First of all, let me thank you, Jeffrey Robbins, for all your work in organizing the Seminar on God and the Human Future. We can all learn from your ability to conceptualize a project that has the coherence to result in the book project we are here to discuss, the graciousness to invite and value wide participation, and the dexterity to adapt it in a process that represents the table conversation that is the metaphorical foundation for the introduction we are here to discuss.

Let me offer my personal thanks as well for your invitation to participate in this evening’s session, as a non-specialist whose professional training for ordained Christian ministry gives me enough foundation to snatch at the content of God Seminar discussions and to exemplify the dictum that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. It’s also said that fools rush in… So here I am. Thanks are due, too, to the God Seminar for your openness to collaboration.

This evening I will emphasize three perspectives for my comments in response to the introduction to your volume, *Varieties of Post-Theism*. I have shared written comments and suggested edits on the document with Jeffrey and members of this evening’s panel and I will not repeat them at any length in these initial remarks. My responses are comments on the draft introduction as it reveals the God Seminar’s project and what this means for our projects and collaborations as the Westar Institute. I bring three perspectives to this endeavor:

1) One perspective is as an **INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST FEMINIST** – “Intersectional” indicates a developing understanding of the interconnected web of oppression based on race, economic exploitation, colonization with its seizure of the lands of indigenous peoples and the destruction of their cultures, and environmental degradation with the spectre of
climate change. This perspective also includes commitment to participation in the development of interconnected “bottom-up” sustainable alternative systems.

2) Another is my perspective as a SCHOLAR OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY, specifically as a Westar Scholar/Fellow since 1995, participating actively for the past decade in seminars related to Christian origins.

3) A third perspective is as a NON-CHRISTIAN. The term “POST-CHRISTIAN” is probably more descriptive. I bring this perspective as a member of a long-standing constituency in Westar that I hope will continue to be part of our work and discussions.

I will begin with this last perspective.

I. NON-CHRISTIAN / POST-CHRISTIAN

In reading this draft introduction, I found a sentence on p. 4 to be most unsettling:

Our devotion first and foremost is to the mystery of faith and not the cardinal ordinances of any orthodox belief.

Of course I have no issue with a lack of devotion to “the cardinal ordinances of any orthodox belief,” but devotion to “the mystery of faith” leapt out in a “Whoa, Nellie! This should have been more than obvious but how did I miss this? What was I thinking?” The blinders fell away.

I do not know what I was thinking because I had not really thought about this, but the discovery of the obvious, that we now have a seminar as part of the Westar Institute that is focused on “the mystery of faith” comes as a surprise. Such an explicit statement of the personal spiritual-religious motivations of a Westar seminar is something new. As a post-Christian, I find the use of the term “faith” exceedingly problematic. It evokes a Christianized worldview that defines human experience using a Christian vocabulary it assumes to be universal. It makes me question whether people like me are still part of this discussion. Perhaps devotion to “the search for truth” would not be as narrow but does that still evoke Eurocentric Enlightenment assumptions? (More on the universalizing presumptions of such thought in a bit.)

As I examine my own motivations, I think more about the thought shifts that need to happen in concert with sustainable human life practices in thinking and practice that moves in an awareness of the energies of the earth and the universe. I would look
for a succinct way of declaring devotion to sustainable thought and practice that will allow the survival of human beings and all our relatives on this planet. Conversely, challenges are needed to the conceptions of “God” that are counter-productive to those sustainable practices and are destroying the possibility of a human future.

I realize that a wide range of questions are included in such a distinction, and some of my other comments here will relate to this.

I should also note that the term is problematic from the perspective of a scholar of early Christianity because of the wide range of meaning for the Greek and Latin terms πίστις and fides that have been translated and theologized into English as “faith.” This could provoke a lengthy discussion, but I would recommend setting aside “mystery of faith” in favor of a less problematic and more inclusive word choice. This is not simply a matter of word choice, however, but the revelation of more deeply held assumptions.

II. WESTAR FELLOW/SCHOLAR OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

More than matters of vocabulary need to be addressed in reflections from the perspective of a Westar scholar of early Christianity. The work of the God Seminar surfaces more comprehensive methodological questions for vital discussion within and among Westar seminars.

The book introduction relates a serious difference of perspective that surfaced at a God Seminar discussion at the 2016 spring meeting. One of the scholars of early Christianity confronted the honored guest of the God Seminar, a respected senior philosopher of religion, about his use of stories from Christian scriptures. The Christianity scholar viewed the philosopher’s use of scripture as ignoring decades of critical work and appropriating stories and motifs from the Bible in a dangerously naïve and uncritical way. The book introduction clarifies that the philosopher understood his project instead as post-critical. In the frame of understanding provided by Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutical philosophy, the philosopher understands his work as “a return to religion after the demythologization of religion.” (p. 6) The difficulty remains, however, when old assumptions about biblical stories and motifs are revived without a serious engagement with the critical work that has been done the texts being used. Yet the work of the God Seminar surfaces methodological questions that have been submerged in Westar’s work on Christianity as well. A host of methodological questions surface for both areas of work in Westar.

On the one hand, there is the question: How should the Seminar on God and the Human Future interact with results of Westar scholarship on early Christianity?

A first question emerges around the issue of what the results are and whether or not there is a real consensus. For example, one session of the God Seminar took
unanimous votes on some characterizations of the work and thought of Paul. These “conclusions” were, however, explicitly contradicted in another session at the same meeting where other scholars of early Christianity discussed another scholar’s book on Paul’s rhetoric in the letter to the Galatians. These scholars were forthright in their acknowledgement of a lack of consensus while the presentation made in the God Seminar did not surface an awareness of disagreement with the presumed image of the so-called “radical Paul.”

Perhaps the concrete image of table conversation used in the book introduction can be of assistance here. Picturing conversation rather than dialogue is essential, acknowledging multiple rather than dual perspectives. Intersections of table conversations are also crucial. At the spring 2016 meeting, there was no intersection of the table discussions around one topic that would have produced a more ample conversational fare. Your sharing of the book introduction for our table conversation here allows for renewed possibilities and an expansion of perspectives in an understanding of how the God Seminar interacts with result of work on Christianity.

What would it mean, for example, to recognize a lack of agreement on the statement, “Paul of the authentic letters is a figure of transgression and of an alternative horizon”? (2016 Spring, Report on Anatheism, no. 2) I, for one, would vote black on this. This statement appears as a product of what I have called the “search for a usable Paul,” an enterprise that carries latent assumptions that the authority of Paul (and Jesus) are needed for “transgression and an alternative horizon.” Note the latent assumption of the authority of the Christian texts.

What if we had agreed, instead: “Paul of the authentic letters was an ancient writer who employed rhetoric to enhance his own power and standing in his community.” Or perhaps using terminology from one of the other papers at the same session primarily describing Augustine but grounding the issue in a passage from Paul, we should say more simply: “Paul was a blowhard.” An apology for the supposed “radical Paul” appears to have blunted the effect of that discussion and the issue of blowhardism does not appear to have found its way into the results of the session.¹ More generally, I would ask, “What would it mean for the God Seminar if Paul were viewed without recognized or vestigially assumed canonical authority and instead seen as an ancient writer and community organizer, an influential historical figure in the history of the development of Christianity and Western culture? Does the work of the

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God Seminar require the invention of a usable Paul? What does that say about a view of the authority of early Christian texts? Does not being “confined to historical factual truths” include the invention of history? How does this need relate to the view of “scripture”?

This brings a second question into view. It involves not only who is at the table for which conversations but also deeper questions about our multiple views of early Christian texts. This returns me to my first identification of perspective as a post-Christian. Some Westar scholars’ interest in early Christian texts is informed in part by their various identifications with Christianity, some with an urgent need to redeem it from literalism. Others of us view these texts from standpoints outside of Christianity, some seeing an urgent need for its deconstruction. We have often proceeded together as if our scholarly work is not informed by these commitments. This is just one example. Your work in the God Seminar constructively provokes a need to clarify that there are diverse viewpoints. You have made some preliminary statements about how the texts and critical understandings inform but do not determine your work on the question of God. Perhaps this will be a set of questions to revisit as the work on Christianity proceeds. This brings me both to the flipside and to my third perspective.

III. INTERSECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTALIST FEMINIST

Just as continued conversation around the question of the God Seminar’s use of Westar’s work on early Christianity is needed, we must ask, conversely: How can the work of the Seminar on God and the Human Future assist the work of Westar on early Christianity in engaging in critical discussions of methodology?

Back to the image of the table. I have mentioned the need to clarify that we have diverse standpoints in relation to early Christian texts. Other diversity has proved problematic for the work on Christianity, and this is most visible from my intersectional environmentalist feminist perspective. Here I venture into uncomfortable territory. Yes, it’s prickly, and I realize the risk.

The book introduction mentions “methodicide,” a word coined by Mary Daly in the early 1970s. By this she does not mean a fumigation that indiscriminately destroys the question of method but a surgical strike that destroys the hegemony of methods that claim primacy, a hegemony enhanced by a refusal to examine methodological assumptions and to proceed instead with a catch-all assumption of historical-critical method as if it were objective.

Over the years, some of us who are not part of the original limited circle of primarily white men from particular graduate programs that established the Westar Institute have kept participating as those scholars have taken the hegemony of their
unstated methods for granted. These are the methods of the Enlightenment project of history and its corollary, a historical-critical approach to biblical texts. Enlightenment thinkers, including the founders of the Westar Institute, seek freedom from the constraints of dogma and authoritarian Christianity “by establishing the authority of ‘objective’ methods of interpretation.”

More recently, as many scholars who are not males of European extraction have entered the field, the supposed objectivity both of the tools of these Enlightenment-based historians and of their results has come under scrutiny. In the words of [Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner], “much of the so-called ‘objectivity’ for which historians aimed appears to be a universalization of their own particularity.”

On occasion, challenges to this presumed objectivity and the hegemony of this universalizing of their particularity has produced an audible defensive bristling from these beloved and venerable scholars of Westar.

One of the most difficult moments I have observed was the response when an honored guest, a senior feminist scholar, took them to task over the question of their oblivion to issues of method, including feminist method. She chided them for ignoring methodological issues that had already been part of discussion in the academy for decades. It is notable that some of this methodological work draws from Paul Ricoeur, especially his notion of a “hermeneutic of suspicion.”

Several of the prominent Westar scholars repeated their defenses of the early decision to avoid the question of method in order not to get bogged down. It seemed to be almost a mantra. I saw little willingness to acknowledge the issues the senior feminist

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scholar raised. Instead several of these men spoke with me during the breaks in an effort to defend themselves and to seek my sympathy by distinguishing me from the “strident feminist.” In as friendly a way as I could, I attempted to clarify that my assessment was in no way different from hers and that I was glad to hear her say these things out loud. I recognized this as a typical behavior pattern of those steeped in unexamined assumptions of their own patriarchal hegemony and realized that the ocean liner does not turn quickly.

Nevertheless the hour cometh and now is when these questions of methodology must be confronted, realizing that these questions are really questions of diversity, questions from the perspective of an intersectional environmentalist feminist.

Here the image of the table must be pushed beyond conviviality to question more critically who is present at the table. We must consider the well-worn dictum that “If you aren’t at the table, you’re on the menu.” It is an open secret, a proverbial elephant in the room recognized and addressed with some sincere but still insufficient efforts, that scholars who are not white men have only recently and then mostly intermittently been seated at the Christianity tables at Westar, beyond a steady handful of white women among whom I am numbered. Only recently have white women participated in the still obscure process of setting the menu for the topics of discussion.

To consider who is present at the table is to re-examine assumptions about the location of truth. The Enlightenment pursuit of an “objective” truth established using historical-critical methods infused with universalizing assumptions based on the experience of individuals from a specific sector of society, even as a consensus among of red-bead votes of those individuals. This mode of pursuit needs to be replaced with what Audre Lord describes as “the power of difference, the power of recognizing and unifying different experiences rather than imposing an elite perspective as universal.”

Truth is approached only from multiple perspectives.

The image of the table conversation in the book introduction is vital, indeed, as an image from which to approach truth, as a conversation from multiple perspectives rather than as a dialogue that devolves to a debate where one side wins and the other loses. The questions address matters of awareness of inclusion and exclusion and the recognition of the authenticity of articulating a partial truth from a particular perspective. If, for example, many of the chapters in the book address questions that

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originate primarily in Eurocentric philosophical traditions and concerns about the language of God, that does not discount the value of the questions or the conversation. It only specifies the perspective. Such specificity will also be helpful in the matter of the extent to which these table conversations remain intra-Christian or move beyond Christianity by inviting others to the table.

One more matter from a feminist perspective merits comment. Given the issue of who is at the table and who is on the menu, the adulation of Tillich expressed in the book introduction is troublesome. In reviewing the report of a full session on Tillich, a session that raised many useful elements in his thought, no acknowledgement can be found of his sexual exploitation of women students and how his rationalization of his use of women (or his corresponding silencing of women) was part of his theological thought. A return to examine Tillich’s work from current feminist and decolonizing perspectives could prove useful as well as attention to work now decades old on how his views of the feminine and the primitive are part of his basic conceptual framework. Venerating Paul Tillich as a “guiding light” may well be off-putting for potential readers, especially progressive women clergy and a variety of feminists. This would have been true a decade ago, even moreso in the era of the “Me, Too” movement.

Let me note that as a child of the progressive Christianity of the 1960s, I was raised on a combination of Tillich and process theology -- and very aware of the positive role of his thought in the struggle with neo-orthodoxy among my United Church of Christ minister father and his clergy colleagues. “Ground of being” was a welcome part of the language of worship and it countered the problematic language of the monarchical God. Yet even that language merits and has received useful feminist analysis that the God Seminar would do well to consider.

Lack of attention to this core issue about Tillich’s thought more broadly indicates an uncritical assumption that thought itself can be disembodied. The notion that thought and reason can be detached from our lives as bodies here allows the illusion that Tillich’s use of women and his concepts of the feminine and the primitive and many

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colonizing aspects of his thought are not integrally related. Embodiment of thought is a core issue that will, I hope, be squarely addressed in further work.

These comments have gone beyond the requested editorial work on the coming volume, but I hope they will be received in the constructive spirit in which they are offered as part of the ongoing work and the continuing table conversation.

May the feast continue!