

What's the *Use*? Pragmatic Reflections on Neville's *Ultimates*

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For readers familiar with Robert Neville's expansive literary corpus, one of the first questions that arises when confronted with volume 1 of his trilogy on *Philosophical Theology* is: how many *magna opera* can one scholar produce!? For those of us interested in the details and the development of his metaphysical and epistemological hypotheses over the decades, a whole series of more serious intellectual questions also quickly emerge. My primary interest here, however, is exploring an explicitly *pragmatic* question: what's the *use* of Neville's astonishingly consistent and carefully argued theoretical proposal in contemporary contexts shaped by radically pluralistic and globalizing forces? The answer, of course, is: "it depends." As Neville himself makes clear, whether or not a religious symbol carries over the value of ultimate reality in certain respects depends on a whole host of factors, including the purpose, maturity, and community of the interpreter.

The function of religious symbols within an interpretation also depends, however, on the extent to which individuals automatically follow or learn to contest evolved cognitive and coalitional biases that reinforce the tendency to detect human-like, coalition-favoring disembodied intentional forces. In the first section of this essay, I examine these dynamics in light of a heuristic conceptual framework derived from empirical findings and theoretical developments within the biocultural sciences of religion. As one of the directors of the *Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion*, Neville is quite familiar with this literature, and in the second section, I point out some of the ways in which his theoretical project encourages the contestation of biases toward anthropomorphic symbols authorized by a particular in-group. My main concern, which comes to the forefront in the third section, is the extent to which Neville's "pastoral" practice of allowing (and even insisting upon) the continued *use* of such symbols for ultimacy can surreptitiously strengthen the superstitious and segregative tendencies he wants to enervate.

Toward the end of *Philosophical Theology*, volume 1, Neville points to the intrinsic relation between what he calls systematic philosophical theology and systematic practical theology. The latter has the task of determining the truth of symbols of ultimacy in particular contexts. "How can we tell whether popular religion carries over ultimate truth into its practitioners from context to

context? . . . That is, do the symbolic engagements in those contexts have in their practical lives the truth of ultimate reality?" In order to answer such questions, practical theology has to understand not only the context but also the functional network of semiotic connections, the relevant iconic and indexical referential dimensions, and the extent to which "the individuals and groups are ready or unready for accepting the symbols in a true way. But in order to do any of this, systematic practical theology needs to hold on to the most sophisticated truth possible about what ultimate reality really is."¹

One of the aspects of Neville's system that I most appreciate is his emphasis on the sense in which all religious symbols "break on the infinite."² Insofar as they are intended to refer to finite/infinite contrasts within a sacred canopy, such symbols inevitably break—determinate symbols cannot directly refer to the indeterminate ontological act of creation. For the purposes of this essay, I am going to assume readers' familiarity with these key aspects of Nevillian ontology and semiotics. For many, however, recent developments within disciplines such as cognitive science, evolutionary paleobiology and cultural anthropology and their relevance for the study of religion may not be as well known. Before I can explain why I find Neville's attitude toward religious symbols to be insufficiently iconoclastic, I need to quickly summarize the growing scholarly consensus about why gods are so easily born in human minds and borne in human cultures.

I. Theogonic Reproduction Theory

Evolutionary biologists are pretty confident that they know where babies come from, and social psychologists have good explanations for why adults usually want to keep them around. Confidence about the capacity of the biocultural sciences to explain the processes that engender the arrival and nurture of gods—or supernatural agents, in a broad sense—within the mental and social space of human life has been growing rapidly in the last couple of decades. Insights from a wide variety of academic fields have been converging around the claim that religious phenomena can be explained by the evolution of *cognitive* processes that over-detect human-like forms in the natural world and *coalitional* processes that over-protect culturally inscribed norms in the social world. I call these two types of theogonic (god-bearing) mechanisms "anthropomorphic

1. Robert Cummings Neville, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Ultimates* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 295.

2. Neville has spelled out this aspect of his theory in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) and *On the Scope and Truth of Theology* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2006).

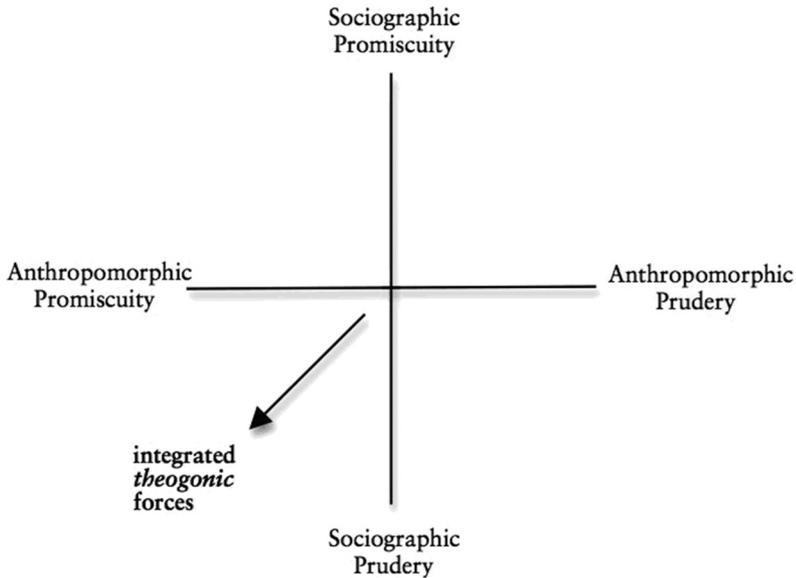


Figure 1

promiscuity” and “sociographic prudery.”³ The coordinate grid in figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for discussing the possible correlations between these perceptive and affiliative predispositions.

Why are humans so prone toward *superstition*, that is, to proposing and accepting interpretations of ambiguous (and especially frightening) natural phenomena that are based on false conceptions of causation? Such interpretations are due, in part, to evolved *cognitive* defaults that pull us toward the left side of the horizontal line in figure 1. When we encounter some pattern or movement we do not understand, our first guess is likely to involve the

3. I have summarized many of the major theories within the biocultural study of religion and explored their relevance for the discipline of theology in more detail elsewhere. See especially F. LeRon Shults, *Theology After the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Some of the material in the current article is adapted from this book, and overlaps with fuller arguments developed in Shults, *Iconoclastic Theology: Gilles Deleuze and the Secretion of Atheism* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Shults, “Excavating Theogonies: Anthropomorphic Promiscuity and Sociographic Prudery,” in *Religion at Work in a Neolithic Society*, ed. Ian Hodder (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 58–85; and Shults, “The Atheist Machine: Clearing the Ground of Idols in Neolithic Catalhoyuk and Modern Istanbul,” in *Iconoclastic Theology*, ed., Lindsay Powell-Jones (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming). For extensive bibliographies and reviews of relevant literature, see the Institute for the Bio-Cultural Study of Religion website: <http://www.ibcsr.org/>.

attribution of features like mentality and animacy. This overactive predilection helps to explain why we so easily see faces in the clouds and so often worry about hidden forces that may intend us harm. Moreover, we quite often double down on such guesses and keep scanning for human-like agents even when there is no clear evidence of their presence. This tendency to assume that hard-to-detect agents are the cause of hard-to-understand events served our Upper Paleolithic ancestors well.

Early hominids who developed hypersensitive cognitive devices that scanned for agency were more likely to survive than those who did not. What made that noise in the tall grass? Was it a human enemy or some other animal? Or was it just the wind? Those who quickly guessed “intentional force” and acted accordingly were more likely to avoid being eaten (if the animal was a predator) and more likely to find food (if the animal was a prey). Despite almost constant false positives in the short run, this overactive perceptual strategy would have granted survival advantage in the long run. It would have paid off to keep searching for and believing in such hidden agents. Anxiety about the failure to find an actual agent generates other hypotheses; just because we are paranoid does not mean that an animal-spirit or angry ancestor-ghost was not really lurking in the grass before it mysteriously disappeared.

Contemporary humans have inherited this anthropomorphic *promiscuity*. We jump at any opportunity to postulate human-like entities as causal explanations even—or especially—when these interpretations must appeal to counter-intuitive disembodied intentional forces, that is, to “supernatural agents.” Of course, it is also possible to contest this sort of evolved default. Scientists and philosophers, for example, are trained to become anthropomorphically *prudish*. Far more cautious about such appeals, and typically critical of superstition in general, they are more likely to resist ascribing intentionality to unknown causes. If something strange happens in a test tube during an experiment, the chemist will not guess that it was a “ghost.” If something seems to be missing in a causal (or logical) chain, the (nonreligious) philosopher will not insert a “god.”

Why are humans also so easily prone toward *segregation*, that is, to making and reinforcing inscriptions of the social field that protect their own in-groups from contamination or domination by out-groups? Our evolved *coalitional* defaults pull us toward the bottom of the vertical line in figure 1. This (often vehement and sometimes violent) fortification of boundaries is engendered, in part, by an evolved overactive tendency to embrace and defend conventional modes of segmenting and regulating society. This naturally generated prejudice for one’s own collective makes it tempting to just stay at home where the proscriptive and prescriptive norms feel most comfortable. This default ten-

gency is so powerful that we will often engage in costly and painful behaviors in order to follow the rules—and willingly inflict pain on those who do not. It makes sense that such a hypersensitive propensity toward protecting one's own coalition would also have served our early *Homo sapiens* ancestors well.

When it comes to competition among small-scale societies, especially when resources are low or under other stressful conditions, those groups that are most likely to survive are those in which the individual members are able to cooperate and remain committed to the group. Natural selection reinforces the tendency of an individual organism to watch out for itself, but if there are too many cheaters, freeloaders, or defectors in a society, it will quickly fall apart. Research in the biocultural sciences of religion suggests that this problem was solved in some hominid coalitions during the Upper Paleolithic by an intensification of shared belief in and ritual engagement with potentially *punitive* supernatural agents. Vindictive “gods” could catch misbehavior that regular natural agents might miss and could punish not only the miscreants but their offspring or even the entire community. Accepting the existence of invisible or ambiguously apparitional “watchers” with some investment in the behavior of individuals within the coalition helps to enhance the motivation to follow the rules and stay committed to the in-group.

Contemporary humans have also inherited this sociographic *prudery*. Most people somewhat automatically follow the authorized social norms of their in-group, or at least put great effort into building up a reputation for doing so. Here too, however, the evolved default can be contested. Those who are *promiscuous* in their sociography are less likely to accept claims about or demands for the segregation of human groups that are based only (or even primarily) on appeals to authorities within their own coalition. They are more likely to be open to intercourse with out-groups about alternate normativities and to the pursuit of new modes of creative social engagement. In-group bias helped (some of) our ancestors survive in small-scale societies in difficult socioecological niches. Today, however, this evolved default does not always serve us well—especially those of us who live in large-scale, urban societies characterized by the pressures of globalization and radical pluralism. A growing number of policy makers and legislators in such contexts refuse to appeal to “ghosts” or “gods” in their attempts to inscribe the public sphere.

Like the term itself, the phenomena commonly associated with “religion” are complex and contested. Definitions are symbols too, and can be intentionally engaged for quite different purposes; my purpose here is exploring the impact of the biocultural sciences on the Nevillian project of “practical theology.” In this context, then, it makes sense to focus on an aggregate of features that has in fact been found in every known culture, past and present, namely, *shared*

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imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents. Religion, in this sense, is naturally reproduced as god-conceptions appear in the mind and are nurtured by groups. In other words, belief in the manifestations of disembodied intentional forces and commitment to ritual manipulations that support in-group cohesion are the result of the integration of the naturally evolved perceptive and affiliative tendencies depicted in the lower left quadrant of figure 1.

It is particularly important to note the way in which anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery are *reciprocally reinforcing*. Conceptions of gods may be easily born within human minds, but it takes a village to raise them. Supernatural agents who are cared for and ritually engaged within a coalition are easy imaginative targets for the hair-triggered agency detection mechanisms of each new generation. Extensive cross-cultural empirical research has demonstrated that activating people's anxiety about the welfare of their kith and kin automatically increases their tendency to interpret ambiguous phenomena as caused by potentially punitive disembodied agents. Conversely, priming individuals with thoughts about possible invisible watchers automatically reinforces a tendency to protect their in-group and become antagonistic toward out-group members.⁴ This reciprocal intensification of superstitious interpretation and segregative inscription happens automatically and unconsciously, all too easily obscuring the powerful covert operations of theogonic reproduction.

II. Robert Neville's Anthropomorphic Prudery and Sociographic Promiscuity

Like most serious academics, Robert Neville resists explanations of the natural world that appeal to supernatural agents as causal forces. Like most public figures in pluralistic contexts, he also resists appeals to the supernatural authorities of particular in-groups. In fact, this dispositional tendency to contest the evolved cognitive and coalitional biases briefly outlined above is evident throughout volume 1 of *Philosophical Theology*. Already in the introduction, Neville points toward the importance of the biological and social sciences for his project and hints at themes that will pervade the book, including resistance to privileging "personal" ideas of God and "confessional" approaches to theology. Later in the book, he sometimes explicitly incorporates insights from the biocultural sciences to support his arguments, as when he points to the role

4. For summaries of this research, see the references in footnote 3.

of the tendency to over-attribute agency to nonintentional things in fostering human-like interpretations of ultimate reality.⁵

Neville is quite straightforward in his attitude toward anthropomorphic symbols for ultimacy: “We know from the concept of the ultimate as the ontological creative act that God does not have intentions. Metaphysics can tell us when a false inference is being drawn from an anthropomorphic symbol of divinity.”⁶ He insists that it follows from the concept of the ontological act of creation that it “cannot be internally intentional . . . the personal connotations many people have with the term *God* should be carefully expunged from philosophical theology.” However, this sentence is immediately followed by a qualification: “Of course, there might be situations in which highly personified symbols of ultimacy are well used for engaging ultimate reality.”⁷ It is this hasty “of course” that worries me, for pragmatic reasons to which I will return below.

Neville is also straightforward about the societal problems that arise from what I am calling sociographic prudery. For example, he insists that the in-group/out-group distinction is absurd if regarded as ultimately significant. It is also pernicious because “it leads people in the in-group to not pay attention to those in the out-groups, to not observe their diverse narratives and conditions.”⁸ Such distinctions can intensify anxious and violent reactions to cultural others. “Nevertheless,” argues Neville, “the human need for intimate connections with the ultimate realities that might be depicted in sacred canopies means that we cannot do without ultimate narratives of some sort and some kinds of anthropomorphic symbols of ultimate realities.”⁹ It is the ease with which Neville asserts this “nevertheless” that worries me; is it really the case that we *cannot* do without “ultimate narratives” that include anthropomorphic symbols? It seems to me that in a growing number of contexts, this is precisely what we *must* learn to do without.

For the most part, Neville’s writings support the integration of anthropomorphic prudery and sociographic promiscuity (figure 2). These forces are theolytic (god-dissolving) because they weaken the mechanisms of theogonic reproduction.

Superstitious interpretations and segregative inscriptions are becoming more and more problematic in pluralistic, globalizing contexts. Increasingly, modern

5. Neville, *Ultimates*, 254.

6. *Ibid.*, 296.

7. *Ibid.*, 280–81.

8. *Ibid.*, 158.

9. *Ibid.*, 158–59.

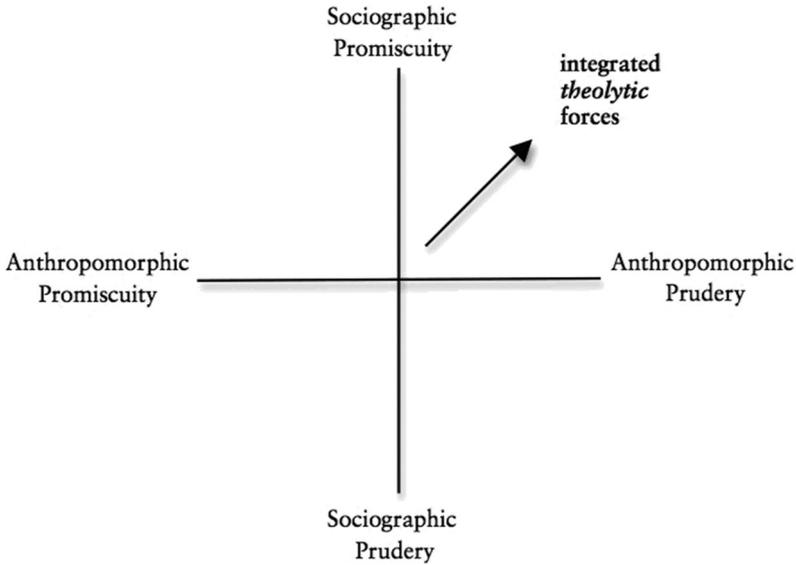


Figure 2

people are coming to believe that it is possible to make sense of the cosmos and act sensibly in society without appealing to supernatural agents as causal powers or moral regulators. This shift is related to the spread of naturalism and secularism, both of which can be conceived as ways of adapting to the challenges of a new socioecological environment that is radically different from that of our Upper Paleolithic ancestors.

There are many varieties of *naturalism*, but most share a resistance to appeals to supernatural agency in theoretical explanations of the natural world, especially in the academic sphere. Individual scholars may continue privately to harbor superstitious beliefs, but most are (at least) methodologically naturalistic in the sense that they exclude god-concepts from their scientific hypotheses. There are also many varieties of *secularism*, but most share a resistance to appeals to supernatural authority in practical inscriptions of social worlds, especially in the public sphere. Individual civil leaders in complex, democratic contexts might maintain membership in religious in-groups, but a growing number are (at least) methodologically secularist in the sense that they exclude divine-sanctions from their political proposals. In these senses, Neville is a naturalist and a secularist.

He is also a theologian. Why is that relevant? Long before the rise of naturalism and secularism, the intellectual elite of the large-scale religious traditions that emerged in the wake of the west Asian axial age had begun to think

critically about anthropomorphic symbols for the divine.¹⁰ The idea of “God” as an infinite disembodied intentional Force was tentatively born(e) in the minds of monotheistic theologians who pressed the evolved defaults toward anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery to infinity. This turned out to be too far. They realized that a truly infinite, absolutely transcendent reality could not be represented in the human mind. And so theologians worked hard to break idolatrous symbols, that is images (or icons, in the Platonic, not the Peircean sense) that pretended to represent the infinite. Ultimacy cannot be conceived (or perceived) as a Person (or anything else). *A fortiori* it really makes no sense to think of ultimate reality as preferring one Polity over another. This “iconoclastic” trajectory in theology presses toward the integration of anthropomorphic prudery and sociographic promiscuity.

Evolved cognitive defaults for detecting finite agents crumple under the pressure of trying to think an infinite intentional Entity. Evolved coalitional defaults for protecting in-groups implode (or explode) under the stress of trying to live in complex literate states. It is not hard to understand why and how theolytic forces would gain traction (albeit rarely, slowly, and tentatively) as monotheism took over within large-scale, pluralistic societies. An abstract, transcendent God does not seem to have any relevance for daily life. All these people around me have different views of gods whom they think care about their group. They try to explain the natural world in superstitious ways that make no sense to me. They try to regulate the social world in segregative ways that make it difficult for me and those I love. Might it be possible for us to all get along without bearing God—or any other finite supernatural agents preferred by particular in-groups?

On the other hand, as active members of monotheistic coalitions, most theologians have also worked hard to defend hypotheses about the existential conditions for axiological engagement that *do* involve the interpretation of and ritual interaction with a supernatural Agent who cares for their Group. This latter “sacerdotal” trajectory has been the most dominant in theology by far. Reinforced by (hidden) biocultural gravitational forces, it has not had much trouble domesticating the iconoclastic urges of even the most rigorous intellectuals, prophetic activists, and devoted contemplatives in those traditions. Moreover, regular believers have always found it relatively easy to ignore theological debates about the unknowable transcendence of God.

As cross-cultural psychological experiments have shown, people may memorize and repeat orthodox doctrinal formulations about God’s transcendence

10. So did the “theologians” of those traditions that emerged out of the south and east Asian axial age traditions, as Neville notes at several places in *Ultimates*. See also Robert Cummings Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

(citing attributes like omniscience, omnipotence and impassibility), but under time constraints or stressful conditions, they automatically and immediately fall back upon “theologically incorrect” interpretations guided by their evolved default biases—imaginatively detecting finite and relatively “dumb gods” who are interested in their practical lives, and have at least enough power to punish or reward their kith and kin.¹¹ In other words, even if a religious parishioner (or seminarian) was able to pass an exam on Neveillian metaphysics, as soon as she leaves the room and reenters her everyday frame of reference, she will continue reproducing anthropomorphic god-conceptions that hold her sacerdotal in-group together—unless and until she learns to contest the theogonic mechanisms.

III. Having “The Talk” about Religious Reproduction

Allowing the covert operations of these evolved biases to continue unchecked reinforces commitment to favored in-group superstitions and antagonistic out-group segregations. This is why I urge “practical theologians” to become more explicitly iconoclastic, and more intentional about pursuing a delicate conversation that is all too tempting to avoid. When it comes to having “the talk” about where babies come from and what it takes to care for them, we know that waiting too long can have devastating effects. Of course, it can be equally devastating if the conversation makes people feel attacked, afraid, or ashamed. The activities that lead to sexual and religious reproduction can feel terrific to our bodies, but baring our souls about them can feel terribly vulnerable. When discussing such intimate issues, it is important to be sensitive—but it is also important to be direct.

Having “the talk” about *religious* reproduction should involve more than simply explaining how “it” works. It is equally important to work out the physical, emotional, and social consequences of “doing it.” This is just as true for religious education as it is for sex education. We need a theological version of “the birds and the bees” that deals with the dynamics by which gods are reproduced in human minds and the consequences of nurturing them in human groups. Part of the problem is that we are socialized not to ask where gods come from; we learn early that it is not polite to ask folks why they keep them around. Until relatively recently, our understanding of the mechanisms that engender shared imaginative engagement with human-like disembodied agents associated with particular in-groups has been quite limited.

11. For a discussion of these experiments, see D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Justin Barrett, “Dumb Gods, Petitionary Prayer and the Cognitive Science of Religion,” in *Current Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Ilkka Pyysiainen and Veikko Anttonen (New York: Continuum, 2002), 93–109.

The illuminative power of the disciplines that contribute to the biocultural study of religion challenges the plausibility of belief in ghosts, gods, and other culturally postulated disembodied intentional forces. Scientists and (nonreligious) philosophers may not be able to provide deductive logical arguments that *disprove* the existence of supernatural agents or inductive evidence that *invalidates* claims about their causal relevance, but they can offer powerful abductive and retroductive arguments that render their existence *implausible*. The more reasonable hypothesis is that shared imaginative intercourse with supernatural agents emerged over time as naturally evolved hypersensitive cognitive tendencies led to mistaken perceptions, which in turn slowly became entangled within erroneous collective judgments about the extent of the social field.

As a systematic *philosophical* theologian, Neville seems to agree. In his efforts as a systematic *practical* theologian, however, he seems all too willing to allow and even encourage the use of personified religious symbols, even in rituals that have traditionally served to mark off the boundaries of an in-group (such as the Eucharist). In his discussion of worldviews in chapter 4, Neville suggests that “in most North Atlantic Christian congregations, few people would believe that they could manipulate God, shaman-wise, to get what they want in prayer.”¹² Based on my own interactions with literally thousands of evangelicals in literally hundreds of North American congregations over the decades, I would argue the vast majority of religious people in such contexts believe *exactly* that. This is supported by the research on “theological incorrectness.” Neville is (understandably) dismissive of interpretations of 9/11 as God’s punishment on America for the gays or the feminists,¹³ but this is precisely the sort of interpretation favored by some of the most tightly bound and fastest growing religious in-groups.

Continuing to foster symbolic engagements that utilize anthropomorphically promiscuous and sociographically prudish images automatically reinforces the naturally evolved tendency to over-detect agents and over-protect groups. If the philosophical theologian does not explicitly challenge the validity (“truth,” in Neville’s sense) of such symbols in modern contexts, religious people on the “popular” side of the continuum, which is the vast majority of the population, will go on having incautious imaginative intercourse within their own religious family of origin and reproducing “theologically incorrect” coalition-favoring supernatural progeny. The virtuoso speculative theologian may be an exception. She might theoretically be able to take such symbols in some respect that does not lead to their misuse or abuse in her social engagement with others.

12. Neville, *Ultimates*, 89.

13. *Ibid.*, 295.

But if she is *also* a practical theologian concerned about the real consequences of engaging such symbols within sacerdotal in-groups, why would she? Regardless of what she may say as a *philosophical* theologian, if she does not explicitly address the deleterious pragmatic effects of continuing to bear supernatural agents in supernatural coalitions in a violent-prone, ecologically fragile world, even those of us who can remember her sophisticated formulations will just smile and nod as we go on detecting the gods of our own group, thereby reinforcing the hidden mechanisms that activate cognitive and coalitional biases that contribute to superstition and segregation. Why not just leave the gods out of (philosophical and practical) theology completely? Why not explicitly encourage people in late modern contexts to avoid *any use* of an anthropomorphically promiscuous and sociographically prudish religious image (*eikon*)?

In my view, not only is this sort of iconoclastic approach more likely to produce feasible pragmatic strategies for inscribing the socius in pluralistic contexts, it is also more consistent with Neville's own theoretical arguments. The basic thrust of his constructive work over the decades has challenged the personification of God and the authority of monotheistic Groups in thinking about *Ultimates*. Especially within socioecological niches in which survival no longer depends on the detection of gods that protect in-groups, symbolic engagements that incorporate iconic semiotic representations of the latter are (in the Nevillian sense of the terms) not only "broken"—they are "false" insofar as they promote inaccurate superstitious interpretations and aggressive segregative inscriptions that are in no sense "ultimate."

Scholars trained in the monotheistic (and other) traditions that emerged in the wake of the axial age have a unique role to play in the *practical* theological task to which Neville alludes in volume 1 and addresses in more detail in volume 2 (and 3). As the mechanisms that support the sacerdotal dominance of theology are increasingly unveiled, it will be easier to liberate the productive iconoclastic forces that have long been domesticated within these traditions. Our "pastoral" ministrations will either foster theogonic reproduction or promote the sort of theolytic retroduction that engenders naturalism and secularism. In the contexts in which most of us find ourselves, I argue that it makes good sense to become ever more explicit as we invite people to have "the talk" about the causes and consequences of shared symbolic engagement with the gods.

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