**Deocene Islands in an Anthropocene Ocean:**

**Shifting the Conversation from Geoscience to Culture**

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**\*1** In common parlance, the dominant narratives of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going are all based on current theories of physical science, specifically cosmology, geology, and environmental science. “Big History,” from the Big Bang to the present, posits a materialist, cosmic framework for the human experience. It deserves a “Bigger History” involving human actors and the spiritual dimensions of their experience; it also stands in need of a critique and counterproposal to “the Anthropocene”— a currently favored grand narrative claiming that environmental destruction has taken humanity into a new geologic era beyond the Holocene. As a historian of science, I see no reason to privilege contemporary science as the foundation of a comprehensive worldview. Here I propose that the great diversity of world religions and ethical practices that shaped human consciousness and affairs from time immemorial are central and critical components of a more complete, nuanced, and constructive big picture history that tempers the excessive claims of the materialistic storytellers, while shifting the narrative from science to culture. I call it the “Deocene.” According to Google ngram viewer, the term “Big History” rose exponentially from 1991 and peaked in 2016; “Anthropocene” began its rapid rise in 2000 and continues to soar; “Deocene” returns no results. You are in on the ground floor!

**\*2** The Deocene is a call to imagine and to develop an alternative way of understanding the world —actually an alternative to a secular dominant alternative — replacing, or at least supplementing, secular reasoning with spiritual and relational ways of knowing and being. It is embodied in inspirational texts, monuments, and artistic works; it is visible in layers upon multiple layers of complex cultural strata grounded in a transcendent reality; it forms and informs the worldviews of billions of people and exists in many customs and current practices. it is very ancient and very current. The aim is to offer a positive, reasoned, and aspirational global solution to the recent crisis of faith in the Transcendent as well as pathways toward a more peaceful world based on virtuous practice. Although its historical dominance has waned, especially since the 18th century, and massively since the mid-20th century, the evocative power of the Deocene has not waned. It persists today as enclaves and island outposts in a dominantly secular “Anthropocene” ocean. It stands both as a predecessor to and cotemporaneous with the present era. The idea of the Deocene can provide alternative metaphors and serve to shift the conversation about the human experience away from geoscience, pollution, and decline and direct it toward uplifting values, specifically embodied in world religious and ethical cultures. It seeks to orchestrate the many interrelated themes, nuances, and intonations of ancient and recent truth claims and aims to provide a counterproposal to modern, secular, and often reductionistic reasoning about our interconnected world. It is not evangelistic or even ecumenical. It is a potent idea worthy of further examination, research, and articulation. The Deocene is irrupting today.

**\*3** Now on to Big History. In 1991 David Christian presented a “case for big history.” Asking, “What is the scale on which history should be studied?” He pointed out that world historians had got it right: “in geographical terms…the whole of the world.” Without missing a beat, he argued that the whole of time – since the “Big Bang” – is the appropriate time scale for the study of big history. “Big History” seeks a synthesis of knowledge in the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities – a cosmic framework for the human experience. Using a multidisciplinary approach, practitioners incorporate insights from cosmology, astronomy, Earth system science, biology, archaeology and anthropology in epochs and eras that long predated recorded human history. Big historians seek an overarching theory of everything based on physical categories such as matter, energy, complexity, disorder, and what they identify (in retrospect) as favorable “Goldilocks” circumstances.

**\*4** My critique goes as follows[[1]](#footnote-1): In attempting to “cover” all of cosmic history from the big bang to the present, Big History, as promoted by Christian and his associates, propagates a number of fundamental categorical errors. Big History focuses cosmic history on one planet among billions, with a remarkable and self-conscious species (us), and locates Earth and the concerns of *Homo sapiens* at the center of the universe. The arc of this story constitutes a new form of geo-centrism! Big History privileges a modern, Western, scientific perspective, ignoring the historical development of the sciences and their contingent claims to natural knowledge. Big History forces the historian to pose as amateur astronomer, amateur geologist, amateur archaeologist, and to focus on the inanimate world instead of humans. It unfortunately neglects the lived experience of individual protagonists, which is the essence of history! Christian’s book, *Maps of Time* dedicates 80% of the coverage to pre-recorded history. How is the big bang linked to the emergence of modernity and the modern state? The author doesn’t say. Does Big History end with the current environmental crisis or the projected heat death of the universe? Big bang theory did not exist before 1965; thus, the current (21st century) incarnation of big history is not the only one possible. Big histories written in, for example, 1923 (before quanta), 1858 (before Darwin), 1543 (before Copernicus), or 1319 (before Dante) would be based on fundamentally different worldviews than today. In the latter case, Ptolemaic astronomy and the providential history of the Bible would be center stage. Big Histories grounded in traditional world cultures would be radically different.

In summary, Big History's emphasis on the grand narratives of Western science diminishes the importance of pre-modern and non-Western origin stories, placing it in conflict with World History. History is about human experience. The big history narrative detracts from that focus. It is an aggressive pedagogical project that uses present categories to tell a universal tale, succeeding mainly in providing mental furniture to middle school and first year college students. In the beginning “Bang!” Big Bang! Big historians aspire to become historians of the universe, but in doing so, largely ignore the experiences of humanity and forget to be historians!

**\*5** The 21st century neologism “the Anthropocene” (or age of humans) has been proposed[[2]](#footnote-2) as a candidate for the most recent era of geological time during which human activity has become the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth. A currently ubiquitous grand narrative closely linked to environmental decline, it is marked by an explosion in the human population along with the resource depletion and other unwelcome aspects that will likely come with it. Supposedly it will be marked by deposits near the Earth's surface that include plastics, concrete, asphalt, metal alloys, radioactive and other toxic wastes, as well as everything else added by our modern industrial and postindustrial civilization.

**\*6** But can the history of the world be based on geology? What does it mean for humanity to be moving from the age geologists call the Holocene (literally t**he current geological epoch)** —where human civilization and all historical records originated, to the brave new world of the Anthropocene — where it seems likely humanity may meet its demise as a species? Will humans be to blame for destroying the life-support systems of the planet? The Anthropocene signals, to many, what may be the final apocalyptic epoch of our planet, a candidate for Earth's 6th mass extinction. In the long shadow cast by the fin-de-21st century crisis of post-modernism or the contemporary demise of Enlightenment rationality, will this be the final chapter of a macro-declensionist and ultimately an extinctionist environmental history? To be written by whom?

**\*7** What is the influence of these concepts on us? Are we expecting climate change to cause the blue marble to somehow morph into the angry red planet? Most likely responses include individual and cultural depression; a breakdown of societal norms and functions; retreat to gated communities or microtopias, and hedonism (YOLO). Some elites, as I have documented elsewhere, will pursue technological interventions, or “tech fixes.” Others may increasingly favor other-worldliness (apocalypticism). These approaches valorize materialistic explanations of life and the universe and either ignore or elide the insights provided by the world history of cultures, religions, and spiritual practices. My goal in declaring the viability of the Deocene is to provide an alternative.

Both natural and social scientists have appropriated the notion of a new geological era in order to speculate about radical new relationships between humanity and nature. [[3]](#footnote-3) In many such accounts, an elite cadre of masculine humanity — those with resources, agency, and voice — occupy positions of power and dominance over nature as the “wise men” to manage the planet and steer “spaceship Earth” within safe “operating limits” in order to “save us from ourselves.”

**\*8** Are questions of ultimate meaning to be decided by three white, Western, male scientists in charge of the International Union of Geological Sciences? Have we fixated too firmly on the Holocene/ Anthropocene transition? Have we reduced all of history to environmental history and all of the foreseeable future to an environmental lament? Have we ceded global narration and global governance to the Earth system scientists? Here is how the Nobel laureate chemist Paul Crutzen speaks of managing the planet:

A daunting task lies ahead for *scientists and engineers to guide society* towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require *appropriate human behaviour* at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, *large-scale geo-engineering projects*, for instance to ‘optimize’ climate. At this stage, however, we are still largely treading on terra incognita.[[4]](#footnote-4)

*Scientists and engineers guiding society? Appropriate human behavior?* *Large-scale geo-engineering projects*?[[5]](#footnote-5) Such hubris and instrumental rationality serve to legitimize top-down authoritarian programs by engineers, scientists, politicians, billionaire entrepreneurs and their ilk that include the types of manufactured crises and crisis management we see today: supply shortages, pandemic lockdowns, depopulation programs, and endless wars. Well over ninety percent of the populace (J.D. Bernal’s “sheeple”), will experience world-shattering pain, loss, and dislocation due to these programs, but having been “cancelled,” will have no voice and will have no alternative but to submit to the ten percent or so of the visionary leaders who are guiding the planet into the future.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**\*9** Joachim Schellnhuber, a German theoretical physicist and climate modeler claims that controlling the earth system is possible, necessary, and desirable in order to optimize it and stabilize it within acceptable limits.[[7]](#footnote-7) He calls for a new global Leviathan, or ruler, and imagines himself to be a wise advisor to the global governor — deciding the fate of the planet, playing the role of “Jorel” (Superman’s dad) to his Krypton overseers. Schellnhuber recently discussed the notions of “terrestrial politics” and planetary governance, with the noted sociologist Bruno Latour. Referencing geo-engineering, Schellnhuber also called for “sharp instruments to cut the social tissue.” Without missing a beat, Latour responded, “in France we call that the Guillotine.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

What if we turn our attention away from geoscience to the French revolution and invoke the cultural discontinuity it represented and the trauma it inflicted on the French Catholic Church? The beheading of the French king Louis XVI in 1793 symbolized a shifting of the axis of human affairs from royalist, religious, traditional, mostly rural, agrarian and hierarchical societies *with vast inequities* to increasingly secular, urban, industrial, and capitalist societies *with vast inequities.* This event is a candidate marker, if you seek one, for a “Deocene/ Anthropocene” transition in the West. There is a plethora of others.

**\*10** Never underestimate the prophetic power of islands. The Christian view of the apocalypse came from the vision of Saint John on the island of Patmos, “Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a son of man…”[[9]](#footnote-9) And in Japanese lore, the deities Izanagi and Izanami descended from Heaven to the island Ono-goro and erected a heavenly pillar and a spacious palace.... "Let us, you and me, walk in a circle around this heavenly pillar and meet and have conjugal intercourse," said Izanagi. They united and gave birth to children, [the eight islands of Japan].[[10]](#footnote-10)

**\*11** The persistence of religion is a remarkable feature of world history. It is invoked by some theologans as evidence of a transcendent being. China, for example, has experienced many cycles of the rise and fall of dynasties and numerous transfers of political power, yet the religions of the Far East — Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism — have continued to thrive. Hinduism has survived and prospered in India despite the rise and fall of many kingdoms and regimes. Similarly with Islam in the Middle East and Christianity in the West, regardless of strong secular influences. Religions that have persisted have left their mark on history, forming many influential cultural spheres, with four great spheres surviving to the present day: the East Asian sphere, the Hindu sphere, the Islamic sphere, and the Judeo-Christian sphere. All religions have checkered histories of internal persecution and conflict against the other, but all seek higher ideals for their believers and in some cases, for humanity in general. These values include loving kindness and exhortations to live for the sake of others.[[11]](#footnote-11) Up to 80 percent of the world’s population live under the influence of one of the major religious cultural spheres. Whether or not they are religiously observant, this number constitutes a massive foundation for articulating a philosophy for the Deocene.

**\*12** A history of the Deocene will have to include atrocities committed in the name of religion such as crusades, jihads, and the Inquisition. Beyond such ugly landmarks, Deocene philosophers and theologians will have to address persistent problems accompanying religious belief, for example the assumption that ultimate truth resides in only one faith position, and that true believers should colonize, control, or in some cases, eliminate nonbelievers. To simplify this task, in light of the emerging planetary and spiritual crises we are experiencing, the first step is to map out the big history and present situation of the Deocene. I have used the metaphor of islands heuristically.

**\*13** In my imagination, the Deocene is more like deep layered and overlapping structures, with erupting out-flows of undersea lava forming new lands, new islands on top of much older sediments. Culturally the Deocene dates back at least 5,000 years. I suggest it can be developed into a powerful and constructive, rather than destructive, worldview if we begin from the premise that interfaith consilience is a prerequisite for the establishment of a peaceful, civilized world and go from there in constructing viable alternatives to the secular Anthropocene.

1. I first shared this critique at the British Society for the History of Science’s Global Histories Twitter Conference in 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. How many times must it be repeated that this term was coined by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and popularized by geochemist Paul Crutzen? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremy Baskin, “Paradigm Dressed as Epoch: The Ideology of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Values* (forthcoming), jbaskin@unimelb.edu.au [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Paul J. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415 (Jan. 2002): 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James R. Fleming, *Fixing the Sky: The checkered history of weather and climate control*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J.D. Bernal, *The World, the Flesh & the Devil: An Enquiry into the Future of the Three Enemies of the Rational Soul* (1929), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bernal/works/1920s/soul/index.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, “‘Earth system’ analysis and the second Copernican revolution,” *Nature* 402, supplement (Dec. 1999): C19-C23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Discussion between Bruno Latour and Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, Part of “Anthropocene Lecture: Bruno Latour,” <https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/video/anthropocene-lecture-bruno-latour>. Moderated by Bernd M. Scherer English original version May 4, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-n_44M2nLw>, at time stamp 35-36min. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Christianity. Bible, Revelation 1.9-19* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Shinto. Kojiki 4-6*  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For many more examples, see Andrew Wilson, ed. *World Scripture*, <http://www.religious.org/ucbooks/WorldScr/WS-19-00.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)