

Professional Development Grant Final Report

International Scientific Congress: Globalistics 2017
Lomonosov Moscow State University
25-30 September 2017
Moscow, Russian Federation

Dr. David Blanks
History and Political Science Department

9 October 2017

Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

Moscow State University is the site of the Eurasian Center for Big History and System forecasting and home university of two of the most prolific scholars/editors in Big History, Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev, both of whom I've known and worked with for over a decade. At the last International Big History Association (IBHA) meeting, Amsterdam, July, 2016, I was invited to submit an article to one of the journals they edit, *Evolution* (Uchitel Publishing House, Moscow). I am currently working on that project. In addition, they invited me to submit a paper to this year's International Scientific Conference, which I did, and which was subsequently accepted. This particular paper is part of a larger project that I am working on, a conference and a book-length edited volume on religion and Big History. Last year I submitted a \$200,000 grant proposal to fund this larger project to the Templeton Foundation, but it was turned down. I intend to try again with the National Endowment for the Humanities this year.

Brief Review

My presentation was called "The Church Scientific or *La religion de l'humanité relancé.*" It examined the origins of the big history worldview in medieval and early modern Christianity, the way in which its "science vs. religion" discourse has changed very little since the mid-nineteenth century, and on how scientific history, for all its insistence on objectivity, empiricism, and scholarly method, often approximates in practice and outlook the very religious traditions that it desires to overturn.

In essence the problem here is whether Big History, a newly emerging discipline in history, is legitimately scientific and objective, as it claims to be, or if it is a form of scientism, which is an ideology that purports to base all knowledge on scientific fact and on the scientific method. The argument goes that there are some questions, particularly questions of meaning, that science cannot address, and that other forms of knowing, particularly philosophy or theology are required.

My research in this area is at the forefront of international discussions on theory, meaning, religion, and science in Big History. Big History itself is a powerful new teaching and research field that aims to combine the natural and social sciences. Within the past ten years it has developed its own organization and its own journal; has produced the first Ph.D. in the field (Macquarie University, Sydney); has had a national education initiative funded by the Bill Gates Foundation; has been introduced as part of the core general education requirements at several universities, both in the United States and

internationally, and is now being taught in hundreds of high schools in the U.S.; it has its own series on the History Channel; and will in the estimation of many replace world civ as a gen ed course in a majority of U.S. colleges and universities in the next ten to twenty years. This project explores the limits of scientific knowledge and the ethical questions surrounding the teaching of Big History courses and the ways in which the discipline itself is currently still being formed.

Summary of Findings, Outcomes, Experiences

That David Christian, Craig Benjamin, Lowell Gustafson, Andrey Korotayev, and Leonid Grinin chose to attend my session and listen to my presentation is confirmation enough of the seriousness with which scholars in the big history community take my work. These are all among the top, indeed, are the top names in the field. (The other 3-4 most well-known international researchers were not in attendance at the conference.)

I was gratified by the discussion that my presentation engendered, including from these particular scholars, and am also happy to be able to report that Dr. Gustafson, who is President of the International Big History Association and editor of the *Journal of Big History*, has asked me to submit an article for consideration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I am very appreciative of the opportunity that ATU's Professional Development Grant gave me to participate in this conference. It is a professional enhancement opportunity of inestimable value, which not only presented me individually with a positive scholarly experience but at the same time gave me the chance to enhance the reputation of Arkansas Tech University as an institution that is committed to serious scholarly research.