ability to raise the level of intellectual discourse, but few of us seem comfortable taking the same approach to religion, despite our core pedagogical commitment to developing critical thinking skills in our students. If we demand that our students apply rational thinking to religion, shouldn’t they in return expect us to allow them to apply their religious thinking to rationality, which many of them believe offers only a false closure.

It is in this context that big history can make an important contribution. By offering a coherent scientific account of the origins of the universe and life, the modern creation myth becomes a powerful rationalist argument in favor of the scientific paradigms. For a surprising number of students, a big history classroom is the first context in which these theories and their evidence have been explained. And what a splendid environment it is for this to occur in! Most big historians are not trained scientists, and we have developed
ways to explain this scientific material in laymen’s terms. Many younger college students have only a basic scientific knowledge anyway, so an explanation that is in the form of historical narrative works better than one laden with jargon.

Providing a clear overview of the paradigms is just the first level of engagement, however. Students, unsettled by the compelling logic of these paradigms, immediately try and reconcile this modern creation myth with their own religious accounts, and having been warned that liberal professors will try and take them away from their faith, the first response is to fall back upon a dualistic paradigm in which only one account can be correct. This tension can only be resolved through a frank and mutual consideration of the inner conflict, and that can only take place in the context of intensive, systematic, student-led class discussion. In my course, small teams of students lead the weekly discussion sessions; it is their responsibility to frame questions and facilitate the full-class conversation. Ground rules encourage robust discussion but demand civility, and seek commonalities and the accommodation of apparently mutually exclusive accounts rather than further division along entrenched cultural lines. The professor’s role becomes that of teacher-student in a classroom full of student-teachers. In every big history class I have ever taught, these discussions have quickly become the most valuable part of the course, a fact borne out by the almost universally enthusiastic response in student evaluations.

As students begin to see the college classroom as a microscopic representation of wider society they realize that there has to be a way of reconciling seemingly irreconcilable positions if the destructive national cultural divide is to be bridged. Our students are
future leaders whose responsibility it will be to lead their society away from the chasm and seek out commonalities rather than division, but how can we expect this when many members of the academy seem to have a difficult time of it once we move beyond the cognitive level to matters of the heart and soul. Yet surveys show that students want to associate themselves with faculty who can help them in a search for meaning. Students are asking ‘who am I and how can I make a difference’, and if we ignore that and argue that our job is simply to teach the subject matter of our discipline, we are abdicating one of our core responsibilities, which is to teach the ‘good life’. This is a concept that encompasses both the Platonic and religious perspectives of liberal education as a means of promoting moral and ethical thinking. The good life is not about individual success but about doing good for others, making a difference, changing the world for the better. We ignore this central component of liberal education at our peril.

Ironically then, it turns out that the modern creation myth, utterly devoid of gods and spirits as it is, is a powerful tool to engage and challenge undergraduates at the highest level of both their cognitive and spiritual consciousness. We educators need to be open to all worldviews. Even as we present, as persuasively as possible, a modern creation story founded on scientific principles, we need to understand that students will be hearing this from a very different perspective. The greatest error we can make is to dismiss this perspective as simplistic and naïve, stemming from an ignorant past, as something that we now demand our students simply leave behind and shed like an old skin.
Our students do have the ability to move to a more nuanced worldview, but only if we facilitate this, only if we provide an appropriate environment in our classrooms for the sort of complex, intense conversations this will demand. We can go even further and create a climate of awe and wonder inside the walls of the academy. The big history story is ideal for this, because at every level it raises profound questions about origins, evolving complexities, what it means to be human, the individual’s role in the cosmos, the reason and purpose for existence. This is an awesome story, yet how can we encourage our students to enter into the imaginative consideration of these questions if we teachers are not prepared to also give up our sense of control and power, the sort of narrative power that Lyotard argues is embedded in the recounting of all coherent stories?

We are teachers and mentors, and a crucial role of the mentor is to challenge and support. Our job is to teach students how to think, not what to think, to teach holistically and focus on student development, not mechanical subject knowledge and bland methodology. Big history provides an elegant, awe-inspiring, multi-disciplinary account that connects all facets of human and cosmic reality in a modern creation story of extraordinary sweep. Despite the fact that it is a creation myth with no gods in it, it also turns out to be a powerful way of engaging faith and rationality and offering ways of reconciling both. For this reason it deserves to be at the heart of every general education program at every university in this country that is genuinely dedicated to providing their students with a liberal education.

---


iii Christian, Maps, 2

Author’s Note
Australian-born Craig Benjamin, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the History Department and Meijer Honors College at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. He is the author of numerous published articles, chapters and books on ancient Central Asian history and world history historiography. He is currently working on three textbooks for major US publishers, including a big history textbook for McGraw-Hill with co-authors David Christian and Cynthia Brown

This paper was originally published as:

The paper was published again as:
‘The Convergence of Logic, Faith and Values in the Modern Creation Myth’, World History Connected, Volume 6, No. 3 (October 2009)
http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/6.3/index.html 2700 words

Email: benjamic@gvsu.edu