

# Sideris, "Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World"

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## Book Review

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Lisa Sideris. *Consecrating Science: Wonder, Knowledge, and the Natural World*. University of California Press, 2017.

This is the second of Lisa Sideris's books that deal with religion, science, ethics, and the environment. In her first, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (Columbia University Press, 2003), she was critical of Christian thinkers who misrepresent nature by neglecting and/or misappropriating scientific data. In this, her most recent book, she continues her critical stance, though toward a (mostly) different group of thinkers: scientists and Christian thinkers, all of whom, she claims, turn science into a mythopoeic quasi-religion, often turning (and therefore skewing) our direction of wonder toward the expert or scientific explanation, rather than to unmediated experience of reality. Pulling no punches, she is adamant that the new epic cosmological narratives that many of these authors espouse proffer the human a far too central – and unmerited – role in the world, which, contrary to these authors' intentions, does nothing to turn humans into benign members of the Earth community.

Her critique of the works of Richard Dawkins focuses on his dismissal of mystery as that-which-ought-to-be solved. By having readers revel in the scientific explanation of the rainbow, not the experience of it, for instance, Sideris avers this estranges humans from finding meaning in our own experience of reality. A similar critique is targeted at E.O. Wilson who, while espousing the merits of enjoying nature in itself, nevertheless, through his reductionist thinking, diminishes all reality under one mode of knowing, namely the scientific. Sideris continues her criticism by turning to Loyl Rue and his devaluation of religion and elevation of the scientific story of the universe, and similarly critiques Ursula Goodenough for her recrafting of religion based upon scientific understanding.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry receive a special place in her analysis, as their writings are the genesis of the grand cosmological narratives, or Universe Story, many others praise. Sideris asserts such narratives not only bear a resemblance to Wilson's notion of consilience (the unity of knowledge), but in their presentation leave little room for individuals to question 'presumed facts' or even the meaning behind the story drawn from the data.

It is at this point that the devotees of Berry and followers of Teilhardian thinking, Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Brian Swimme, come under Sideris's scrutiny. In a separate chapter, Michael Dowd and Connie Barlow's sometimes uncritical understanding of science as religion is dealt with. While Sideris posits qualifications – where these authors, notably Tucker, Grim and Swimme, wish to promote a more humble role for humans in the world – she finds central in

their overall approaches a cosmic optimism with the human as a sort of new, good manager of the planet (formerly lead by bad managers).

This last point is interesting, as Sideris draws a parallel from this line of reasoning to some current narratives about the Anthropocene, which, instead of calling for humility from the human in the face of the destruction we have done to the planet, places humans as beings to whom Earth (Gaia) has confided its destiny. In this manner, Berry's call for a switch from our current "technozoic" era (where we continue as plunderers of Earth), to the "ecozoic" era (where we become a benign presence on Earth), is reframed as humans becoming beneficent dictators of the planet.

The book ends with a tribute to the thinking of Rachel Carson, with a nod to Loren Eiseley, who paint a more humble role for the human, directing all of us to wonder at reality as it comes to us, unmediated by the scientific expert, without trying to resolve the mystery that presents itself to us.

There is much to commend in this book. Sideris upholds a strong place for the humanities and its own pursuit of knowledge against a relentless scientism, stemming mainly from the likes of Dawkins, Wilson, Goodenough, and – ironically – former Christian pastor Michael Dowd. Sideris is also erudite on the issues surrounding the study of wonder, taking insight from many scholars who have tried to wrestle it away from those who tolerate mystery as a mere stepping stone to eventual full knowledge of the universe. Moreover, her work serves as an apt caution to the sometimes overly optimistic future painted by the new cosmologists, as she calls them, and their overly anthropocentric view of the role of the human.

Her work, however, can be tiring to read. It's the tone. While she raises caveats and qualifications, the reader gets the sense that Sideris is angry at these thinkers. She does not let up, suggesting, for example, that Berry and Teilhard receive an "almost hagiographic devotion" from the above thinkers. On the work of Berry, she is not always correct in her conclusions. While Berry does assign a preeminent role to science, which Sideris uses to propose he and others consign a sacred status to it, Berry, she neglects to mention, was also adamant that science is deficient and inadequate in certain aspects of understanding, calling for the wisdoms of other religions, of women and of indigenous peoples to the same table.

Curious is Sideris's many claims that the cosmological story of the universe is unlikely to serve as a basis for ecological action. Yet, the experience of a number of women religious congregations – certainly throughout North America – who have been imbued by Berry's teaching, shows that ecological action has indeed come out of the new story. Also odd, given Sideris's role as a scholar in religion and science, is that nowhere does she outline her operative conceptualizations of science or religion, apart from some casual mentions. Is this important? I think so for two reasons: first, she calls for an "accurate and clear-eyed appraisal of what

sciences are” (7) but does not explore the epistemological underpinnings of the scientific endeavour; and second, she critiques these authors (who are mostly Catholic) and their call for a new story without detailing the role within religion these underlying myths – how we got here, what our role is – play. Catholicism is a religion that maintains that humans are made in God’s image, as co-creators of the planet. To be fair, the new story of the universe devalues the human in great measure compared to traditional church teachings, which have not quite caught up with recent findings in science. The question then is not whether the grand narratives are problematic, but whether they are not better directed toward a predominantly Christian and Catholic audience where grand narratives make up the DNA of this religion.

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