

Why Do We Disagree on Climate Change?

with Mike Hulme, “(Still) Disagreeing about Climate Change: Which Way Forward?”; Annick de Witt, “Climate Change and the Clash of Worldviews: An Exploration of How to Move Forward in a Polarized Debate”; Lisa Stenmark, “Storytelling and Wicked Problems: Myths of the Absolute and Climate Change”; Jonathan Moo, “Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination: Science, Faith, and Ecological Responsibility”; and Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Can Science and Religion Respond to Climate Change?”

STORYTELLING AND WICKED PROBLEMS: MYTHS OF THE ABSOLUTE AND CLIMATE CHANGE

by Lisa L. Stenmark

Abstract. This article examines the emphasis on facts and data in public discourse, and the belief that they provide a certainty necessary for public judgment and collective action. The heart of this belief is what I call the “myth of the Absolute,” which is the belief that by basing our judgment and actions on an Absolute we can avoid errors and mistakes. Myths of the Absolute can help us deal with wicked problems such as climate change, but they also have a downside. This article explores the experience behind these myths, to better understand how they describe and mediate our experiences of uncertainty, then relates these myths to debates about climate change. I conclude by describing how to engage these myths in a way that promotes better public discourse—and thus better public judgment and collective action—by telling these stories in such a way that we poke and prod wherever the story is not.

Keywords: climate change; public discourse; public judgment; storytelling; wicked problems

In September of 2014 *The Wall Street Journal* published a series of articles with headlines such as “Whatever Happened to Global Warming?” (9/4/14) (Ridley 2014) and “Climate Science Is Not Settled” (9/19/14) (Koonin 2014). The response was predictable—*Climate Science Watch*: “On Eve of Climate March, *Wall Street Journal* Publishes Call to Wait and Do Nothing” (9/20/14) (Climate Science Watch 2014); *The Guardian*: “The *Wall Street Journal* Downplays Global Warming Risks Once Again: The Periodical Follows the Murdoch Media Pattern of Sowing Doubt

Lisa Stenmark is a Lecturer in the Humanities Department, San José State University, San José, CA 95192, USA; email: lstenmark@earthlink.net.

About Climate Change Threats” (9/22/14) (Nuccitelli 2014) and *Slate*: “Climate Science Is Settled Enough” (10/1/2014) (Peierrehumbert 2014). All of these articles criticized the *Journal* for misrepresenting climate science in order to excuse climate inaction. Similar charges have been made against *Fox News*, which not only emphasizes the ambiguity of climate science, but sometimes goes so far as to suggest that climate scientists fudge the data, or outright lie, in order to protect their jobs and lucrative grants, both of which are dependent upon the existence of a global climate crisis. *Fox* detractors, of course, claim that it is *Fox* that lies and distorts facts, which “decreases trust in scientists ... decreases certainty that global warming is happening” and undermines our ability to deal with pressing problems, such as climate change (Hmielowski et al. 2014, 866). There is a lot that could be said about these particular exchanges, but what I am interested in is the role that assumptions about “facts” and the need for certainty play in public discourse and debates, particularly as they relate to our expectations about science and scientific data. There are those on both sides of the debate who claim that the facts are in and that science is on their side. For these people, we disagree because some people refuse to accept facts, either because of ignorance or fiendish intent. Others argue that the science is unclear. If we had better science we would agree on the facts and on the proper response. Until those facts are in, however, we shouldn’t do anything. What all these positions have in common is a focus on facts and hard data, and thus certainty, as the key to public judgment.

The strange thing about these assumption and assertions is that they are useless when it comes to problems and issues such as climate change. As Mike Hulme points out, climate change is a classic “wicked problem”: complex with no definitive formulation, “characterized by ‘contradictory certitudes’ and thus defying elegant, consensual solutions,” and complex enough that “a solution to one aspect of a wicked problem often reveals or creates other, even more complex, problems demanding further solutions” (Hulme 2009, xxii, 334). In other words, when it comes to climate change science is not now and never will be either “certain” or “settled.” Even the data we do have is insufficient to decide how to respond, because the facts themselves exist within particular cultural, social, and ethical contexts, so that our thoughts, feelings, and responses to and about climate change are loaded with deep, often conflicting values and assumptions about the world and our relationship to it. Ultimately, because climate science and climate change are intertwined with ill-defined needs, preferences and values, defined by uncertainty, and riddled with unclear understandings of the consequences and impact of our collective actions, waiting for definitive facts about what climate change is and how to respond is a quixotic adventure, a little like waiting for Godot.

Clearly, we need more than “better science” or “more data” to deal with climate change, and yet the desire for better science and more data (or

more facts) remains the focus of so much public debate and disagreement. To understand why this desire is so pervasive it is necessary to understand the “mythological” dimension of our quest for certainty. By myth, I mean certain core assumptions that are both deeply embedded in and shape our perceptions of the world and our actions in it. These myths are rooted in a deep and fundamental aspect of the human experience—we accept them because they “feel” true and help us make sense of and cope with our experiences of the world. When these experiences are profound enough, and widespread enough, they can have incredible staying power and a profound influence on how we approach the world and each other. One such myth—and it is very much in evidence in climate change debates—is what I call the “myth of the Absolute.” This is the belief that there is an Absolute outside of human history and independent of human limitations—wishful thinking, or selfish motives upon which we can base our judgment and actions and which makes it possible to avoid errors and mistakes. Myths of the Absolute are rooted in the experience of human finitude and fallibility and the realization (or fear) that nothing is certain: what we know can be wrong and our actions have unforeseen consequences. It is also connected to an experience of something beyond our limited existence, something greater than ourselves. Myths of the Absolute are powerful because we *are* fallible and contingent, but we *want* our decisions to be based on something more than an accident of history and we *want* our actions to tap into something eternal and transcendent. The presence of Absolutes can transform beliefs, which may be false, into certainties; and actions, which may be unpredictable and transitory, into something meaningful and everlasting.

In situations riddled with uncertainty—such as debates about climate change—it should come as no surprise that myths of the Absolute are present. The question is whether or not myths of the Absolute can help us deal with uncertainty in a positive way, a question that is not just important to climate change, because fallibility and contingency are fundamental to the human condition. As I shall argue, the answer to this question is yes, but with reservations. In this article, I explore myths of the Absolute to better understand how they describe and mediate our experiences of uncertainty, in the hopes of better understanding how they can help and hurt us when dealing with wicked problems. I will begin by exploring the experience expressed by myths of the Absolute then relate these myths to debates about climate change, exploring some of their problematic elements. I will conclude by describing how we can engage these, and other, myths in a way that promotes better public discourse—and thus better public judgment—and collective action.

Behind the myth. In order to understand a myth, it is helpful to start with the experience behind it. As I suggested above, at their most basic,

myths of the Absolute attempt to overcome the experience of fallibility and contingency, and to impose certainty in a sea of uncertainty by relying on an Absolute that transcends the limits of our existence. The Absolute can take many forms—including the ideal that guides Plato’s philosopher king, Cartesian foundations for doubt-free thought, Kant’s reason, and the scientific method—but the experience of the Absolute is fundamentally religious, if only because, in the West at least, our concepts of reason and rationality are rooted in a transcendent source that “still bears clear signs of divine origin” (Arendt 1962, 194). Whether the particular Absolute is laws based on God’s Will or value-free facts, Absolutes are an attempt to escape the human condition, to transcend the limitations of time and place by discovering a solid basis for belief and action.

This connection between the experience of human limitation—our finitude—and our attempts to overcome it links myths of the Absolute to the experience of the tragic. Søren Kierkegaard’s exploration of the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* suggests that it is this dimension that gives myths of the Absolute their depth and makes them so compelling. Kierkegaard, in an attempt to understand the experience of faith, considers various tellings of the story of Abraham and Isaac. In one variation, he imagines Abraham’s response to God’s command to kill Isaac is complete acquiescence. In this case, the Absolute trumps everything, including the limited perspective of Abraham’s hope for the future and his love for his son. It also, presumably, trumps the limited perspective of those hearing or reading the story, who we might suppose would deem it wrong to kill a child, especially one’s own child. Abraham surrenders all of these perspectives and gives himself over to the Absolute completely and unconditionally: whatever God asks, he will do. In this telling, Abraham *becomes* the man who sacrifices his son for God. Kierkegaard points out that this is compelling because a willingness to sacrifice everything for something beyond ourselves allows us to transcend our limited existence and become part of something eternal. Think of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*, a ne’er-do-well who wastes his mind and talent in a life of sloth and substance abuse. In the end, he redeems himself by sacrificing his life for the woman he loves—Lucie—so that she can live happily ever after with another man. Kierkegaard’s meditation on faith suggests that we are drawn to his sacrifice because it means our lives don’t have to be meaningless, because we too can commit ourselves to something greater than ourselves and thereby *become* greater than ourselves. Thus, Carton’s final words: “It is a far, far better thing that I do than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.” We may be tiny specks in the cosmos, but we are capable of transcendence.

Myths of the Absolute have more than existential depth, however; they also have a functional dimension which is connected to the relationship between Absolutes and authority. Absolutes undergird authority—that which

“compels action or belief without the need for force or persuasion” (Stenmark 2013, 6)—by providing transcendent support and justification for more worldly social and political structures. This is the political version of myths of the Absolute—the divine right of kings, the mandate of heaven, God who is the source of the law—and it expresses the close connection between religion and politics. While we often approach this connection with a certain amount of trepidation, it does have an important function in that it provides for stability and makes collective action possible. This connection between authority and action is illustrated by an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Captain Picard and Dr. Crusher are stranded on a planet and have been implanted with transceivers which transmit their thoughts to one another. They become lost and are not quite sure which way to go. Picard—in typical fashion—confidently points, “this way.” Dr. Crusher, able to read his mind, pauses: “You don’t really know, do you? . . . You’re acting like you know exactly which way to go . . . but you’re just guessing. Do you do this all the time?” After a moment’s dissemblance, “No . . .” Picard fesses up, “But . . . , there are times when it’s important for a captain to give the appearance of confidence.”¹ Most of the decisions we make in life are just these kinds of decisions; we really don’t know what to do and it is likely that our response doesn’t matter anyway because—despite what we tell ourselves in retrospect—neither road is less travelled by. This kind of ambiguity and uncertainty, as well as the suspicion that our choices are irrelevant, can make it difficult to make decisions—this is *why* we tell ourselves that it matters which road we choose, and that the one we took was somehow better (or worse) than the one not taken. This ambiguity is particularly difficult to address when faced with a collectivity of perspectives and opinions, and in those instances the presence of an authoritative someone or something can mean the difference between action and inaction. Absolutes give us the confidence to act in spite of uncertainty. Picard is not God—although he seemed transcendent when he was part of the Borg collective—but this story nonetheless suggests that myths of the Absolute provide a sense of confidence that we would not otherwise have, a confidence that allows us to act when we need to.

Existential depth combined with this organizational function make myths of the Absolute powerful tools for mobilization, and they have been an important element of social justice movements, compelling action even in the face of overwhelming odds. In 1826, Sojourner Truth walked away from a life of slavery because she believed God had told her to. She advocated in the courts for the return of her son, who had been sold illegally, because she believed that the Holy Spirit was guiding her. Her confidence in the existence of the Absolute and Its commands were sufficient for her to believe that it was possible to overcome the evil of slavery. In a piece for *The Atlantic*, Harriet Beecher Stowe recounts a story about an exchange

between Truth and Frederick Douglass. According to Stowe's account the two were attending a public meeting in Faneuil Hall, in Boston.

Douglass had been describing the wrongs of the black race, and as he proceeded, he grew more and more excited, and finally ended by saying that they had no hope of justice from the whites, no possible hope except in their own right arms. It must come to blood; they must fight for themselves, and redeem themselves, or it would never be done.

Sojourner was sitting, tall and dark, on the very front seat, facing the platform; and in the hush of deep feeling, after Douglass sat down, she spoke out in her deep, peculiar voice, heard all over the house, —

“Frederick, *is God dead?*”

This story is something of an embellishment—the exchange happened at a Friends meeting in Salem, Ohio on August 22, 1852, and what Truth probably said was the far less poetic “Is God gone?”—but the basics are correct (Mabee 1995, 83–85).

The disagreement between Truth and Douglass is not just whether violence was necessary, although that element was certainly part of the exchange; it was also not a disagreement about the existence of the Absolute—both Douglass and Truth believed in a God that they appealed to for support for their cause. Their disagreement was about whether or not God was active in human history. Douglass did not believe that God was dead, but he did believe that God was “gone,” a remote God who relied on human beings to carry out his will for justice. This is also a myth of the Absolute, which Douglass believed could justify their cause and guide their actions, but the remoteness of God meant that the success of their enterprise was not assured and they might need to take extreme—human—measures to achieve it. Truth, on the other hand, had an evangelical belief in a personal, interventionist God—a God who is not merely alive, but Who is also present. This is the myth of the Absolute in all its glory: God is not dead, God is not gone, God is present and active in human history. Those who align themselves with God's absolute and inexorable will can therefore be confident in their success.

For Truth, and many others in the abolitionist movement, Justice was an Absolute, because the God of History was also a God of Justice. This Justice was more authoritative than laws based on a limited human perspective, and it not only provided a perspective for judging what was false in human history, it justified confronting and resisting it through various forms of civil disobedience. Thus, the words of Angelina Grimké:

I know that this doctrine of obeying *God*, rather than man, will be considered as dangerous, and heretical by many, but I am not afraid openly to avow it, because it is the doctrine of the Bible; . . . If a law commands me to *sin* I will break it; if it calls me to *suffer*, I will let it take its course *unresistingly*.

The doctrine of blind obedience and unqualified submission to *any human* power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, is the doctrine of despotism, and ought to have no place among Republicans and Christians. (Grimké 2011 [1836], 413–19)

This confidence not only made it possible to be for justice, it sustained them in the fight. Doing what we believe is right often demands sacrifice and suffering; and confidence that one's sacrifice and suffering will be worth it in the big picture can be necessary to sustain us in dark times.

Myths of the Absolute help us resist despair by offering the assurance that there is a power outside of history that is working within history that can transform darkness into light. This gives these myths an apocalyptic edge: they provide confidence and hope in the midst of dark times, sustaining us in the face of suffering. We see this in Grimké's letter—if following God's law meant she would suffer, then she would suffer. It was present as well in the Civil Rights movement in the American South. In 2002, there were a number of commemorations of landmarks of the Civil Rights struggle. In one interview, a woman—now in her late 50s—recalled being a young girl integrating a grade school. What she remembered was that none of the other kids would jump rope with her. As an adult, more than fifty years later, she began to cry, remembering the terrible loneliness of the struggle for justice. Then, she composed herself, recalling that at the time, it did not seem so bad. We all knew, she said, that God was on our side. And He would never abandon us, and would never give us more than we could bear. She was able to endure, because she lived in a community inspired to love justice enough to suffer, a community sustained by the story of a loving God who would not abandon them, bound together by a God of promise, who is also the God of Justice.

Absolutes and climate change. By combining existential depth with an authoritative function, myths of the Absolute become powerful tools for motivating people in the absence of certainty, scientific or otherwise. But caution is advised because while these myths may help us cope with our experience of finitude and human limitation, they also have problematic elements. They do not merely express a desire for more and better information—we can always use more and better information—nor do they merely express a desire for a certainty which is rarely, if ever, possible; they sometimes go further, suggesting that certainty of knowledge is not only *possible*, it is *necessary*. Trust in an Absolute can compel us to act, but it can also promote inaction, it can empower and motivate us, but it can also promote the feelings of helplessness and resignation. When our uncertainty causes us to search for Absolutes, we may end up waiting for a certainty that is impossible. And, to the extent that trust in an Absolute causes us to see outcomes as dependent upon factors beyond our understanding and control—or as inevitable—we may start to believe that there

is nothing we can do, which absolves us of the need to do anything. Myths of the Absolute can be an excuse for accepting the status quo, no matter how disastrous or untenable. This resignation can lead to despair. In Kierkegaard's version of the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham becomes a knight of infinite resignation who resigns himself completely to the will of God: whatever God asks of him he will do, even if it means killing his son. Abraham becomes the man who sacrificed everything for God. But, in Kierkegaard's telling, when this knight of infinite resignation gets Isaac back, he becomes bitter and angry because he no longer knows who he is, what it means to have faith or what it is he is supposed to do. Having given Isaac up, he cannot take Isaac back.

Myths of the Absolute do not merely undermine action, they promote non-reflective action, that is, action based on poor judgment. Absolutes can lead us astray—for every prophet there is a false prophet, and the slave-owners were also convinced that God was on their side. When the Absolute “lets us down,” it can lead to despair over the loss of the solid foundation, but it can also lead to a stubborn refusal to say that we were wrong about the Absolute, or that the Absolute had changed. We become entrenched in a disastrous course of action, unable or unwilling to change direction. An unquestioning acceptance of an Absolute can lead to dualistic thinking and, darker still, the absolute conviction that because we are right, and because God or Truth or Facts are on our side we are justified in the use of force or even violence. The result is ever more vigorous efforts to align ourselves with the Absolute whatever the cost. It is as though Abraham, refused to accept that God had changed God's mind and he went ahead and killed Isaac anyway.

All of this is present in debates about climate change where certainty is delayed (or impossible). There are those who suggest that uncertainty means we should do nothing until we can be more certain, and who perceive those who urge action as alarmists or having ulterior motives. In this case, the need for Absolutes restricts our capacity to act by anticipating a certainty that is impossible. On the other hand are those who are convinced that the data is in and that the course is clear, and anyone who refuses to accept this is simply denying reality. The need for certainty causes these people to see certainty where none exists—science will never be “certain”—and can cause them to double down on specific facts, interpretations, or courses of action. Commitment to an Absolute can lead to a dualism in which different parties retreat into opposite camps of irrefutable data—each side relying on the myth of their own absolute with the accompanying conviction that those who don't accept our facts are the problem and are thus demonized. The key here is certainty: try telling a true believer that the data is unclear, or the course of action is not certain and the best that you can hope for is a “yes, but . . .” in which they immediately counter with all of the certainty they can muster and the suspicion that you are a

“climate change denier” or not living in a reality-based world (“reality,” of course, being another of those Absolutes).

Ultimately, myths of the Absolute restrict agency—our capacity to choose how we act and take responsibility for those actions—by limiting us to a range of responses: one must act in accordance with the Absolute, regardless of the consequences. They also undermine the capacity for judgment by closing our minds to alternatives and restricting the plurality of perspectives necessary for good judgment. Furthermore, too much focus on Absolutes in decision making can cause us to become accustomed to accepting what we are told as opposed to engaging in the kind of exchange of opinion that is the core of judgment. We become so accustomed to relying on them, when they fail us, we no longer know how to think for ourselves. Like Abraham, we can’t take Isaac back.

The question is whether the benefits of myths of the Absolute outweigh their dangers. There are those who say no, and that it is therefore necessary to ban them from public discourse and thus from public judgment. This is the solution suggested by John Rawls and others who argue that “comprehensive doctrines” (analogous to absolutes) cannot be the basis of public judgment and should be excluded from public discourse. There are a number of problems with this approach. For one, it is impractical: these myths are not going away any time soon, and, I suspect, most of us would not want them too, because we are all part of communities that accept myths of the Absolute in one form or another, whether God, Science or Something Else. We might reject or feel uncomfortable with other people’s Absolutes, but few of us would be willing to give up our own, even when we don’t acknowledge that we have them. Indeed, Rawls has been roundly criticized for his own reliance on Absolutes, which he merely substituted for those he deemed too “controversial” (see, e.g., Johnson 2007, 29–67; Stenmark 2013, 27–28; and Stout 2004, 65–77). Even if it was possible to banish all Absolutes from public life, by doing so we would be losing powerful motivators that have led to positive social change in the face of overwhelming odds. These are the myths that mobilize; getting rid of them would not only be difficult, if not impossible; it is not particularly desirable.

Rather than asking whether and how to eliminate myths of the Absolute from public discourse and decision making, we should be asking whether it is possible to mitigate their dangers while still providing for the benefits. I think the answer is yes. The key is understanding where the danger lies. It is my position that the problem with Absolutes emerge when they cease to be a way to cope with the experiences of ambiguity, fallibility, and contingency and become a way to deny them, or to deny human freedom in the face of contingency. Our ideas and actions may be subject to error, and involve circumstances beyond our control, but we always have the capacity and the responsibility to choose how we respond to facts and

events as we encounter them. By distorting our experiences, myths of the Absolute make it possible for us to deny responsibility for the choices we do—and do not—make. But eliminating Absolutes will not help us cope with our finitude, nor will it improve our capacity to act or to judge. The solution is not to eliminate myths of the Absolute, but to learn how to think and act *with* them. As I shall argue, the way to do this is through stories and storytelling.

Storytelling. By advocating for storytelling, I don't mean argue that stories and storytelling should somehow replace scientific data and scientific discourses. These are a vital and necessary part of public discourse, helping us develop a provisional understanding of the "facts" and providing technical responses when we determine that there is a problem to be addressed. But scientific discourses alone cannot help us understand the *meaning* of scientific data, nor can they tell us how to apply our technical solutions, or to what end. Science cannot mobilize us to act on what it is we believe the case to be (Hulme 2009, 325). Dealing with wicked problems, and mobilizing a response to them, requires stories and storytelling.

This is true for a number of reasons (for a fuller elaboration, see Stenmark 2013, 180–92). To begin with, only stories are complex enough to describe the myriad elements—persons, actor, motivations, outcomes—that encompass action, and only stories can address the multiple dimensions—cultural, spiritual, personal, religious, economic, and otherwise—that actual problem solving entails. Second, stories help us deal with ambiguity because a story does not claim to provide definitive answers or certainty. Quite the opposite, stories are ambiguous and open-ended because no story is unquestionable or exhaustive. There is always more to the story, another event that has not yet occurred, another perspective not yet included. There can never be a definitive story because a good story invites more perspectives, more interpretations, and more stories. A good storyteller does purport to describe the way the world *is*, she offers a perspective, "this is the way the world seems to me," inviting others to ask themselves how that world might look from this different perspective. Moreover, stories and storytelling do not seek to resolve each of these elements—either collapsing one into another, or combining them into one overarching narrative—but they hold these different perspectives in tension without ever resolving them. By helping us live with ambiguity, stories help us resist the need to seek out, or cling to, definitive answers and solutions—Absolutes. Stories prepare us to consider alternatives even while providing those alternatives, helping us see from many perspectives at once. It is this plurality of perspectives, along with the unsettling of givens, that is the key to good judgment particularly when dealing with wicked problems such as climate change.

The more "scientific" among us will be glad to know that these arguments about the benefits of stories and storytelling go beyond the realm of

philosophical musings. The assertion that storytelling helps us deal with ambiguity and uncertainty, while opening our minds to new possibilities and perspectives, is supported by research. Psychologists at the University of Toronto have conducted research that suggests that “reading a literary short story led to a significant short-term decrease in participants’ self-reported need for cognitive closure” (Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu 2013, 153). When one reads stories “one is encouraged to simulate other minds” and prompted toward “thinking from a different perspective, from the point of view of (at least one) other person,” enabling readers to “simulate the thinking styles even of people he or she might personally dislike” (152, 150). Because stories do not demand a decision, they discourage the urgency and the permanence “that propel the need for cognitive closure” (152). When reading about fictional characters, one does not feel the need of defend one’s own perspective. One can simulate the workings of other minds without the fear of undermining one’s own (153). Non-fiction does not work this way. Propositions and assertions of truth may change people’s minds, but they do so by substituting one certainty for another and do nothing to improve our judgments about those assertions. Clearly, those who insist that “facts” will solve our problems are going about it exactly the wrong way!

Merely eliminating Absolutes will not improve our discourse, or our judgment, because it would not help us deal with ambiguity, uncertainty, or finitude. The solution is thus not eliminating Absolutes, but learning how to think *with* them. This involves storytelling. We need to tell and engage with myths of the Absolute—and all myths—in such a way that they promote action and judgment in the midst of uncertainty by emphasizing the open-endedness, partiality, and multiplicity of our stories in order to promote the many-sightedness of public discourse. Hannah Arendt suggested that this kind of storytelling does not involve a fixed position or a fixed stance: it provides confidence when we are unsure, and shakes our confidence when it is too settled. Our goal as storytellers is to go where the story does not, and to poke and prod where the story isn’t. In the final section I will suggest several aspects of this kind of approach.

Poking and prodding where the story isn’t. The first step is to explore the plurality and multiplicity *within* each story. Kierkegaard provides a good example of this kind of storytelling when he uses multiple tellings of the story of Abraham to explore the multi-sidedness of the experience of faith. Similarly, we can highlight ambiguities within our myths of the Absolute, such as the narrative of scientific progress, which should emphasize the multiplicity of perspectives that is part of the expectation of repeatability as well as the fits and starts and blind alleys of the practice of science and the unintended consequences of scientific discoveries—one need not travel any further than the science fiction section of the local bookstore or

library to find ample resources for these explorations. Moreover, we should emphasize the ways that our myths of the Absolute are often coupled with a sense of hesitancy and caution. The goal of the scientific method might be the search for a value-free perspective and certainty of facts, but it also includes a sense of the tentativeness of those assertions, as expressed by concepts of falsifiability. This hesitancy towards the Absolute is especially prevalent within our religious traditions—far more so than in more secularized versions of the myth. This might be a counter-intuitive claim—it is certainly contrary to the characterization of religion as populated by single-minded ideologues—but a religious sense of the Absolute is regularly tempered by a sense of caution, emphasizing the tenuousness of the relationship between the Absolute and human judgment and action.

Martin Luther, for example, was a man committed to acting on his perception of the truth, regardless of the consequences. His declaration “Here I stand, I can do no other” is a testament to the experience of compulsion embedded in myths of the Absolute. But this declaration—as bold as it was—was not without its caveats, and his understanding of the relationship of the Absolute to human judgments was as dialectical as the rest of his thought (Ebeling 1964, 25). The Absolute can be present in the physical world and in human history—Luther considered Christ and the Sacraments to be prime examples—but we can never be certain that the Absolute is, or will remain present, unchanging, or unambiguous. As a result, nothing we can think or do can remain a manifestation of the Absolute—in Luther’s word, Spirit—for long. Even the doctrine of the Trinity—a basic tenet of the Christian faith—had at one time been the Spirit but “today it is the letter . . . unless we add something to it, that is, a living faith in it” (Ebeling 1964, 97–100). The belief that our experience of the Absolute can be unmitigated or that it always speaks the same Word in the say Way is anathema to Luther’s thought. In theological terms one would say that it is idolatrous and exhibits a demonic certainty that is always a danger with myths of the Absolute. Storytelling, constantly poking and prodding to find the gaps in our traditions and our certainty, is a defense against this kind of idolatry and is itself an active (and ambiguous) manifestation of the Spirit.

The second way to poke and prod where the story isn’t is to play multiple stories off of one another. Hulme, for example, describes four myths connected to our discussions about climate change. The first, “Lamenting Eden,” views nature as pure and pristine, separate from human beings and needing to be protected and saved. It is rooted in our instinct for nostalgia, and feelings of loss, lament, and yearning for restoration. Myths of Eden express our desire to return to a simpler time, in part because we are uneasy with our powers and fear that in impacting climate we may have exhibited godlike powers with which we are uncomfortable. The second set of myths, “Presaging the Apocalypse,” reflects the fear of the future and

impending disaster posed by climate change. Our concern is no longer—or not merely—the wrath of God, but our own voracious appetite in which we have lost the sense of transcendent mystery and gratitude that once offered restraint to our appetites. The third group is “Constructing Babel,” and it is rooted in the confidence in our ability—usually technical and intellectual—to exert power over the environment. This idea of the “conquest of nature” is an expression of “a deeply optimistic strain in the scientific mindset” in which nature is “increasingly colonized and controlled by human conceptual inventions and technological interventions” (Ebeling 1964, 349, quoting John Lie [2007] “Global Climate Change and the Politics of Disaster,” *Sustainability Science* 2: 233–36, 234). This confidence often underlies the belief that we can, somehow, find a technological fix to the problems of climate change. The final set of myths are “Myths of Jubilee,” which express our desire for justice and an understanding of the ways in which climate change becomes the concrete issue that mobilizes concerns for social and environmental justice.

These myths are, of course, intertwined with each other. This is important to note because each can also be an expression of a myth of the Absolute. A pristine version of Eden, for example, can become an Absolute standard by which we judge all our actions, as can a particular vision of Justice at the heart of the myth of Jubilee. These Absolutes can restrict the exchange of perspectives at the heart of public judgment, and undercut calls for thoughtful caution (which is not the same as thoughtless inaction). Apocalyptic myths are also related to myths of the Absolute, because both tap into fear brought on by uncertainty, while myths of Babel suggest the Absolute in the conviction that we can control the consequences of our actions—technical or otherwise. The key is to play these, and other, myths off of each other: when told in connection with myths of the Apocalypse, myths of Babel become reminders that the consequences of hubris can be disaster, while myths of Jubilee can offer hope in response to the despair of apocalyptic imagery.

The final way to poke and prod where the story isn’t is to look outside our own traditions—and our established ways of telling and hearing our stories—and to actively seek out stories that may be radically different from, and even contradict, our perspectives. This has a number of benefits. For one, because this kind of storytelling is not to replace old certainties with new ones but to unsettle our own perspective, this broadens out the vision, as I described above. The further we can go outside our received versions of the story, the greater out depth of vision will be. This exchange of perspectives makes it possible to address our common problems because problem collective action requires more than an agreement about the totality of facts—those facts have to be made comprehensible, interpreted and given meaning that happens in stories. Moreover, the exchange of perspectives is the core of community. The stories we tell with one another, not to

one another, create community where none existed, increasing our sense of responsibility to one another, while maintaining the plurality of perspectives necessary for dealing with wicked problems. This community acts as a counterbalance to the demonic elements of myths of the Absolute. This does not mean ceding our judgment to that of the community, but it does acknowledge that an exchange of perspectives subjects those perspectives to the judgments and the responses of others. We may believe that our trust in the Absolut is well founded, and that this Absolute is greater than our community, but that certainty does not trump community. Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther both made their proclamations of certainty in the presence of others who were invited to judge those proclamations and to respond to them. Similarly, Grimké asserts her belief that the Absolute must take precedence over the laws of the community, but then submits to that same law, acknowledging that if her commitment to the Absolute causes her to violate the law she is willing to face the punishment. Ultimately, the process of exchange draws us together and creates the kind of solidarity that will make it possible to act and creates a sense of meaning and a shared world that we must take responsibility for.

Scientific discourses and data are important for dealing with wicked problems like climate change but stories and storytelling are indispensable, helping us live with uncertainty and ambiguity, opening us up to new possibilities, and drawing us together in a process of public judgment and public action. The practice of storytelling is, in important ways, a religious one, which is why science and *religion* discourse is important, because it reminds us that we are talking about religion as an embedded and embodied practice. This is especially true to the extent that science and *theology* concerns itself with doctrinal statements, as opposed to storytelling. Our goal as storytellers should always be to poke and prod wherever the story isn't—to point to Absolutes when we fail to act, to point to uncertainties when we become too confident, and to always think about how to tell stories that provoke judgment and increase the plurality of perspectives and open our minds to alternatives, stories that help us judge and act in the midst of uncertainty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A version of this article was originally presented on a panel at the 2014 American Academy of Religion annual meeting in San Diego, California in November 2014. Thanks to Willem Drees and *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* for the invitation. Thanks as well to members of the panel and to all those in attendance for their comments and questions.

NOTE

1. www.st-minutiae.com/academy/literature329/260.txt. Beginning of Act Four, 18–19.

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