Environmentalism and faith: Post-apocalyptic religions as mediators of paradigm shift

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The political will problem

The environmentalist movement, looking back on its efforts since Rachel Carson’s monumental *Silent Spring* (1962) to promote more sustainable resource use and battle various tragedies of the commons, cannot ignore a simple and chilling fact: its strategies are not working.¹ Despite our knowledge of the gross causes and consequences of global climate change and taking into account our vast technological powers certainly capable of mitigating at least the most dire projected outcomes if strategically marshaled and directed, carbon emissions continue to rise.² The issue is not of ignorance or technical capability, but of political will, which we can understand as actionable public opinion. As Garrett Hardin’s seminal article points out, there is no technical solution to this kind of problem—a collective tragedy of the global commons. If stabilizing the earth’s climate was simply a matter of finding some sort of “magic bullet” technology

¹ I acknowledge that such a broad claim is difficult to substantiate, and I am sure that any number of specific campaigns or initiatives could be used to argue the opposite. I am not, however, founding this observation on any particular group of sub-movements, but rather on the easily observable cultural trends and attitudes concerning the environment, technology, and the fruits of industrialization, and of course the empirical trends of greenhouse gas emissions.

that would solve our problems without miring us in political controversy or asking us to change habits and give up luxuries, we would gladly implement it. It has become clear, however, that such a dream—nuclear fusion, the discovery of a new element, and so on—is at best quixotic and at worst a dangerous point of fixation, a way of holding our gaze outward to avoid implicating ourselves. Asking what we can do, once we have decided against shutting our eyes and hoping for a miracle, brings us to political will and so to its moving parts: education, communication, and, at root, ethics. Addressing the causes of climate change, possibly the most tragic “tragedy of the commons” we have encountered yet, “requires a fundamental extension in morality.”

This is not to say that, in terms of technical fixes, there is no room to improve. As The Skeptical Environmentalist (2001) author Bjørn Lomborg writes, there is a space between business as usual and despairing paralysis to focus existing political and technological resources on the “right things” in order to maximize any number of “goods,” such as reducing global hunger or building infrastructure capable of withstanding rising sea levels. However, even this approach, which would largely be compatible with existing economic and political systems, requires a mustering of political will that has proven beyond our abilities—most starkly in rich and technologically-advanced yet massive and partisan America—not to mention that it comes with its own challenges. Even the more modest of environmentally minded reform initiatives tend to

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5 Edith Efron’s The Apocalyptics (1984) attests to the divisive politicization of data and the lack thereof when it comes to environmental issues. See Edith Efron, "The Apocalyptic Movement," in The Apocalyptics: Cancer and the Big Lie (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). Lomborg also writes about the crippling costs of acquiring and analyzing enough data to make sound judgments about which “goods” to maximize and how to measure progress toward them. See Bjorn Lomborg, "Cost of Gathering Data on
founder on the rocks of controversy and sabotage, from widespread denial, fear, and apathy to the sowing of misinformation and political scapegoating. It is difficult to conceive of technical or managerial approaches of any significant magnitude that would not require at least some political consensus in their funding, reallocation, or implementation, thus returning us to the basic question of how to organize cooperative societal reform against such a large, diffuse problem for which we ourselves are largely to blame.

Furthermore, environmentalism, as a movement both historical and contemporary, has faced its own internal problems. The strategies of its preeminent public figures like Carson and her ideological descendants have revealed some advocacy approaches to be particularly self-subverting. Emotional appeals founded on the power of charismatic megafauna, megaflora, and their conceptual counterparts (read tigers and pandas, redwood trees, and then ideals of “nature” and “wilderness”) are dismissed as sentimental and negligent of more pressing human misery or ignorant of economic realities. On the other end of the spectrum, strictly utilitarian appeals have found that humans are not in fact purely rational beings, but rather all too capable of acting against their own self-interests in both the short and long term even when provided with the relevant data.6 Guessers of exact year, quantity, or percentage of any given environmental variable (as with Paul Ehrlich’s more sensational predictions of famine and breakdown in The Population Bomb) have often been disproven solely by time, and worse, the more general implications of their arguments largely discredited in the public eye after their exact

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6 As was so vividly illustrated by the at best lukewarm response to The Club of Rome’s The Limits to Growth (1972), along with other works in that rational, data-driven vein.
predictions do not pan out. In retrospect, the guilt-leveraging environmental jeremiad saw its first and final peak in efficacy with *Silent Spring* and has since met with less inspiring results, including crippling problems of credibility and the sowing of paralysis and impotence rather than agency.

The political will problem facing environmentalism and thus humanity as a whole—if any kind of solution is possible before systemic collapse renders it a moot point—requires more powerful tools and a more fundamental target than saving this or that species, or persuading homeowners to use fluorescent bulbs: not *what* people think about their environmental impact, but *how*. It has become clear that the kind of reform required to realize even a modest climate change mitigation and adaptation effort is literally unthinkable for most people. No one wants to settle for a lesser quality of life, especially, as in Hardin’s “double bind,” when they feel that their sacrifice will be for naught, ultimately exploited by those with less pressing consciences—a feeling that is, unfortunately, probably justified. The scale of the problem is too big and too abstract, spatially and temporally, for our minds to comprehend and the required changes in lifestyle too drastic for our overwhelmingly materialistic metrics of what denotes a successful or happy life. Climate change, political psychologists have noted, “seems tailor-made to be a low priority for most people,” either because it seems too distant or

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7 The response to the peak oil movement is another vivid example of this trend. As Gross and Gilles point out, the “focus on the moment when peak oil arrives—and whether that moment will be apocalyptic or merely the moment when the market begins to invest more aggressively in alternative energy sources—ignores the pressing reality of the trend.” From Mathew Barrett Gross and Mel Gilles, *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), 150.


9 Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," 1247.

10 Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, "Apocalypse Fatigue: Losing the Public on Climate Change," http://e360.yale.edu/feature/apocalypse_fatigue_losing_the_public_on_climate_change/2210/.
because calls to action ask too much. Moreover, beneath specific failures to persuade and empower lies a larger, causal conflict of ideologies. The central premise of environmentalism, that the environment imposes physical limits on human consumption, is at odds with a general and widespread way of looking at the world. Whatever terminology you care to use—“dominant social structures and ideologies,” “contemporary economic orthodoxy”—and however diverse our individual worldviews may be, there are broad patterns in our assumptions about the world holding us back from addressing climate change, and they orbit around the myth of unchecked progress.

The paradigm of progress

Inherited from Enlightenment ideals and Judeo-Christian eschatology, the “working faith of our civilization,” what we will call “the paradigm of progress,” comprises the belief in “steady improvement with no foreseeable ending at all”—that through perpetual economic growth and scientific development the future promises ever-

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12 Ibid., 198.
13 Ibid.
14 Both economic and scientific (in the sense of the scientific method applied to the developing field of the “natural sciences”). Lynn White notes the emergent dominance of “the Baconian creed that scientific knowledge means technological power over nature” subsequent to the “so-called” (his skepticism) Industrial Revolution, or in less periodizing terms the mid-1800s, although he is careful to stipulate that the ideas themselves were not novel, but rather extensions of a technological history spanning back into the Middle Ages, just as most Western apocalyptic beliefs have their roots in the Bible and its ideological predecessors in Jewish cult beliefs, despite various resurgences throughout recorded history. Ideas regarding history of science from Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," Science 155 (1967): 1203-04. Ideas regarding history of apocalypse from Gross and Gilles, The Last Myth.
17 Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 47.
increasing levels of material wealth and power, with the spread of social justice and freedom from want. The concept of a “paradigm” is particularly useful here to identify the somewhat flexible but deeply embedded myths and assumptions that persist through, in contrast, superficial historical and intellectual periods. The term “paradigm” comes down through the common redeployment of Thomas Kuhn’s coinage, originally formulated in terms of the history of scientific revolutions, to the founding assumptions of massive cultural movements in general. Kuhn’s definition of a community’s (or, here, a civilization’s) paradigm is the “set of recurrent and quasi-standard illustrations of various theories in their conceptual, observational, and instrumental applications.” The abstractness of this definition makes it relatively simple to fit onto a broader framework, bringing with it a useful vocabulary for discussing a community’s relations to its paradigm and, specifically, how such buried and causal assumptions might be manipulated or changed, if at all, rather than just retroactively observed. The concept of paradigms used in this essay is roughly equivalent to the concept of worldviews in social psychology, grounded in the thesis that “to maintain psychological equanimity throughout their lives, people must sustain … faith in a culturally derived worldview that imbues reality with order, stability, meaning and permanence; and … a belief that one is a significant contributor to this meaningful reality.” Thus a paradigm is the buried


19 Ibid.

cultural framework on which we hang the meaning of our lives: the story of where we come from, what we are up to now, and where we are going.

The idea of a paradigm of progress can then help us understand the endurance of the common concepts underlying exponential rates of consumption and population growth over the last few centuries, a period which otherwise saw so many trends and ideas tried on and cast off again. If the late twentieth century saw the loss of an explicit belief in utopia as the endgame of modern globalized society, along with various other postmodern disenchantments and deconstructions, the paradigm of progress has undoubtedly survived at least implicitly, unconsciously, or for lack of a better alternative. The intra-paradigmatic shift from explicit utopia to implicit perpetual progress is only one step in an extended series of conceptual developments stretching back to the paradigm’s inception. For example, the mid-twentieth century utopian belief, at the root of familiar techno-progressive (or, from our perspective, retro-futuristic) fantasies like The Jetsons et al., was itself the product of secularized Judeo-Christian teleology: visions of paradise reupholstered in the still optimistic terminology of the early “post-Christian age.” The changes in sub-beliefs stretch even further back, as much a part of our intellectual history as the underlying assumptions they all share. The advent and rapid growth of the Internet age has ushered in yet another reincarnation of modernity’s founding beliefs in slightly different terms: contemporary prophets congregate in Silicon Valley to discuss the perfection of the human species with body- and mind-enhancing technological upgrades, genetic research into life extension, and the

21 Gross and Gilles, The Last Myth, 188.
23 White Jr., "Historical Roots," 1205.
prospect of smarter and smarter AIs to do our problem-solving for us.\textsuperscript{24} Our primary, if unconscious, way of finding meaning in human existence is still the story that, overall, things will get better: our children will have things easier than we do. The historical spectrum of end goals stretching from heaven to technological perfection conceals a largely unchanged set of basic values.\textsuperscript{25}

And so it comes as no surprise that, when you trace most specific environmental (and environmental justice) problems to their causes, you inevitably bump up against this grounding faith in progress. It lies beneath reckless pesticide use, exploitative investment banking, vast monocultures, horrific food industry practices, and even the most mundane and rudimentary building blocks of our civilization like suburban sprawl, car culture, and fossil fuel dependence. The unspoken or even bare-faced justification is that pollution, oppression, and other “externalities” (this concept lives in scare quotes maintained by its persistence in our society’s discourse combined with its blatant ethical and ecological bankruptcy) will be redeemed by the strides made in terms of progress broadly and, of course, vaguely construed, yielding a sort of trickle-down theory spanning the globe and stretching off into the future—that is, if these costs are justified in terms of the greater good at all. Our political and economic systems have become disturbingly adept at making those justifications, or any sort of accountability, easy to simply ignore. Luxuries turn into necessities, even at the highest price, because the brunt of the cost is so widely

\textsuperscript{24} A vivid and prescient imagining of the paradigm of progress in these terms can be found—among many such hypothetical explorations among the science fiction of the modern age—in Isaac Asimov’s short story, “The Last Question.” In it, increasingly powerful AIs enable humanity to colonize the solar system, the galaxy, and then the universe. The last question of the title refers to, appropriately for the subject of this essay, how to deal with the unsolvable problem of entropic unraveling. That same question faces our society today, at a much earlier date and less technologically advanced stage than Asimov imagined. The story is available online at http://www.multivax.com/last_question.html.

\textsuperscript{25} White Jr., "Historical Roots," 1207.
“externalized” onto the less privileged, including the vast majority of the earth’s current population, future human generations, non-human life, and the earth’s climate itself.

To produce change in these practices requires a change in the paradigm that frames and sustains them: a paradigm shift. This is, however, no simple task. There is a reason that the study and vocabulary of paradigms comes from observing trends in the past rather than planning proactive changes to the present and future. To abandon one paradigm, as the theory goes, requires a fully-fledged replacement with as much explanatory power as its predecessor, and moreover the ability to account for “those further phenomena which the last was notably unable to explain”\textsuperscript{26}—in our case the world’s various ways of saying that rampant carbon emissions have scary and life-threatening consequences like rising sea levels, drier droughts, more destructive and less predictable storms.

There are other barriers to paradigm shift as well. For one, as a paradigm is a fundamental explanatory frame, it carries the weight of an entire culture’s ramified beliefs, systems, and institutions; in this sense it is like an ideological keystone in the vast arch of civilization.\textsuperscript{27} For instance, our paradigm of progress is thoroughly entangled in globalized capitalism, ideals of democracy, and the cultural dominance of Abrahamic religions. Additionally, while paradigms (like scientific theories) are technically explanatory narratives imposed \textit{on} reality, their subject is “effectively regarded \textit{as} objective reality” and thus to lose one’s paradigm is “in a very important sense to loosen one’s grasp on reality.”\textsuperscript{28} People do not like to feel that they are losing grip on reality.

\textsuperscript{26} Douglas, "Paradigm Shift," 204.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
They go into denial, become paralyzed, scapegoat or lash out at those around them. This backlash has been called “worldview defense,” the “subconscious reaction” to mortality and other threats to our sense of meaning, or our paradigms.\textsuperscript{29} We will go to staggering, self-subverting, even murderous lengths to protect our sense of how the world works, a perhaps surprising truth borne out many times over in our world’s history of violence and denial.

To understand at least the basics of why we do this, it is important to recognize that the gap between one paradigm and the next consists of chaos and despair—a total void of meaning or sense of purpose. Without culture, we stare straight into the abyss of mortality. That unstructured, unadulterated space between (or rather behind) paradigms can be found in the various movements and periods of disenchantment and disillusionment throughout recent history, all going by names conveying profound uncertainty about the possibility of meaning after various facets of the dominant paradigm’s explanatory power have been eroded. It makes sense that these collective reactions have tended to appear after particularly vicious or extended instances of violence or oppression, making mortality difficult to ignore: variations of existentialism and nihilism, for example, have tended to spread within societies under or recovering from oppressive regimes, or directly involved in warfare. Much in the way that repeating a word over and over again makes one acutely conscious of the contingency of its semantics and perhaps of semantics in general, being forced to dwell on the concept of existence and its tributaries (life, death, nothingness, etc.) without the usual mediation of culture often works to destabilize our understanding of it, both practical and formal.

\textsuperscript{29} Gross and Gilles, \textit{The Last Myth}, 175.
As the nineteenth century grew into the twentieth and then into the twenty-first, the “great chasm of spiritual emptiness that had widened beneath humanity as we marched so optimistically toward the future”\textsuperscript{30} has only widened further, and so we reckon with the loss of even larger sections of our paradigm. The term “postmodernism,” for instance, identifies the effacement of enough of our paradigm to threaten the decline of modernity itself, with which the paradigm of progress is largely coextensive. The sense in which that chasm of meaninglessness seems to stretch endlessly on before us only underscores our predicament: without a new paradigm to replace the paradigm of progress, the future promises the continued gradual decay of our ideological systems, with collective meaning harder and harder to sustain. This is not, of course, a uniquely contemporary malady, but yet another step in the declension narrative of a society working within an aging paradigm. In that sense, you could say that we are, like declining civilizations before us, “dwelling in apocalypse,”\textsuperscript{31} experiencing the gradual degradation of both our physical world and our assumptions about it.

It is hard to image how the stakes could be higher or the challenge greater for those with an active interest in the ecological stability of the planet—narrowly environmentalists, but ostensibly all people. These are ideas, questions, problems playing out at the level of a civilization’s rise and fall. The increasing imminence of climate change’s apparently apocalyptic effects and the increasingly evident inability of our current systems to adapt forces our hand as a species. We therefore ask not a question of paradigm shift in a vacuum or as an academic experiment, but a question of whether

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 117.

\textsuperscript{31} Frederick Buell, "Crisis History: From Prophecy and Risk, from Apocalypse to Dwelling Place," in \textit{From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century} (Routledge, 2003), 204-5.
enough of us can transition to a more tenable, literally sustainable way of thinking about
the world before things get too bad to worry about thinking, and (to lapse into the
apocalyptic language that is nearly unavoidable in this context) before the breakdown of
the foundations of idealized progress leaves us metaphysically stranded in that void of
meaninglessness—and very concretely trapped in a destabilized climate increasingly
hostile to human life.

Paradigms and religion

How can we even begin to approach such a monumental task? The history of
environmentalist writing and advocacy is strewn with failed attempts, failures not in their
clear-sightedness or argumentative coherence, but in their inability, judged
retrospectively, to enact significant change in how societies—rather than individuals or
even movements—think about resource consumption and individual responsibility. But
while there is no “magic bullet” technical solution to explosive population growth or
climate change, perhaps there is room for improvement within environmentalism itself
and its efforts to produce the kind of widespread social change that would be as close to a
solution as we can get. We need tools to facilitate the “extension in morality” that Hardin
calls for, a way of bolstering our moral psychology and community organizing powers to
meet a challenge that dwarfs them individually.

One of the most promising and obvious resources along this line is religion.
Religions have been working with what we have called “paradigms” for millennia: they
provide “basic interpretive stories of who we are, what nature is, where we have come
from, and where we are going,” comprising the “worldview of a society.”

And in the admittedly problematic traditions of conversion and evangelism, religions have developed toolkits for the exact scenario our civilization faces today, albeit on a significantly broader scale: shifting from one worldview to another, from one god (or lack thereof) to another. The central question of theology is arguably not one of speculation or esoteric knowledge, but of social organization: “How are we to live? To what should we devote ourselves? to what causes give ourselves?”

Even today, in our increasingly secularized world, religion often informs, or rather structures, specific beliefs about the world prior to other ideological commitments like political party and even pro- or anti-environmentalist stances. Faith operates on the same deep-seated level as societal paradigms, an insight which on the one hand gives credence to arguments that the belief in progress is merely a secularized faith for the modern era, and on the other points to the power of sub-rational belief in achieving otherwise unthinkable shifts in ideology and consequent behavioral patterns.

At the very least, religions tend to be realistic about the working psychology of human beings in a way that environmentalism and other activist movements like it largely have not. Religions, crucially, do not attempt to impose moral codes and guides to


34 For example, conservative church-attending Protestants were found to be much more receptive to private environmental actions, like recycling and car-pooling (based on an interpretation of the Bible as in favor of environmental stewardship) than they were to publically supporting environmentalism, due to the link between organized Christianity and American conservative politics. This is just one example of how religious beliefs, acting almost as private or individual paradigms in their causal power, can account for otherwise conflicting attitudes toward the world. Data from Darren E. Sherkat and Christopher G. Ellison, "Structuring the Religion-Environment Connection: Identifying Religious Influences on Environmental Concern and Activism," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 46, no. 1 (2007): 81-83.
behavior in terms of logical necessities, but traditionally “sell” these often wholly pragmatic societal frameworks (think of the Ten Commandments) embedded within a vivid story-based tradition, or, in anthropological terms, “an emotionally compelling communal system of symbols, beliefs, and ceremonies.” Christianity’s biblical tradition is only one example; the cultural ecologist E. N. Anderson points to beliefs in Hong Kong about attracting good luck by planting trees and to Mayan rituals of “feeding the field” that foster a community’s emotional involvement in its agriculture, marrying a society to its means of survival in contrast to our culture’s remarkable achievements in distancing itself from its means of production. We need only consult a map tracing the distance each of our groceries has travelled to reach our kitchen counter to comprehend the magnitude, for better or worse, of our divorce from what sustains us.

These examples may strike us as quaint or too disconnected from our problems to be of help, but their relevance is not in the specific practices as much as the approach to establishing sustainable norms that informs them. Even after centuries of intellectual development, people are only rational agents within specific, circumscribed bounds, and these bounds are almost always established sub-rationally, emotionally, or intuitively. Reason, from the Renaissance onward, has essentially been deified, regarded as the sacred inheritance of the human race. Yet our use of reason is so often limited to idiosyncratic patches of our lives otherwise directed primarily by circumstance and intuition—Anderson characterizes its role as “an aid to planning how to reach goals set

36 Ibid., 9-10.
by instincts and emotions.”37 This is certainly not to denigrate rationality, but rather to assess honestly its place in our lives. The danger is in subscribing to Cartesian fantasies of reason disembodied, the inception of which composes a key historical locus in the development of the human-nature conceptual divide and its fruit, techno-progressivism, speciesism, and others of modernity’s worst ideological offenders. Upon reflection, although we carefully plan how to get food, the gnawing pain of hunger is primal and physical. Although we carefully plan social advancement, “the aching need to be loved and accepted is not something we have decided to feel after careful analysis.”38 I would suggest that the same logic applies to modern civilization’s paradigm of progress: reason undoubtedly operates at a furious pace within its bounds, but the establishing framework itself is buried at the level of emotion and intuition. Dislodging it requires an approach tailored to this fundamental psychological reality.

Contemporary thinkers considering this problem have acknowledged that there “has to be something more to hold out to people”39 than the empirical prospect of a more sustainable civilization that largely promises fewer creature comforts, less physical security, and the psychological trauma of disengaging from centuries-old habits and traditions enabled by modernity. Environmental policy writer Richard McNeil Douglas proposes emphasizing the “non-material aspects of the good life,” the attainment of which the modern era’s obsession with novelty and growth, and the consequent ubiquity of materialism, has precluded.40 Douglas and others have also pointed out that breaking

37 Ibid., 12.
38 Ibid. Both hunger and social advancement are Anderson’s examples.
40 Ibid.
with the paradigm of progress is inevitably linked with the thorny prospect of reckoning with our mortality as individuals and the mortality of our civilization, all without the comforting eschatological doctrines supplied by religion in past societies. This has led some to contend rather mystically that we need to “learn how to die”\textsuperscript{41} in order to learn how to live. In less poetic language, we might propose that we will have to find ways of reckoning with mortality that do not depend on the myth of perpetual progress and so require untenable rates of resource consumption sustaining radically unequal societies. The circular, mythic cosmologies of many pre-Christian societies—as opposed to the linearly progressive, historical cosmology of Christianity and thus our modern empiricism—which still survive in some Eastern religions offer one possibility, although substantially modified Judeo-Christian doctrine or fully novel belief systems are also plausible options. Above all is the insight that our environmental problems are entangled with questions that have traditionally been addressed by religion, philosophy, and other belief systems.

Whether or not these questions go beyond the capacity of reason, they carry immense emotional weight. As concepts, they operate at the same primal level as paradigms or beliefs. This is not to propose an environmentalist religion, but rather to acknowledge that the relatively young environmentalist movement has come up against problems that religions have been grappling with for much longer. While perhaps today’s gradual marginalization of religion as superstitious and limiting (relative to any other point in recorded history) is impossible or undesirable to reverse, religion’s strategies for binding communities together and successfully directing them toward useful moral codes

and sustainable practices are more important than ever. Recognizing that, as Anderson puts it, all “traditional societies that have succeeded in managing resources well, over time, have done it in part through religious or ritual representation of resource management,” it seems possible, and even paramount, to salvage their “use of emotionally powerful cultural symbols to sell particular moral codes and management systems,” if not the religions themselves.

Bringing religion into the fore of environmentalist discourse admittedly complicates an already hopelessly complicated arena. Balancing out its history of sustainable resource management and framing of meaning, organized religion carries with it a grisly record of oppression, cruelty, and warfare, not to mention an alignment with some of the most environmentally exploitative practices and philosophies. Moreover, in an age so preoccupied with scientific objectivity and the relentless pursuit of empirical truth, it is difficult to avoid the problem posed by active religious beliefs—the extent to which they require what in literary terms is called the “suspension of disbelief,” or generally a demotion of conventionally (in our time) primary concepts like factuality below faith. Some thinkers, coming from a more theological angle, speak in terms of the “mystery” of human existence, adapting traditional conceptions of God to (relatively) more empirically defensible positions and relying on the still remaining gaps in human knowledge about the origins of the physical universe, or on metaphorical and allegorical interpretations of religious symbols, texts, and traditions. Others stay on

43 Ibid.
44 Lynn White points out that Western ideas of the human right to exploit natural resources have their roots in the Bible, in White Jr., "Historical Roots," 1205. The development of capitalism is also intertwined with the cultural dominance of Protestantism (following Weber).
anthropological ground, like Anderson, speaking in terms of the pragmatic social codes grounded in religious cosmologies, the “tightly ordered systems that provide very good guides for behavior but are based on assumptions that are incorrect from the point of view of Western science.”\textsuperscript{46} Regardless of intellectual orientation, religion’s fundamentally subjective, non-scientific basis presents its own problems in our world. All of these complicating factors introduced by religion, added to the already immense and abstract scale of cultural paradigms, make an actual or hypothetical attempt at paradigm shift difficult to conceive of or analyze in purely theoretical terms.

Usefully, this exact subject has been treated in popular literature—“fleshed out,” so to speak, in the hypothetical people and societies of our cultural imagination—enabling a more concrete examination of religion’s potential as an instrument or mediator of paradigm shift. While sociological studies and polls of public opinion could perhaps provide a more objective avenue of inquiry toward the possibility and mechanics of a paradigm shift away from progress toward some version of sustainability, the very idea of moving to a new paradigm is fundamentally creative and inevitably radical. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus on well-known works of fiction that ask or implicitly respond to many of the questions I have raised, in hope that the fruits of some of our most cherished creative minds might act, retroactively, as rich, shared thought experiments offering insights and, at times, warnings regarding the intersection of the environment and our beliefs about it.

\textsuperscript{46} Anderson, \textit{Ecologies of the Heart}, 11.
Religion and the post-apocalyptic genre

Newly invented religions are a relatively common literary trope, especially in science fiction and fantasy. This essay will limit discussion to two particularly popular and influential examples: Mercerism in Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? (1968) and Bokononism in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963). In both of these novels, a newly created religion is used to sustain a moral code intended to hold society together in the face of extreme duress, both social and environmental. Both also include a literal apocalypse directly preceding and in the midst of the narrative, respectively, in the form of thermonuclear holocaust or a close analogue. Although the threat of nuclear war has receded somewhat from the public (media) consciousness since the mid-twentieth century, when these novels were written, the specific form and consequences of an apocalypse are less important than the scale and imminence of its threat, and in these categories nuclear war and global climate change differ primarily in rate of annihilation.

Before delving into the specifics of each novel, I would like to discuss briefly apocalypticism and the closely related, potent myth we call the post-apocalyptic in generic terms. Apocalypticism has been a resilient cultural trope since Christianity’s birth and emergent dominance, solidifying a conception of time as historical, linear, and therefore moving toward some end.47 However, as humans have become more knowledgeable and so more capable of manipulating their environments and each other, visions of apocalypse have moved away from speculations about the time and nature of the Second Coming toward manifestations of specific anxieties and fears. Zombie viruses

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47 Gross and Gilles give a very good rebuttal to the argument that societies have been preoccupied with apocalypse for ages. In fact, they argue, apocalypse is directly tied to Christianity and its movement from a cyclical, mythic conception of time to a linear, historical one.
have a lot to do with the threat of pandemics, AIDS, influenza, and so on. Meteor strikes and other cataclysmic astronomical events are tied to scientific discoveries about the earth’s geological history and place in the cosmos. Nuclear holocaust speaks for itself: like the strontium-90 and cesium-137 planted in the atmosphere and geological record as bombs were tested and deployed, the advent of nuclear terror can be traced with precision in time and space. Climate change, as the newest ascendant apocalypse, is perhaps the scariest yet in its inevitability and unpredictability. We are not exactly sure what to expect or when to expect it, but given our growing knowledge and not so decisive action in the face of that knowledge, we can be fairly sure that we will not like whatever it is, whenever it happens.48

So the first major significance of the post-apocalyptic genre is that it undertakes a direct reckoning with the largest and most pressing fears of the time. For *Cat’s Cradle* and *Do Androids Dream*, it was nuclear war. These days it is climate change, which is not to say that nuclear war has gotten any less scary or possible, given at least the number and increased power of armed warheads in arsenals around the globe. The other suspects, including pandemic and destructive astronomical events, though perhaps less devastating than they are sometimes portrayed in sensational news reports and works of fiction, are certainly not off the table. Post-apocalyptic works go beyond imagining the event itself to working through what this might mean for our world, our physical and ideological systems, and our senses of self.

The other major significance of the post-apocalyptic is that it involves imagining a new beginning. The end of the world, in the ways we usually conceive of it, is the end

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48 This is more a reflection of public sentiment than scientifically rigorous and up-to-date information. We can obviously observe the present and extrapolate regarding things like droughts, storms, sea levels, migratory patterns, extinctions, and so on.
of our world—not the end of everything. Apart from the most hardy of solipsists, we can agree that something will continue on after we do not, even if that something seems to us tremendously meager or blighted. In the biblical tradition, the apocalypse is both the end of our human world and the advent of the heavenly one. Since the Book of Revelation we have become less optimistic about what waits on the other side of the abyss, but it seems likely that it will be something rather than nothing at all, even if that something resembles Jonathan Schell’s “Republic of Insects and Grass”\(^{49}\) rather than a republic of heaven.

Ultimately, confronting apocalyptic fears requires imagining what lies beyond them. This vision might consist of a wholly lifeless earth or a reduced but still surviving remnant of humanity. When destruction is assuredly great but unknowable in detail, imagination has a lot of leeway.

In post-apocalyptic imagining, then, there is something of “the pleasure of the sequel.”\(^{50}\) In fact, in many existing examples of the genre, apocalyptic dystopia leads directly to the rudiments of utopia, perhaps as a legacy of the Second Coming myth, or simply because utopian ideals tend to reveal themselves in any construction of a new world.\(^{51}\) Few dystopian or apocalyptic works are wholly nihilistic; more often the calamity sows the seeds of—or even explicitly delineates, inversely—the utopia. The post-apocalyptic genre, then, including both novels discussed in this essay, brings together a society’s biggest fears and most optimistic hopes for the future; it is very vivid and concise manifestation of a culture’s self-consciousness.


In their post-apocalyptic religions, Dick and Vonnegut converge on a number of common literary and in fact anthropological and theological tropes, including moral codes centered on empathy; the importance of rituals, ceremonies, and other focuses for belief; the thin line between religious symbolic narrative and lying; the dark side of religion as a potential means of pacifying oppressed demographics; and finally the possibility that religion is not powerful enough to effect paradigm shift, that the remnants of our paradigm of progress still have enough power to subvert and subsume escape attempts. Above all, each bares the causal chain that Lynn White identifies regarding the connection between identity, community, and environment: “What people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them.” And, we should add, our continual process of constructing our relation to the things around us is informed primarily by religion, belief systems approximating religion’s powers, or a lack thereof manifested in feelings of meaninglessness and impotence. Each novel presents a complex and nuanced scenario of societies reckoning with recent or imminent apocalypse, emphasizing both the enormous potential power of religion to shift paradigms and the limits of that power. Although *Do Androids Dream* was written five years after *Cat’s Cradle*, it raises a number of questions that are discussed explicitly in the latter, so I will address it first.

**Case study 1: Mercerism in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?***

The religion in *Do Androids Dream*, called “Mercerism” after its eponymous prophet figure Wilbur Mercer, explicitly elevates empathy to a position of primary

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52 White Jr., "Historical Roots," 1205.
importance in its moral code. Empathy has become the preeminent virtue, replacing reason as the unique power distinguishing humans from other beings, particularly, in the novel, from biological androids, distinct from humans only in their shorter lifespans and purported inability to empathize. This development in morality, we learn, was encouraged by the post-apocalyptic American government with a policy requiring each citizen or family to acquire and care for an animal as an active and sustained public demonstration of empathy.\(^{53}\) Once the policy was repealed, however, social custom and religion sufficed to sustain the practice of keeping animals: to refuse would be “immoral and anti-empathic.”\(^{54}\) An ethic was thus retooled and instantiated, at least in civic discourse.

Mercerism, notably, is a technologically mediated religion. Its place of worship, central ritual, and holy text have been consolidated into an electronic device called an “empathy box,” something like an advanced virtual reality console, allowing its users, the faithful, to achieve “fusion” with Wilbur Mercer and through him the entire network of empathy box users.\(^{55}\) These users find themselves undergoing “physical merging—accompanied by mental and spiritual identification—with Wilbur Mercer”\(^{56}\) and thereby active participants in the religion’s central narrative, a symbolically laden perpetual climb up an “old, brown, barren” hill.\(^{57}\) This technological experience also works to create, and even impel, feelings of empathy and communality. In his ascent, Mercer is pelted with


\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 19-21.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 20.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 18.
stones by unseen antagonists, and the empathy box users not only feel these blows, but physically bear them in cuts, bruises, and in extreme cases even in fatal wounds, evincing an almost comically literal vision of empathy. A sense of togetherness with the others users is at the same time physiologically stimulated by broadcasting “the noise of their many individual existences” and artificially conjuring feelings of united purpose.

Mercerism thus presents an ambivalent take on the potential of religion to effect meaningful systemic and social change. Its primary achievement is to reorient value around empathy rather than disembodied reason. This is a meaningful step forward from our society, in which globalization and individualism have created a system of superficially connected but fundamentally fragmented individuals, communities, and nations—an environment tragically unsuited to our moral psychology, which is best adapted to smaller communities in which our sphere of moral relevance is limited to those we see around us every day, discouraging us from ignoring the negative “externalities” of our actions. An emphasis on empathy is particularly apt as a preventative measure taken against nuclear war, which is fundamentally a matter of systematically stunted empathy and an enflamed sense of conflicting purposes, exactly what Mercerism resolves in its forced unification. Whether artificially stimulated empathy would be as suited to resolving climate change, which fits the tragedy of the commons model more than the nuclear war model, is unclear, but it certainly could not hurt, especially if environmentalism were reframed primarily in terms of environmental justice and the alleviation of human misery, which is certainly not in short supply.

58 Ibid., 25.
59 Ibid.
In many ways, however, Mercerism offers a markedly cynical take on humanity’s ability to move beyond the paradigm of progress and its ills. The society depicted in Do Androids Dream remains fully in the throes of a free-market capitalist system focused on alleviating human problems with technology (if at all). The Rosen Association megacorporation, which manufactures all of the androids we meet in the novel, is recognizable as a thinly veiled stand-in for any technology giant intent on creating more and more powerful tools regardless of their ethical implications: we know that the androids in the novel are enslaved to perform particularly hazardous or undesirable human labor on planetary colonies.

Even the radically empathic Mercerism is not exempt from the touch of commodification and progress. For one, its central symbolic narrative is a nearly exact visualization of the paradigm of progress: an often grueling and unpleasant climb perpetually reaching upward toward a vaguely articulated ideal. More specifically, Rick Deckard is obsessed over the course of the novel with “upgrading” from his electric sheep to a rarer and more valuable organic animal; one of these being beyond his means, he moons at charismatic megafauna in shop windows and compulsively browses through his “Sidney’s” animal catalogue. ⁶¹ This consumer dissatisfaction is, as in our society, sublimated into less direct terms: Rick bemoans “the tyranny of an object” in his electric sheep, its inability “to appreciate the existence of another.” ⁶² While we might ourselves empathize with this impulse to have a pet cat over a pet rock, the most important and most difficult deployment of human empathy is toward beings (and perhaps nonbeings) that are not so charismatic, as Rick begins to realize at the very end of his adventures:

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⁶² Ibid., 40.
“The electric things have their lives, too. Paltry as those lives are.”63 Paltry as this almost-epiphany is, it at least gestures toward a substantive internalization of empathetic Mercerist doctrine. Ultimately, however, Rick is a single and unusual case in his society. Largely, the animals that were intended as focuses of active empathy become appropriated by consumerism as social signifiers, stepping stones in a very intact paradigm of progress.

The technologically mediated nature of empathy and community in Mercerist practice raises other questions about its transformative power. Can feelings of empathy and community achieved through “artificial brain stimulation”64 be regarded as authentic feelings, or authentic moral improvement, when they are “stimulated” as opposed to “natural” or even just “real” feelings, much as narcotics stimulate euphoria via dopamine release in a way that we distinguish from authentic happiness or fulfillment? Morality is conventionally taken to apply only to what is in our power to do or not to do: we “cannot take, or be given, responsibility for what is not within our power to control.”65 The empathy boxes seem to offer exactly what Hardin calls for as a solution to tragedies of the commons: an extension of morality. However, when that extension consists in submitting passively to stimulated emotions and experiences, its validity as morality becomes questionable. The novel does not offer a definite take for or against such a mediated relationship with empathy and community—which are, after all, traditionally qualities of directness and closeness—but it prompts in a search for the extension of morality a distinction between actual and quasi-moral achievements.

63 Ibid., 239.
64 Ibid., 5. The technology being described here is “the Penfield mood organ” rather than the empathy box, but we are led to believe that the latter functions in the same way.
Finally, the novel explores the possibility of sustaining a religion on a central narrative that is verifiably false, in the sense that it is evidently fictional, or at least, in Anderson’s words, “incorrect from the point of view of Western science.” One of the narrative’s most climactic moments is the revelation that Wilbur Mercer is not in fact “an archetypal superior entity perhaps from another star,” but rather a character put on by “some bit player marching across a sound stage.”\textsuperscript{66} With the unveiling of Mercerism’s total fictionality, the picture of the religion as soap opera is completed, with masses of viewer-believers tuning in from the comfort of their own homes to “fuse” with an illusion acted out by an aging, washed up Hollywood actor. Against this process of disenchantment, which is spun by the mass media in the novel’s world as the exposure of a disingenuous “swindle,”\textsuperscript{67} however, the novel places a scene in which the group of Nexus-6 androids slowly dismembers a spider, plucking off its legs to see with how few it can continue to walk. The dismemberment of Mercerism, this connection suggests, is a similarly un-empathetic, destructive act, crippling and perhaps killing something that, despite its unattractive origins, was itself alive.

The crucial question the novel poses here with regard to Mercerism is whether it can still walk after having its legs of credibility torn away. Both Deckard and J. R. Isidore experience hallucinations of Mercer suggesting that the loss of objective credibility is a challenge to be surmounted by believers, rather than a fatal blow, in order to preserve the religion’s central values. To Deckard, Mercer says, “you must go on as if I did not exist. Can you understand that?”\textsuperscript{68} Later, after the televised discrediting of Mercerism’s origins,

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\item \textsuperscript{66} Dick, \textit{Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?}, 205.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 207.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 176.
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Mercer tells Isidore, “They will have trouble understanding why nothing has changed. Because you’re still here and I’m still here.”\(^6^9\) Despite its technological mediation and spurious cosmology, the religion still has value—and, the novel suggests, only ever had value—in the moral achievements and practices of its adherents. This insight is reinforced by Deckard’s reconciliation with electric animals at the novel’s end, wherein his acceptance that even electric animals have some kind of life echoes the comparison drawn between the religion and the spider: although discredited Mercerism may lack the intellectual and aesthetic integrity of an intact religion, or a moral system grounded in purely objective observations of human psychology, it retains value (life) perhaps in itself, and certainly in the moral extension of empathy and community it enables, insofar as these values can be transferred from individual “stimulated” feelings to real, self-sustaining, and collective beliefs and practices.

**Case study 2: Bokononism in *Cat’s Cradle***

Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* picks up, in a sense, where *Do Androids Dream* leaves off by centering its narrative around a religion that makes no claim to a factual cosmology. Bokononism, revolving around its own prophet figure, Bokonon, can be summed up by Vonnegut’s epigraph to the novel, which draws from *The Books of Bokonon*, the religion’s holy texts: “Live the *foma* (harmless untruths) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy.”\(^7^0\) This is a humanist’s approach to religion, much like Anderson’s, which begins with the question of how to structure the most sustainable

\(^6^9\) Ibid., 212.

\(^7^0\) Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle* (New York: Dial Press, 1963), vii.
(or least miserable) society and concludes with the need for religion or something like it. This is equally, then, a wholly pragmatic approach to social organization—“It works. I’m grateful for things that work. Not many things do work, you know.”—delivered with Vonnegut’s characteristic irreverence and satirical edge, skewering ideals traditionally held as sacrosanct in our society, like patriotism (along with all “national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries”), scientific or technological progress, and truth itself (“I just have trouble understanding how truth, all by itself, could be enough for a person”). Bokononism could, in fact, be regarded as categorically incompatible with most conventional formulations of environmentalism as well in its radical anthropocentrism. There are no visions of untarnished wilderness or humans and non-human beings living in empathic harmony behind the tenets of Bokononism; in this sense it is the simplest and most direct product imaginable of an anthropologist’s religion as instrument of social stability. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator asks another character, “What is sacred to Bokononists?” “Man,” the answer comes, “That’s all. Just man.”

This unvarnished statement of priorities may merely seem to return us to the original causes of climate change and other instances of environmental and interspecies exploitation. After all, what are the causes at hand—the paradigm of progress, rampant burning of fossil fuels, explosive population growth—if not monstrous ramifications of a driving anthropocentrism? Does not this distillation of the sanctity of humanity just bring

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71 Ibid., 171.
72 Ibid., 2-3.
73 Ibid., 54.
74 Ibid., 211.
us back to where we started, with the boundless exploitation of natural resources and non-human species justified by the call that it is all for our own good? In this sense Cat’s Cradle is at odds with the deep ecology, or biocentrism, that has characterized a good portion of the environmentalist movement’s rhetoric, which insists that the root of our environmental problems lies in the limiting of our collective moral bounds at the edge of our species, excluding (to various degrees) non-human animals, non-sentient beings, ecosystems, and the earth itself, thereby demoting them to the status of instruments to our own gain. Vonnegut’s contention with Bokononism, however, is that an anthropocentric value system is more flexible than the deep ecologist’s criticism assumes, just as divergent interpretations of the Bible have led some Christians to advocate for humanity’s right to use natural resources (including other animals) as it will and others to advocate for humanity’s responsibility to respect “God’s ownership of and concern for nature” by instead assuming a role of conservation and stewardship. Bokononism moves from the sanctity of humanity to a belief system unequivocally structured around community and empathy, with the goal of creating individuals and societies that are above all “brave and kind and healthy and happy.” As shown in Anderson’s analyses of belief systems in sustainable traditional societies, this kind of social structure does not preclude specific beliefs and practices that might otherwise stem from biocentric philosophies or religions, but rather uses religion to mediate between human psychology and environmental (and interpersonal) orientations that would otherwise be beyond it.

It is worth, then, briefly considering the specific values and practices within Bokononism that Vonnegut derives from the overarching sanctity of humanity. These—

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75 Sherkat and Ellison, “Structuring the Religion-Environment Connection,” 74.
like the aforementioned *foma*, "(harmless untruths) that make you brave and kind and healthy and happy"—are consolidated and encoded in abstracted terms de-familiarizing otherwise common concepts, like community and empathy, which overexposure and habits of thought often render too semantically inert to be useful. Among the most important of these terms is *karass*, identifying "teams that do God’s Will without ever discovering what they are doing," bound together by a *wampeter*, "the pivot of a *karass*," elucidated as following:

> Anything can be a *wampeter*: a tree, a rock, an animal, an idea, a book, a melody, the Holy Grail. Whatever it is, the members of its *karass* revolve around it in the majestic chaos of a spiral nebula. The orbits of the members of a *karass* about their common *wampeter* are spiritual orbits, naturally. It is souls and not bodies that revolve.

In other words, the term identifies communities unified by something more real and productive than the societal organizing principles with which we are most familiar, like race, nationality, and political party, for example. Vonnegut lampoons these as instances of “a false *karass,*” a *granfalloon*, “a seeming team that [is] meaningless in terms of the ways God gets things done.” These terms compose the first half of Bokononist doctrine, the central emphasis on real communities as the founding social unit, as opposed to capitalistic individualism, which is particularly insidious in its tendency to leverage the power of community (or rather the need to belong to a community, as manifested in the ubiquity of the ersatz *granfalloon*) to suppress dissent, win votes, or sell products.

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76 Also, in the novel these terms are words from the language of San Lorenzo, the fictional island republic that is the birthplace of Bokononism.

77 Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 2.

78 Ibid., 52.

79 Ibid., 90.
The other half of Bokononism focuses on, echoing Dick, how to bring an ethics of empathy into everyday life. To this end, the religion’s central ritual is the ceremony of boko-maru, “the mingling of awarenesses,” in which two practitioners remove their shoes and press their bare feet together: “We Bokononists believe that it is impossible to be sole-to-sole with another person without loving the person, provided the feet of both persons are clean and nicely tended.” In sharp contrast to the use of empathy boxes in Do Androids Dream, the ceremony of boko-maru not only spurns technological mediation, but seeks to eliminate even the most basic social mediations of clothing and conventionally “civilized” behavioral norms. This is not quite the “free love” movement, but it does set aside traditional social patterns for the fostering of interpersonal connections. And although boko-maru is a thinly veiled analogue for sex, by separating physical intimacy from the traditions of violence and power imbalance surrounding sex itself (just as the San Lorenzan terms de-familiarize potentially trite metaphysical concepts), boko-maru reasserts the usefulness of physical interaction in enabling empathetic behavior. I imagine that it is at least slightly more difficult to oppress or otherwise harm someone after you have sat down and pressed your bare feet together with theirs.

Together with the karass, the concept of boko-maru insists on the importance of communities bound together by common goals and physical togetherness, working toward the good of the group. In this, Bokononism resolves several of the most problematic aspects of Dick’s Mercerism (or rather bypasses, for the fictional universe of Do Androids Dream is significantly less optimistic about the possibility of religion

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80 Ibid., 158.
81 Ibid.
escaping the ideological taint of consumerism and individualism) including the questions of authenticity posed by the technological mediation of community, empathy, and morality overall, along with the continued and vividly problematic dominance of the individual as the basic social unit and capitalism as the overarching economic system.

And yet the novel’s island of San Lorenzo, despite being a fully Bokononist republic (though, of course, officially Christian to maintain the invigorating thrill of revolution and democratized martyrdom) is not without its problems. Although Bokononism, like almost all religions, is implicitly utopian, in practice San Lorenzo straddles the line between utopia and dystopia. The first and perhaps most obvious issue with Bokononism is that none of it is true, implicating everything it relies upon and produces as lies or dependent on lying, thereby arousing our instinctive sense that being lied to is inseparable from being harmed or oppressed. The truth issue is also the one Bokononism has the least trouble overcoming, and it does so with a higher-level honesty. As the very first sentence in the novel’s epigraph gleefully proclaims, “Nothing is this book is true.”\(^{82}\) This disclaimer does not subsequently get out of the way, but is continually brought back into the narrative, a perhaps surprising commitment to accountability for a book self-professedly dealing in lies. Within the first five pages, the novel cites the first sentence of \textit{The Books of Bokonon}: “All of the true things I am about to tell you are shameless lies.”\(^{83}\) The complexity introduced by this contradiction is a further step toward Vonnegut’s overall take on the fraught truth-value of religion. Finally, a revised disclaimer about both the novel and Bokononism is delivered: “Anyone unable

\(^{82}\) Ibid., vii.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 5.
to understand how a useful religion can be founded on lies will not understand this book either. So be it.”

This insight, toward which the ending of *Do Androids Dream* gestures, is fundamental to the anthropological discussion of religion. In Anderson’s words again, this is the approach to religions as “tightly ordered systems that provide very good guides for behavior but are based on assumptions that are incorrect from the point of view of Western science,” or at least look very strange from that point of view. It is very easy today, even habitual, to move from this openness to religious subjectivity to the image of systematic oppression via religion, as we continue to confront inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class, among others, sustained or sanctioned by some of the most arbitrary tenets of Abrahamic religions. However, the intimacy-fostering *boko-maru* is an equally apt example of a behavior that seems very silly and arbitrary to our eyes, its claim to facilitate “the mingling of awareneses” (going soul to soul, or “sole-to-sole” as the case may be) unverifiable from “the point of view of Western science.” The sense of togetherness and mutual humility enabled by *boko-maru* speaks in its favor, and perhaps in favor of other activities or beliefs equally useful for mental and social health despite not being “true.” The pragmatic benefits are empirically verifiable, if not the cultural meaning with which they are imbued. Through an anthropological rather than a dogmatic approach to doctrine and ritual, Bokononism avoids the abyss of religious cosmology unmoored from empirical observation; the use value in its practices comes from the convergence of the two.

84 Ibid., 5-6.
The more damning criticism of Bokononism is its complicity in sustaining San Lorenzo’s cruel and oppressive regime, along with the deplorable living conditions suffered by its inhabitants. The island’s origin story is of a utopia unable to sustain itself, chained to harsh reality by unchangeable economic conditions, with religion subsequently introduced as “the one real instrument of hope.” The dualistic tension created between the republic’s rulers, first McCabe and then Monzano—both dictatorial, unmerciful, nominally Christian—and its prophet, Bokonon—playful, empathetic, mystic—allows the people to “escape” into a sort of narrative happiness while life remains “as short and brutish and mean as ever.” The fine line separating this arrangement from a conventional pairing of propaganda and oppression is that high level honesty within Bokononism itself, cluing its practitioners in on the joke and allowing them to continue on in their beliefs only if they please. The novel equates this setup to employing the full body of believers “as actors in a play they understood, that any human being anywhere could understand and applaud.” So the religion emerges not as a sinister tool of oppression per se, but nonetheless impotent in the face of the unchangeable facts of life, like poverty and the despair of improving one’s material standard of living. The “something more” that Douglas discusses, those aspects of the good life enabled by cohesive communities and a sense of belonging to something greater, certainly cannot be discounted, nor should the power of religion to offer these things even in conditions of material want and physical deprivation. Undoubtedly missing from Bokononism, however, is the connection Anderson makes between belief systems.

86 Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 172.
87 Ibid., 174.
88 Ibid., 174-5.
and the overall sustainability of a society, basic material metrics like access to adequate food and shelter included.

This leads to the pressing question of where environmentalist priorities might fit into a belief system like Bokononism or Mercerism. No explicit discussion of environmental attitudes or commitments is present in either novel, nor in either belief system. In the radiation-filled post-apocalyptic world of *Do Androids Dream*, the environment is presented through the vague binary of cyberpunk cityscape on one side and barren wilderness on the other, all vulnerable to the fallout that has sent most of humanity away to its (conveniently available) interplanetary colonies, twisting degenerative mutations into the genes of the remainder. The logical implications of an ethics of empathy—extending moral relevance beyond humanity—like Mercerism’s begin to dawn on Deckard by the end of the novel, but he is notably presented as a fringe case among an otherwise apathetic and desensitized populace. Nonetheless, that extension of empathy and through it moral consideration to non-human (and even, in the case of electric animals, non-organic) beings is certainly a step toward a better and more sustainable environmental ethic—many wrongs in the world today, environmental and otherwise, can be traced to the demotion of other beings, including other groups of humans, below the bar of moral relevance. So while it is difficult to imagine what a society actually structured around empathy would look like, it seems safe to suppose that it would substantially better (more sustainable, less miserable) than our own—or the one in *Do Androids Dream*, in which that movement toward moral extension has stopped short of ramifying through social and economic systems, but rather been subsumed by the monolithic forces of consumer capitalism working within the paradigm of progress.
In contrast to the retro-futuristic film-noir trappings of Dick’s novel, the world of *Cat’s Cradle* very much resembles our own in the mid- to late-twentieth century, including its pet apocalypse—a global freeze via ice-nine, the stand-in for thermonuclear weaponry—whereas now the slower but more diffuse threat of climate change has joined and perhaps overtaken nuclear holocaust in the pantheon of easily conceivable cataclysms. Due to the cultural dominance of a nuclear-model threat in the novel, there is less a sense of individual complicity regarding the world’s problems, while in contrast we might point to our own habits of consumption as bearing direct responsibility, if only collectively, for the rising sea levels and less predictable storms that the near future promises. Vonnegut does of course implicate the paradigm of progress and the morally degrading forces of individualism, capitalism, and xenophobia in his apocalypse, especially in the way they allow our least flattering, child-like qualities to guide our most important “adult” decisions. Otherwise, however, issues we would recognize as environmental only appear in the vaguest of ways. The “calypso” introducing *boko-maru*, for example, includes the lines, “And we will love each other, yes, / Yes, like we love our Mother Earth,” evoking images of early environmentalism and its association with anodyne initiatives like “save the whales” and “buying green.” And, of course, when the world’s oceans literally ice over at the end of the novel, throwing the planet into a non-nuclear but equally deadly winter, the climate and environment as we might recognize them disappear, putting an end to environmental concerns altogether.

The environmental ethic to be drawn from Bokononism, then, despite its emphasis on community and empathy—surely both important parts of any sustainable

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89 Ibid., 158.
social scheme—is not a wholly positive one. As demonstrated by its relationship with San Lorenzo’s grueling economic conditions, Bokononism indicates a rather fatalistic perspective on life, reconstituting elements of classical Stoicism in more playful terms. To submit oneself to viewing events as “supposed to happen” the way they do, however helpful as a coping mechanism in the face of extreme or prolonged misfortune, leads to the commitment to in some way justify the existing state of things, whether it is an oppressive regime, crushing poverty, rising sea levels, or entrenched systemic habits of thought. Bokononism, with its characteristic blend of whimsicality and cynicism, undoubtedly offers some positives insofar as it enables happiness, community, and freedom from despair, all transparently so as to allow its adherents to accept or reject its tenets as they will. However, following the novel’s ending, to thumb our noses at “You Know Who” while the world crumbles around us—while not lacking in style—is neither responsible nor particularly appealing, especially so long as the world allows for more concerted action, mobility, and organization than the tropical icy wasteland on which Cat’s Cradle closes.

Conclusion

The explorations of fictional religions in Do Androids Dream and Cat’s Cradle suggest a few conclusions about the powers and limits of belief systems to change habits of thought—to what ends those powers should be directed, and which limits are the most difficult to surmount. Mercerism and Bokononism are united in dropping our secular

90 Ibid., 84.
91 Ibid., 287.
deification of the individual and of Cartesian rationality for an emphasis on community and empathy encoded in emotionally compelling shared systems of symbols, beliefs, and ceremonies. The contrast created by the specific nature of the rituals in the two religions raises the question of technical mediation and the tension between the need to extend human moral psychology and the questionable authenticity of this extension when it is imposed or stimulated rather than enabled or encouraged, a fine but significant distinction. Mercerism also suggests that an objectively true cosmology is unnecessary, or at least unimportant, for the value that religion brings to social organization, and Bokononism goes a step further in rejecting truth altogether as a relevant metric when it comes to belief, beginning instead with sustainable practices and human happiness, and from there imbuing them with emotionally potent meaning and context. In these areas, religion is tremendously powerful. The San Lorenzans in *Cat’s Cradle* are able to find joy and meaning in life despite their severe material deprivation and political disenfranchisement. Even the neo-Californians of *Do Androids Dream* find some amount of spiritual solace and communality in the mediations of Mercerism and the keeping of animals, although they remain in a capitalistic system much like our own, with its attendant ills.

The final and largely impregnable barrier upon which both religions founder is the entrenchment of extant systems both material and ideological. Mercerism, with its soap-opera mass-media format, is able to find widespread appeal and following, and in that sense at least constructs the rudiments of an alternative paradigm based on community and empathy. However, the technological mediation, the capitalistic appropriation of

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animals as status symbols, and the shock of the revelation that Mercerism is a “swindle” all point toward its inability to penetrate deep enough into the fabric of society, to shift paradigms rather than merely altering the existing composition. Bokononism, in contrast, essentially does effect a paradigm shift in San Lorenzo, fully reorienting the society’s values around teamwork (the karass), unmediated empathy (boko-maru), and with the overarching concept of foma the idea that all is flexible in social organization and belief systems within the primary goal of creating a healthy society. San Lorenzo is, however, a tiny fictional island, and moreover mired in poverty and oppression—conditions Bokononism seems to depend on rather than oppose. The ultimately fatalistic bent of Bokononist doctrine sacrifices agency and responsibility for a Stoical sense of (playful, cynical) inner peace. Having this recourse in a belief system is probably helpful in sustaining mental health and preventing despair, but at odds with a movement hoping to ignite systemic change and ideological reform.

The limits of religion as a mediator of social change, as explored in these two novels, are undeniable, but not necessarily cause for pessimism about its utility as a whole. The enormous power of belief systems to minister to people’s emotional needs, contrasted with their inadequacy to foment massive social reform on their own, suggests that there is room for—and perhaps even a need to—marry the tools and approaches of religion with the organizational and advocacy structure of a larger social movement like environmentalism. The history of environmentalism’s failures to persuade (or to promote meaningful change thereafter) calls for a recalibration of advocacy approaches to the deeper levels of belief and paradigm, at which level religion, or some belief system
approximating religion’s effects, promises tried and true rhetorical and organizational tools.

Perhaps the largest obstacle to actually implementing the power of belief in environmentalist advocacy is our world’s considerable and ever growing hostility to religion, superstition, and anything positioned against the search for empirical, scientific truth (and so against our dear paradigm of progress). Vonnegut speaks of “the heartbreaking necessity of lying about reality, and the heartbreaking impossibility of lying about it.”93 One possible approach, then, is to balance on the fulcrum of that heartbreaking dichotomy, which he does in *Cat’s Cradle* by leveraging the power of belief while maintaining a high level honesty about the process, so as to reap as many of the benefits of religion as possible while avoiding the nearby danger of coercion and propaganda.

One recent non-fictional example of this approach appears in the writing of the late David Foster Wallace, who through his memory and his works has begun to assume a sort of prophet-like role in our society (though not explicitly religious—similarly perhaps to the way we think of Thoreau). In a commencement address subsequently published and titled *This Is Water*, Wallace couches a barebones ethic of empathy in the terms of just such a high level honesty, addressing the need to overcome a “natural, basic self-centeredness” that is our “default-setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth.”94 He defines the fundamental moral challenge of adult life as the mundane effort to “force myself to consider the likelihood that everyone else in the supermarket’s checkout line is

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93 Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, 284.

just as bored and frustrated as I am, and that some of these people probably have much harder, more tedious or painful lives than I do, overall,” although he is careful to disclaim any sense of prescription or guilt-leveraging, warning, “please don’t think that I’m giving you moral advice, or that I’m saying you’re ‘supposed to’ think this way, or that anyone expects you to just automatically do it, because it’s hard, it takes will and mental effort, and if you’re like me, some days you won’t be able to do it, or you just flat-out won’t want to.”

Wallace, like Vonnegut, insists on maintaining the individual’s agency in choosing what and how to believe as the basis of a feasible modern belief system. Anderson’s formulation of a parallel point is that “a religion must have some ambiguity if it is to spread widely. It must also have few enough rules that it can succeed in a variety of communities.” In Wallace’s words, the “only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to decide how you’re going to try to see it. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn’t. You get to decide what to worship….”

Because, of course, as we have seen with theory of paradigms and the paralyzing void of having no unconscious explanatory frame,

There is no such thing as not worshiping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual-type thing to worship—be it J. C. or Allah, be it Yahweh or the Wiccan mother-goddess or the Four Noble Truths or some infrangible set of ethical principles—is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things—if they are where you tap real meaning in life—then you will never have enough. Never feel you have enough. It’s the truth. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always

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95 Ibid., 6.
feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you. On one level, we all know this stuff already—it’s been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily consciousness.98

These are the same insights we’ve seen woven into the fabric of *Do Androids Dream* and *Cat’s Cradle*, bared and delivered in a kind of contemporary folk wisdom. They are particularly notable because they are not distanced through fiction, but delivered earnestly in a commencement speech, basically a medium of humanistic advocacy.

As Douglas writes, “What environmentalists need to realize is that their ideas are highlighting not just an environmental crisis but a philosophical crisis.”99 If you follow the culprits behind climate change up the causal chain, you come to a problem of applied ethics, Hardin’s prescient call for an extension of morality rather than a fixation on frenzied technological development and “magic bullet” solutions. The common thread running through the texts I have discussed is their preoccupation with the construction of a pragmatic alternative ethical system, a new (or fragment of a new) paradigm or worldview that orients our greatest obligation to *each other* and to the environment we all share through a focus on empathy and community: “a perspective in which self-constitution is not founded in an obligation toward an abstract, groundless Other [like progress or “truth”], but instead is situated in a concrete engagement with a specific milieu that contains a multiplicity of human and non-human actors.”100 Each take on religion runs up against the stubborn barriers to change on the deep levels of belief, but

98 Ibid., 7.
each also highlights the possibility for further innovation in rhetoric and advocacy, of expanding and realigning environmentalism in order to account for the many potent forces grounding and directing human belief. Dick has Mercer, Vonnegut has Bokonon, Lynn White suggests St. Francis as the “patron saint for ecologists,”¹⁰¹ and David Foster Wallace proposes that any of the above is preferable to the self-subverting deification of money and progress in which we are currently entangled. As Anderson observes, “Today, we need all the wisdom we can get.”¹⁰² With a humanistic approach to the history of religion and a high-level honesty about addressing people’s needs for meaning and purpose, perhaps environmentalism can find more success in future years than it has in the past.

References


¹⁰¹ White Jr., "Historical Roots," 1207.


