

## *Chapter 4*



# **Science and Religious Supremacy: Toward a Naturalist Theology of Religions**

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This chapter explores the phenomena of religious claims to supremacy from the perspective of the “bio-cultural study of religion” (BCSR), a phrase meant to describe a convergence of insights within a constellation of scientific disciplines, such as evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, anthropology, and archaeology. Together, these sciences help to unveil “theogonic mechanisms” that engender and support supernatural agents conceptions within human cognition and culture. Philosophical reflection on these findings suggests a new way to think about the options for theology of religions.

Is one religion better than others? This is the sort of question one might try to avoid in polite company. However polite they may be, theologians committed to and working within a particular religious tradition find it difficult to escape such questions, especially when they begin to probe into alien traditions. Those within their home tradition usually want the theologian to assure them that he or she believes their religion is superior to others. Those from alien traditions often want the theologian to assure them that he or she does not. Probing religious aliens can get one into trouble. It makes everyone nervous.

In our increasingly complex, interconnected, and volatile global context, however, suppressing curiosity and conversations about religious supremacy only makes things worse, binding anxiety in ways that hinder

transformative encounters within and beyond religious families of origin (Shults, 2010). The psychological and political health of our shared future is dependent on our ability to develop new and more adequate conceptual (and pragmatic) tools for probative inquiry into the dynamics that generate and reproduce thoughts, actions, and emotions that promote commitment to the supremacy of religious coalitions.

It is easy to understand why ideas like “supremacy” (superiority, uniqueness, ultimacy, etc.) are some of the most contentious topics in the ongoing discussions between theologians within and among the religions. On the one hand, the term has obvious negative connotations in most contexts; few people would call themselves religious “supremacists” without serious qualifications. On the other hand, one of the qualities of serious religious allegiance is evaluating the beliefs and norms of one’s own religious coalition as ultimately the best, or superior to others in important respects. At least this is the case in the context of complex literate states, where these discussions often occur under the heading “theology of religions.”

In the last 20 years, research within this emergent interdisciplinary “field” has led to significant empirical findings and theoretical reflections that are deeply significant for understanding the origin of religions and debates over their relative supremacy.

Many scholars operating in these disciplines explicitly reject notions of supernatural beings or realms, and their scientific probing can feel alienating indeed for people committed to their religious traditions. In the fields of BCSR, the problem of religious supremacy is not adjudicating between the truth claims or normative proposals of religious coalitions, but explaining the cognitive and cultural mechanisms of human evolution that make such beliefs and behaviors not only possible but probable, and even highly plausible for the vast majority of *Homo sapiens sapiens* living today.

When scientists study religious phenomena (such as claims to supremacy), their starting point qua scientists is not (normally) a particular tradition but a particular academic discipline. In this context, too, one sometimes finds a kind of “disciplinary supremacy,” the myopic assumption that one’s own discipline gives the only good—or at least the “best”—explanation of the phenomena. Among scholars that gather within the conceptual space of BCSR, however, disciplinary boundaries are increasingly being transgressed and interwoven in new and creative ways.

That science sometimes challenges religion is not news. However, the extent to which the empirical findings and theoretical reflections of BCSR unveil the mechanisms that engender the religious conceptions of supremacy that shape any and all interreligious discourse about the relative

value of particular supernatural agent coalitions has not yet made major theological headlines. On the other hand, many scientists in these fields assume that theologians are always and necessarily committed to supernaturalism and therefore have very little (if anything) to contribute to serious interdisciplinary scientific discourse about human religiosity. My subtitle hints at a new strategy—actually the renewal and refiguring of an old one—which I hope many on both sides will find newsworthy.

The very idea of a “naturalist theology of religions,” however, will strike many—if not most—scholars as oxymoronic. How could a theologian be naturalistic? How could a naturalist be theological? Most scientists are naturalists (at least methodologically), and most theologians are supernaturalists (at least metaphysically). These two groups approach the problematic of alienation among the religions in radically different ways. Yet, I mean what the phrase suggests: a probative strategy for developing and criticizing hypotheses about religious supremacy that is really naturalistic and really theological. This proposed strategy will no doubt be met with suspicion on both sides, and so I should clarify my terms up front.

## RELIGION, NATURALISM, AND THEOLOGY

For the sake of interdisciplinary dialogue, in this context I will use the term *religion* in a way that is common among BCSR scholars. Many scientists working in these fields would broadly agree with something like Harvey Whitehouse’s description of religion as “any set of shared beliefs and actions appealing to supernatural agency” (2004, 2; cf. Tremlin, 2006, 5; Boyer, 2001, 11). Unlike many of their colleagues from other disciplines in the humanities and (some “standard”) social sciences, who express an allergic reaction to the term *religion*, in part due to its association with Western colonialism and essentialism, BCSR scholars tend to explain what they mean by the word and then quickly move on.

For scientists whose reflection begins with an acceptance of the common phylogenetic heritage of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, claims about cross-cultural similarities are not so surprising. Neurological, psychological, archaeological, and ethnographic research suggests that belief in supernatural agents is a component of every known human culture, past and present. Sometimes Buddhism is offered as an exception to this rule. However, while some philosophical specialists in this tradition (as in other traditions) have developed complex metaphysical systems without supernatural agents, the actual practice of the vast majority of Buddhists includes constant engagement with such agents, such as devas; bodhisattvas; and, of course, Buddhas (Pyysiäinen, 2009).

We will return below to the implications that the centrality of such agents in religion has for debates about supremacy, but here I want to emphasize the importance of the concept of the *supernatural*, against which *naturalism* (of almost any sort) is set. Adopting and adapting the terminology of Wesley Wildman (2009, 20–25; 2010, 23–24), let us take *supernaturalism* to refer to belief in disembodied intentional entities (i.e., to the inclusion of discarnate wielders of power, such as ghosts or heavenly saints) in one's ontological item inventory. This is distinct from *supranaturalism*, which we can take as indicating belief in *an* ultimate disembodied intentional entity that exists "above" (or "beyond") and conditions all other (natural and supernatural) ontological inventory items.

This distinction is more important than it may initially appear for understanding the dynamics of religious supremacy and the potential contribution of a naturalist theology of religions to the wider dialogue among BCSR scholars and others interested in these issues. In relatively isolated small-scale societies, issues of religious supremacy would normally arise only after confrontations with the supernatural agent conceptions of other small coalitions. Which supernatural agents (ghosts, ancestors, etc.) are the most powerful in mediating healing or misfortune? Often ideas of discarnate intentional entities are modified or even exchanged among such groups without much anxiety about the implications for the nature of ultimate reality.

In religions that have developed within complex literate states, however, the question of supremacy tends to be tied more closely to broader metaphysical cosmologies that presuppose some idea of ultimate reality (or ultimate normativity). Competition between such systems can be more anxiety producing both psychologically and politically. While religious supremacy is certainly an issue for and among the major religions that emerged during the axial age in East Asia (Confucianism, Daoism) and South Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism), it takes on a special significance for the monotheistic traditions that trace their roots to the West Asian patriarch Abraham (Judaism, Christianity, Islam). Here the key question is the intention of a *supranatural* agent who controls access to an ultimate coalition in relation to which *all* natural (and supernatural) agents and coalitions will be judged.

The term *theology* is also most commonly used in this latter context. Many people assume that the discipline so named is necessarily tied to the defense of a particular religious coalitional supranatural agent. In fact, the term *theology* has a much wider semantic range; it was used by Aristotle in Book E of *Metaphysics*, for example, to refer to the first philosophy, the study of being qua being. It continues to be used in a broader

sense by some naturalist—and even atheist—philosophers in the late modern period as, for example, in Gilles Deleuze's retrieval and refiguring of some aspects of Stoic ontology (2004, 322). As I explain elsewhere (Shults, 2012), I believe that the term can be used today for the discipline and development of *hypotheses* about the existential possibility conditions for human *axiological engagement*, an exercise that does not require commitment to a particular religious coalition.

Additional clarity on nomenclature will certainly be necessary for the further development of a naturalist theology. First, let us try to understand why and how theology of religions has been shaped and dominated by participants in religious coalitions committed to some concept of a supernatural agent coalition.

### THE USUAL SUSPECTS IN "THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS"

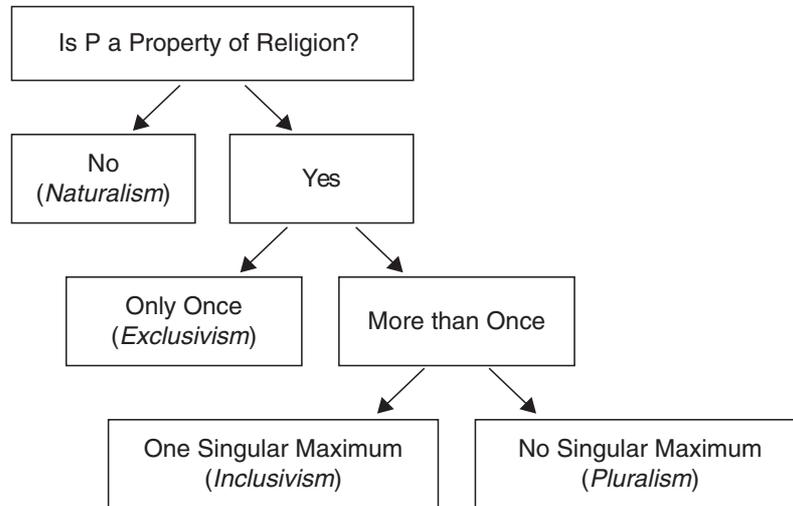
Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Although it has been heavily criticized, this three-fold typology remains the most popular way of framing the options for theology of religions today. The early champions of the typology tended to be pluralists who set out the options in such a way as to distinguish themselves from those who believed their religion was in some sense the only—or the best—way to experience a transformative relation to ultimate reality. Despite their differences, challenging such notions of supremacy was the shared goal of the authors who contributed to *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (Hick and Knitter, 1987) and *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (Knitter, 2005).

Despite its weaknesses, this typology suffices for my purposes here, which is to point out some of the assumptions held in common by the usual suspects in theology of religions. One of the clearest defenses of the typology is provided by Schmid-Leukel (2005), who observes that these three possibilities exhaust the logical options if one frames the issue in the following way. Acknowledging the complexity of issues involved and the need to qualify each term carefully, he proposes that we begin with the property  $P =$  "mediation of a salvific knowledge (or revelation) of ultimate/transcendent reality."

Schmid-Leukel then asks: Is  $P$  given (or instantiated) among the religions? He argues there are four possible answers: (1) no; (2) yes, but only once; (3), yes, and more than once, but with only one singular maximum; and (4) yes, more than once and with no singular maximum. The disjunctions of Figure 4.1 illustrate these options.

For most traditional theologians, the answer "no" (naturalism) is a non-starter. We will return to this option below. The other three possibilities

Figure 4.1



structure much of the debate in contemporary Western theological discourse about religious supremacy.

Exclusivists insist that P is given only once and, not surprisingly, it is usually their own religion in which this quality is instantiated. The problem is how to convince other religions of this claim to supremacy (and to keep in-group members convinced). The main reason to probe religious aliens is to discover weaknesses in their doctrinal and ethical systems and to compel them to accept the supremacy of the exclusivist's own tradition. Sometimes this involves appealing to the special revelation of a holy text, but this is rarely convincing to those outside the coalition. A more common approach is appealing to general revelation, arguing that the existence (or power or wisdom) of one's supranatural agent can be discerned in the effects of its patient—"nature."

Inclusivists accept that P is given more than once but assert that their own religion represents the only maximal (supreme) instantiation of this property. The problem here is how to discern where, when, and how minimal instantiations occur within other religions. One of the classic examples in the 20th century was Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who argued that some participants of other religions might be "anonymous" Christians. Rahner was one of the inspirations behind inclusivist reactions to the rapid growth of pluralist theologies of religion in the 1980s. In 1990, Gavin D'Costa, also a Roman Catholic, edited *Reconsidering Human Uniqueness: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. In his contribution to that volume, he explicitly embraced the inclusivist label but has

since shifted to a version of the exclusivist position (2009). As we will see below, other inclusivists find themselves pulled toward some kind of pluralism. This group is the most resistant to being typified within the three-fold typology.

Pluralists argue that P is given more than once and that there is no singular maximum instantiation. This does not entail that *all* religions are equal, or even that this property is minimally given in *every* religion. Among other things, the pluralist is faced with the problem of convincing members of religious coalitions that their traditions are not supreme like they think they are. Two of the most well-known pluralists are John Hick and Paul Knitter. Hick tended to focus on the philosophical arguments for pluralism; I will return to his approach below in the context of exploring the challenges that BCSR brings to bear on this dialogue. Knitter, too, has contributed philosophical analyses of the issues (2002, 2009), but he has also focused more extensively on practical concerns about liberation and justice. His work suggests that exclusivism (and inclusivism) too easily reinforce oppressive behaviors based on assumptions about supremacy that are linked to race, class, or gender (1985, 1995, 1996). According to Knitter, not only are such claims to religious supremacy false, they can also contribute to psychological and political dynamics that damage human well-being.

### THE “MYTH” OF RELIGIOUS SUPREMACY

Despite the obvious differences between these three types, they all share an important feature, which Schmid-Leukel’s disjunctive analysis of claims about P’s givenness among the religions helps to make clear. All three accept the appropriateness of (some) formulation of P and its instantiation in (at least one) religion. In other words, they all presuppose the existence of a transcendent-ultimate reality, transformative knowledge of which has been made possible by revelation (in some sense). In the case of most Christian theologians, among whom the bulk of the conversation occurs, ultimate reality is explicitly conceived as a supranatural agent and salvation as participation in an ultimate coalition.

This may seem like stating the obvious, but I want to point out that the idea of religious supremacy has a “mythical” function in this discourse that is not adequately acknowledged, even by pluralists. Myth does not simply mean false. It can also indicate world-founding narrative imagery that (often covertly) structures social relations and discourse. All three of the usual theological options begin with a foundational assumption that grounds the debates over religious supremacy. They accept the idea that the human experience of valuing and being valued is originated by,

ordered through, and oriented toward a supreme reality above (or beyond) the natural world.

As we will see, the intentionality and teleonomic functioning implicit in this idea invites conceptions of supranatural agency even among those who wish to downplay them. My main point at this stage is that all three types will tend to trace the conditions for the possibility of axiological engagement to a supranatural agent in relation to whom some human persons are truly transformed. This imaginative structure, however it is narrated, founds the "world" of interreligious social discourse. There is no space here to argue that this also holds for some of those major traditions of East and South Asian origin (cf. Neville, 2001), so let us limit ourselves to the West Asian monotheistic religions.

From what are some excluded? In what are many included? To what are there a plurality of ways? The answer in each case is eschatological participation in an ultimate supranatural agent's coalition, however differently that agent and that coalition (not to mention participating eschatologically) are conceived. The social rules and conceptual tools of mutual religious probing among theologians (at least in the West) are more regulated than they might appear. The power of the myth of religious supremacy to set the limits of the dialogue is due, in part, to the fact that it escapes probation itself because it is hidden, so to speak, before the foundation of the interreligious world.

Theological debates in the West about the *one* true or supreme religion have been shaped by the theoretical dominance of *monotheism* in general and Christianity in particular, which was reinforced by the political dominance of *monopolistic* Constantian programs through the Middle Ages and colonial programs throughout the modern period. Insofar as it accepts the idea that there is one ultimate reality, one supreme source of normativity, above or beyond (yet somehow intentionally engaged with) the natural world, even pluralism remains under the influence of the myth of religious supremacy. The very idea of ultimacy seems to imply unity: How can there be more than one ultimate? Despite the differences in their answers, most theologians of religion in such contexts accept the same kind of question: Which natural agents and coalitions will (or can) participate in the ultimate coalition of *the one* supranatural agent?

Setting aside for the moment the truth or falsity of the myth, let us explore a prior set of questions. Where do ideas of supernatural agents (and ultimate supranatural agents) come from, and how do they function to hold together religious coalitions? Why do we so easily believe in the supreme importance of such agency and assume it is somehow the condition for all of our social axiological judgments? As we will see, framing the

debate around this sort of question allows us to probe more deeply into the problematic of religious supremacy, and opens up new options for typifying theologies of religions.

### UNVEILING THEOGONIC MECHANISMS

Theogonies are stories about the birth of the gods. Such narratives are common among the religions. One of the most well known is Hesiod's *Theogony*, which describes the generation of the Greek gods. Uranus mated with Gaia producing the Titans. Angered by Uranus's treatment of his children, Gaia gave a sickle to the youngest, Cronos, who castrated his father, throwing the testicles into the sea, from which various divinities emerged. Cronos then controlled the cosmos, but a prophecy foretold that one of his children would overthrow him, so after his wife Rhea gave birth to each of his children (the gods), he insisted on swallowing them. Cronos was tricked into swallowing a stone instead of his son Zeus, also the youngest, who escaped and later overthrew his father.

The idea that gods (a term used broadly in the BCSR literature to refer to all kinds of supernatural agents) are born is not usually surprising for most religious people. Supernatural agents like ancestors, saints, and ghosts, were all born at some point. One of the basic narratives of Christianity involves the birth of the Son of God in a Bethlehem manger. Although this causes logical problems for theologians (e.g., how can an impassible and immaterial deity "become" flesh?), such ideas rarely trouble laypeople. In every known culture, human beings naturally conceive of gods who, like them, are born into coalitions and have their own thoughts and desires. It is usually only theological scholars in complex literate states that worry excessively about where the first god (or God) came from.

The sciences of BCSR, however, are interested in the birth of the gods in a different sense. Supernatural agents are born(e) within the mental and social space of human life. How are supernatural agents conceived within human cognition, and how are they cared for within human cultures? Empirical research and theoretical construction within and across these overlapping disciplines has provided compelling descriptions of the evolved (naturally selected) mechanisms that generate and sustain god concepts. As we will see, these have to do with the hyperactive cognitive detection of agency in the natural environment and the hyperactive cultural protection of coalitional boundaries. The challenges raised by these findings are different than those of "projection" theories of religion like those championed by Feuerbach or Freud. It would be more accurate to say that BCSR is suggestive for "detection-protection" theories of religion.

The difference is critical and significant. Projection critiques of religion (which include observations about the deleterious effects of claims to religious supremacy on psychological and political life) often find inspiration in the proclamation of Nietzsche's madman: God is dead—and we have killed him! (2001, 120). Even within Nietzsche's aphorism, however, this proclamation had little effect. BCSR helps us understand why the madman's message is relatively easy to ignore. For most people, the death of gods (especially the death of a supernatural agent) is simply unthinkable. Nor is it really worth thinking about. As we will see, conceptions of god(s) emerge naturally in the human mind and are easily supported within coalitions because of the evolutionary pressures of natural selection.

The alleged "death of God" has had very little effect on most of those who are faithfully committed to the supremacy of their particular coalition, making it easy for theologians of religions within those coalitions to ignore the madman. The challenges raised by the discovery of the bio-cultural mechanisms for the "birth of God," however, will not be so simple to avoid because they challenge the myth of religious supremacy in a new way. The idea that the gods were children is not that worrisome for religious people. The idea that we are the children of the gods can even be comforting. However, the idea that the gods (and God) *are* the offspring of evolved hyperactive cognitive strategies, whose regular failure inadvertently contributed to hyperactive coalitional strategies that enhanced the competitive advantage of some early hominin groups, is much more threatening.

If the madman had read carefully through the literature of BCSR, he would have brought a different message to the marketplace: The gods are born—and we have borne them! Detection-protection theories suggest not simply that religion involves the attribution of human-like properties to the gods, but that the gods *are* shared attributions of human-like properties to natural phenomena that create and sustain coalitional solidarity. Our early ancestors lived in communities where encounters with ambiguous phenomena widely led to the guess, "supernatural agent," which provided an affective and collective security that enabled them to outcompete other communities. All living humans inherit this proclivity; many of those living in complex societies shaped by monotheistic traditions have also learned to guess "supernatural agent," which intensifies competition over coalitional supremacy.

Before exploring these theories and the light they shed on religious supremacy in more detail, let me explain my use of the phrase "unveiling theogonic mechanisms," which is inspired by Rene Girard's concept of the scapegoat mechanism (1977, 1986). Whether or not one accepts the details or scope of his claims, Girard's theory points to an important dynamic in

human-social relations. The scapegoat mechanism creates weak victims, more or less vulnerable, who must be cursed, sent away, or destroyed in order to rid the community of violence, sin, or evil. Theogonic mechanisms, on the other hand, create powerful perpetrators, more or less invulnerable, who must be appeased in some way, in order to hold the community together.

Both scapegoat and theogonic mechanisms “work,” in the sense that persons within the in-group often feel better, and their communities often survive longer because of the mechanisms. However, their “working” can actually make things worse. Removing or destroying the scapegoat reinforces the powerful belief that our problems can (or will) be solved by more violence. Detecting and protecting the gods reinforces the powerful belief that our problems can (or will) be solved by coalitions of supernatural agents.

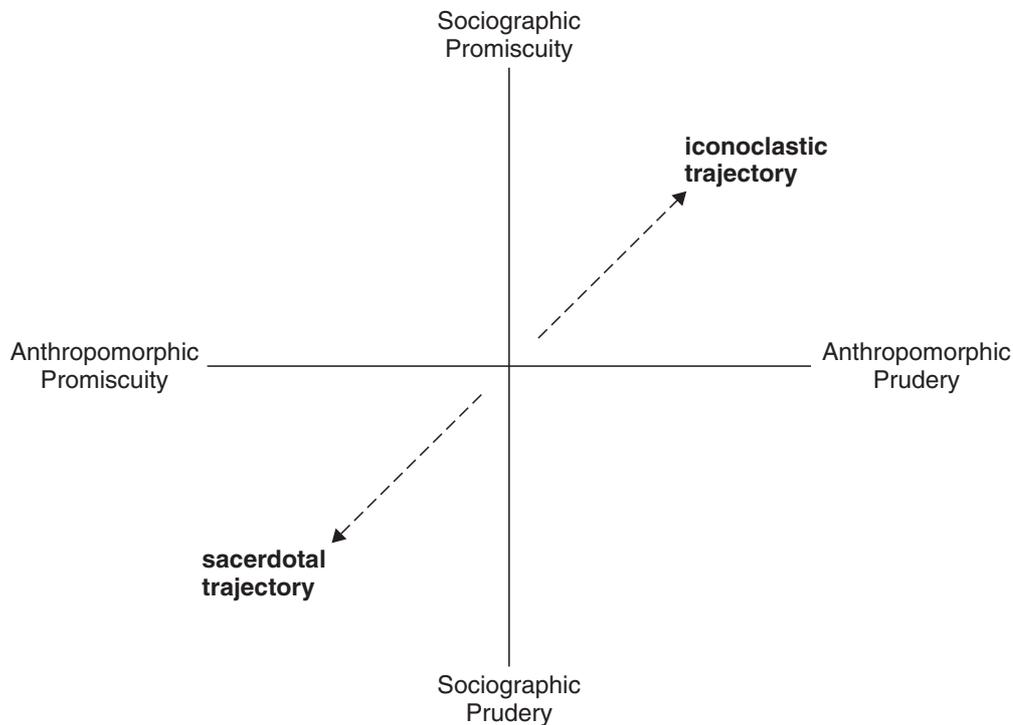
The unveiling of these mechanisms weakens their power. As we begin to see how ideas of religious supremacy are born(e) in human cognition and culture, they can more easily become the object of our critical reflection rather than surreptitiously shaping our subjectivity. The mechanisms only work well if they are hidden. BCSR exposes the reproductive dynamics of god conceptions, making possible philosophical challenges to the “myth” that underlies most theological discourse about religious supremacy. I will suggest that a naturalist theology of religions can also participate in this unveiling by complementing scientific arguments that weaken the plausibility of belief in supernatural agents with philosophical arguments that weaken the plausibility of belief in a supernatural agent. First, let me describe the mechanisms in more detail.

#### ANTHROPOMORPHIC PROMISCUITY AND SOCIOGRAPHIC PRUDERY

The gods are *born* because of anthropomorphic promiscuity, the overactive detection of human-like agents in complex natural environments. But it takes a (more or less faithful) village to raise, feed, and care for them. The gods are *borne* by sociographic prudery, the overactive protection of coalitional solidarity in complex social environments. In what follows, I describe some of the research that supports these claims, but first let me outline the conceptual framework that will guide my analysis and proposal (see Figure 4.2).

In the next section, I will return to the diagonal arrows, which provide a new way of thinking about theological approaches to religious supremacy, but here my focus is on the axes that construct the coordinate system.

Figure 4.1



The horizontal axis represents a spectrum along which one can mark the tendency to seek or to suspect explanations of natural phenomena that appeal to human-like disembodied intentionality. Those who are highly promiscuous in their anthropomorphism are disposed to detect supernatural agency everywhere. The gods who are detected typically fit within the cast of characters, whether protagonists or antagonists, of the narrative plot that guides a particular social coalition. An anthropomorphic prude, on the other hand, is resistant to such interpretations, holding out for nonagential explanations. The point of the axis is not the particular objects of detection but the tendencies of detecting subjects.

The vertical axis indicates a spectrum of ways of holding onto conventional modes of inscribing sociality, of the proscriptions and prescriptions that structure relational evaluations among persons and groups. The sociographic prude is strongly committed to the superior value of the social norms of his or her own coalition and is highly suspicious of others. This is typically reinforced by a (latent or patent) cosmography that stabilizes the identity of the social coalition and its place in the world. Sociographic promiscuity is characterized by resistance to in-group protectionist biases,

openness to intercourse with out-groups about alternate normativities, and the pursuit of new modes of creative social inscription.

Those early *Homo sapiens sapiens* who survived did so (in part) because they were anthropomorphically promiscuous and sociographically prudent. This helps to explain the prevalence of what I will call the sacerdotal trajectory in contemporary cultures. Those of us still around share a phylogenetic inheritance that supports a tendency to detect supernatural agents and protect supernatural coalitions. We are born(e) within communities that already share complex narratives about particular gods. Supernatural agent conceptions are never immaculate; the specific features of our gods (at least in our youth) betray our religious family of origin. We often hear that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. We might also say that theogony recapitulates ethnogeny.

The literature that deals with these themes within and across the disciplines that contribute to BCSR is vast and rapidly growing. What makes this field unique is that many of the scholars operating within it pay attention to *both* anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery, and the way in which they are mutually reinforcing, which requires multidisciplinary engagement. In what follows, I organize a brief presentation of some of the major ideas within BCSR around the four features of religion outlined by Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, suggesting further reading as I go along. As in all generative scientific research programs, here, too, one finds rigorous debates on the details of virtually every theme; nevertheless, their observations capture the general consensus in a way that suffices for our purposes. They argue (2004, 713) that in every society there are

1. Widespread counterfactual and counterintuitive beliefs in supernatural agents (gods, ghosts, goblins, etc.).
2. Hard-to-fake public expressions of costly material commitments to supernatural agents, which is offering and sacrifice (offerings of goods, property, time, life).
3. Mastering by supernatural agents of people's existential anxieties (death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, loss).
4. Ritualized, rhythmic sensory coordination of (1), (2), and (3), which is communion (congregation, intimate fellowship, etc.).

Many different theories from a variety of disciplines overlap in the explication of these features among BCSR scholars.

The first feature focuses on what I have called anthropomorphic promiscuity. Why are supernatural agent beliefs so widespread? One of

the reasons is that there are so many reasons. One significant factor is the human hypersensitivity to the detection of agency in general. What should one infer from the movement of the tall grass? Is it caused by the wind or by a tiger? The false detection of an agent (thinking it is a tiger when it is actually the wind) is much less costly than the failure to detect a real agent (thinking it is the wind when it is actually a tiger). Those who survived the occasional encounter with a real tiger because they kept betting "agent" (no matter how many times they lost) passed on the cognitive traits that produced this default perceptual interpretation. In fact, survival depends not only upon the detection of predators, as well as prey, but also of potential protectors (cf. Atran, 2002; Barrett, 2004).

Stuart Guthrie suggests that the most important thing to detect for early human beings would have been other human beings. This is why our cognitive detection devices are hypersensitive to finding and interpreting human form. In his seminal book *Faces in the Clouds* (1993), Guthrie argues that perception *is* interpretation and interpretation, when confronted with ambiguity, defaults to that which is *most important* to detect. For him, anthropomorphism is, by definition, a mistake; it is the failure of an evolved perceptual strategy that contributes to our survival. Those who cognitively "bet" on agency when perception was ambiguous, although they often "lost," were more likely to survive. Anthropomorphism happens all the time, but normally we can discover when we have bet wrongly. In religion, argues Guthrie, anthropomorphism becomes systematized and protected from criticism.

But why (human-like) supernatural agents? That is, why is the detection of disembodied intentional beings so common? A variety of complementary theories have been offered. Such ideas may have originated from images in altered states of consciousness (Lewis-Williams, 2010), from the overactive imagination of children (Rossano, 2010), from the application of teleofunctional reasoning to natural phenomena (cf. Kelemen, 1999; Pyysiäinen, 2009), or from encountering dead bodies of known persons, the presence of which activated social inference strategies that encouraged the idea of an afterlife (Boyer, 2001). Or from all of the above. The minimally "counterintuitive" nature of supernatural agent beliefs makes them more memorable and easier to transmit across generations (Norenzayan and Atran, 2006). All of this helps to explain where the gods come from—  
AQ1 but why do they stay around?

The second feature brings us more directly to one of the mechanisms that contribute to sociographic prudery. Elsewhere Atran describes religion as "a community's costly and hard-to-fake commitment to a counterintuitive world of supernatural causes and beings" (2002, 264). Here

he is referring to the application of costly signaling theory to religion. It would seem that offering time, money, and even one's life for such counterintuitive ideas is not a good way to enhance survival. However, we can understand such behaviors as displays of commitment to the group, reinforcing its cohesion by weeding out potential defectors or deceivers. Belief in the presence of supernatural agents who are watching the coalition and have the power to bring misfortune would discourage individuals from breaking group norms. For the most part, and over the long run, the most convincing displays are by those who are *really* committed to their beliefs and their promises to the coalition. These people are willing to engage in displays of commitment that are (otherwise) so unreasonable that they would be very hard to fake (2002, 144–5; cf. Sosis, 2003, 2006).

Attachment theory is one of the main psychological theories that shed light on the third feature of religion identified above. Human infants naturally seek proximity to attachment figures when they feel anxious or threatened. Evolution naturally selected for this behavioral system; those infants who expressed a strong urge to look for and get the attention of a caregiver were more likely to survive. Atran does not believe that this explains the *origin* of beliefs in supernatural agents, but once such agents are conceived as potential protectors, they are quite naturally engaged by this behavioral system (2002, 71–82; cf. Kirkpatrick, 2005). If seeking proximity is a dominant strategy for survival, it makes sense to think that the biological and emotional dynamics driving this system would naturally activate concerns about attachment to powerful divine attachment figures, once they were widely postulated in a coalition.

The fourth feature has to do with the way in which religious rituals enhance a sense of community. Atran argues that religion has survived because of the ways in which it manipulates the innate cognitive proclivities of the species in order to support the *collective* engagement of *affective* needs. Ritual bonding played a significant role in this evolutionary process. Archaeological evidence suggests that early hominins sang and danced together by 500,000 BCE, but throughout the upper Paleolithic and Neolithic periods, rituals became increasingly more complex as larger and more stratified societies needed stronger mechanisms for maintaining coalitions (cf. Rossano, 2010; Whitehouse, 2004). Rituals often seem strange to outsiders, but they can reinforce an intimate sense of belonging to an in-group, which *feels* good. Ritual participation further inscribes the socius and makes the prudent transmission of coalitional norms more likely.

What does all of this have to do with religious supremacy? The integration of all of these biological and cognitive processes that have helped human beings survive in coalitions have contributed to the evolution of

the theogonic mechanisms that engender and nurture belief in the supremacy of “our” coalition’s supernatural agent(s). It is precisely these anthropomorphically promiscuous and sociographically prudish tendencies that make the probative endeavors of theology of religions possible—and necessary. The unveiling of these mechanisms by BCSR, however, clarifies the options for those interested and willing to engage in such endeavors.

### SACERDOTAL AND ICONOCLASTIC TRAJECTORIES

This brings us back to the diagonal arrows of Figure 4.2. The arrow in the lower left quadrant represents the trajectory that is formed by the integration of the theogonic mechanisms. Because I am interested here in how these mechanisms together shape the problem of religious supremacy in the context of complex literate states, I will call this the *sacerdotal* trajectory. The word *sacerdotal* suggests the mediation (or making) of the sacred, but it often carries negative connotations of oppressive priestly hierarchies. In fact, theogonic mechanisms can be (and have been) combined in such a way as to produce such systems. My use of the term here, however, is only intended to indicate the way in which this trajectory influences the debates among most theologians of religion operating within the religions of West Asian origin.

The arrow in the upper right quadrant indicates what I will call the *iconoclastic* trajectory. The term *iconoclastic* also has strong connotations and is often linked to a particular historical period (early medieval Byzantium). However, the concept of the breaking (*klasis*) of images (*ikon*) that anthropomorphically represent the divine in ways authorized by the sociology of the regnant elite is too perfect for my purposes to pass up. Here, too, I am interested in how the tendencies on the grid combine to create trajectories within contemporary global society. (I do not have space here to discuss the trajectories of the upper left and lower right quadrants, which I call prodigal and penurious respectively; but suffice it to say that, in my view, they are not promising options. In this context, my goal is to show how the coordinate system constructed by the two axes offers a different way of thinking about our options in theology of religions.

As in most other scientific endeavors, BCSR scholars tend to follow the iconoclastic trajectory, resisting both the overdetection of agency and the overprotection of coalitions. First, as Scott Atran observes, scientific explanations differ from religious (or even commonsense) interpretations of ambiguous events “by excluding rather than conjuring up agent-based accounts” (2002, 49). McCauley and Lawson note that “the religious world increases the number and influence of intentional agents while science

ultimately aims to minimize both by seeking alternative accounts of affairs in terms of underlying, predictable, non-intentional mechanisms" (1990, 162; cf. Guthrie, 1980, 190). In other words, these scientists are anthropomorphically prudish.

Second, scientists are (or at least try to be) critically self-aware of the possibility that their research might be inappropriately influenced by commitment to the ideology of a particular social group. This is an ideal not always followed but an ideal nonetheless. Scientists are doubtful by default toward research that is supported by coalitions that have a strong interest in the outcome. The salutary effect of a drug may be as astonishing as the research funded by the pharmaceutical company that produces it suggests. Most scientists will defer judgment until and unless the research is duplicated by less potentially biased parties. Although sometimes blinded by commitment to their own discipline, or a particular scholar or school within that discipline, scientists attempt to overcome, insofar as possible, the temptation to submit to the pressures of conventional authority when seeking to understand and explain the world. Such efforts enhance the possibilities for creative sociographic promiscuity.

It is important to recognize the context within and the purpose for which I am using the terms *iconoclastic* and *sacerdotal*, and pointing out their connection to *science* and *religion*, respectively. I am not suggesting that "science" (in some general sense) is the solution to all of our problems, psychological, political, or otherwise. Nor am I suggesting that everything about "religion" (in general) is problematic and must be cleared away for future construction. We are dealing here with two specific trajectories created by two specific axes, which offer two quite different ways of approaching a specific task.

How does the unveiling of theogonic mechanisms clarify the options for theology of religions? For the most part, the discipline (like theology in general) has operated under the influence of the forces that constitute the sacerdotal trajectory. As we have seen, most of the participants in such dialogues accept the idea of a supranatural agent and an ultimate eschatological coalition in which (at least some) members of natural religious coalitions may participate.

This has led many scholars within the fields of BCSR to assume that this is always and only how theology operates. For example, Lewis-Williams describes theology as the convoluted justifications of religious spin doctors (2010). McCauley and Lawson see theology as the attempt to exert excessive conceptual control within a coalition in order to avert ritual failures that would dissolve them (2002). Tremlin asserts that "no matter how different theologians make gods, they never abandon the

idea that gods have minds" (2006, 101). Noting how ritual offerings rest on the intuitive belief that gods have desires, he also claims that "no one, not even the theologian, stops to consider why *that* claim should be true" (139).

It is important to acknowledge the power of this critique; much of what happens under the guise of "theology" fits these descriptions. However, it is also important to point out that this is not *always* the case, as some of these generalizing characterizations imply. In fact, many theological scholars within religious coalitions, usually those with mystical or prophetic dispositions, have resisted sociographic prudery, calling for the dissolution of coalitional barriers. Moreover, across the axial age religions, one finds leading thinkers who resist the attribution of intellection or volition to ultimate reality. This is obvious in the case of East and South Asian religions (e.g., Dao, Tian, Nirguna Brahman, and sunyata are denied these qualities). Even within the Abrahamic religions of West Asian origin, however, one also finds serious concerns about the appropriateness of imagining the divine as a supranatural agent (e.g., Maimonides, Aquinas, Al-Ghazali).

Such concerns can have a certain *iconoclastic* force insofar as they insist on breaking the finite symbols with which humans attempt to engage infinity. If ultimate reality is the creative ground of all finite differentiation whatsoever, then it cannot adequately be symbolized (or construed in any other way) as one differentiated finite thing among others. The notion of supranatural agency is particularly problematic in this regard. To be an agent is to be limited in relation to one's patients, to be intentionally oriented toward that which one is not. To be supranatural is to be above (or beyond) that which is natural, to be transcendent to that which it is not. However, to be susceptible to such conditional definition is what it means to be *finite*. Insofar as *an* agent or *a* being is conditioned by that which it is not, its existence cannot be considered truly infinite. This is one reason why the "image" of supranatural agency must be broken; it pretends to signify infinity iconically—a logically impossible task.

For the most part, however, the force of the integrated theogonic mechanisms has brought these iconoclastic lines of flight back into the gravitation pull of the sacerdotal trajectory. It makes good philosophical sense to say that the human mind cannot grasp infinity the way it grasps finite things, but too often this has led to the kind of appeal to mystery that veils the domestication of infinity within a particular coalition. Observations about the limits of human knowledge (which are true enough) can provide a cover that protects the ongoing detection of "our" supranatural agent(s). A tension between these trajectories can be felt in the work

of most of the great theologians in the Abrahamic traditions. As we will see, this tension is also evident within theological debates over religious supremacy.

Is it possible for theology of religions to follow the iconoclastic trajectory without collapsing back under the weight of the forces of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery? As a result of these theogonic mechanisms, exclusivism seems to be the default position within most coalitions. Inclusivism allows for the possibility of the eschatological participation of religious others, but this is ultimately mediated by the supernatural agent of the inclusivist's own coalition. Pluralism tends to downplay anthropomorphic imagery and strive against sociographic prudery more than the others, but usually some idea of an ultimate coalition hosted by a supranatural agent is maintained. Are the effects of the myth that generates these debates over supremacy in theology of religions sufficiently tragic to motivate us to pursue the iconoclastic trajectory more radically?

### THE TRAGEDY OF RELIGIOUS SUPREMACY

The debates around competing religious claims for supremacy are tragic in at least three senses. First, they can lead to the kind of tragedy with which we are all too familiar—the effects of the terrible violence that can occur when interreligious affairs get nasty. When violence has a religious dimension, it almost always involves the type of exclusivists who engage religious others only to change or destroy them, as world headlines illustrate almost every day. Of course, most of those who embrace exclusivism in their theology of religions are not committed to the destruction of others in this (natural) world. It is not uncommon, however, for even the most peace-loving exclusivists to insist that those who are not part of their coalition face a (supernatural) world of hellish violence or annihilation unless—or purgation until—they see things from *their* supranatural agent's point of view.

Second, scholarly debates over religious supremacy illustrate what Pascal Boyer calls the “tragedy of the theologian” (2001). No matter how hard theologians try to articulate philosophically coherent and politically open ideas about God, religious practitioners usually default rather quickly to detecting supernatural agency and protecting supernatural coalitions in a way that is consistent with the natural functioning of evolved theogonic mechanisms. The maximally counterintuitive concepts codified and policed by religious leaders may be memorized and repeated, but as soon as they engage in pragmatic reasoning about issues of morality and

misfortune, people naturally tend to return to the kind of inferential strategies that helped our early ancestors survive.

All theologians of religion are susceptible to this “tragedy,” but let me illustrate with two of the most sophisticated inclusivists currently working in the field. Francis X. Clooney (S. J.) has brought his own Roman Catholic tradition into deep comparative dialogue with some of the Vedantic traditions within Hinduism. He rejects the idea of starting with a theory of religion (like the pluralists) and calls his approach an “including theology.” Clooney explicitly sees his efforts “a kind of Christian witness” (2001, 27). He insists that comparative theology should not be “primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith” (2010, 16). However, it is precisely *which religion is the true one* that concerns the practicing Roman Catholic (as well as the practicing Hindu). If some other supernatural agent coalition *truly* mediates access to a supremely attractive eschatological future, why would she continue engaging in the same costly ritual signaling?

One of the other most philosophically sophisticated theologians of religions in the field is Protestant theologian Mark Heim. In his first major methodological analysis of theology of religions, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, he argued that neither exclusivism nor pluralism (in their classical forms) allow a balance between real openness to others and a commitment to practicing one’s own (1995, 222). Although critical of the taxonomy itself, he suggested that trying to move “beyond inclusivism” would not be faithful to the historical concreteness of real religions, which *do* see themselves as supreme in some sense. He was also critical of the notion of a single religious end, suggesting that this illustrated an obsession with “sameness” that obscured the reality of religious “difference.”

Heim’s constructive proposal is outlined in *The Depth of Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (2001), where he argues that there are a variety of real eschatological consummations. Once one has reached one’s own “summit,” however, from that perspective the others will look “lower” (283). From a Christian point of view, then, one can still affirm a kind of trinitarian exclusivism; only Christians achieve communion with the triune God; other achievements appear to be of a “lesser good.” Other traditions will make similar judgments about the supremacy of *their* religious ends. We should notice that Heim still presupposes *one* creator, who providentially offers salvation to all, drawing any positive response, “however limited, toward the *fullest* providential good” (272, emphasis added). For our purposes, the more important point is that “tragically” such a proposal will not be very compelling to a layperson committed to

pursuing her own summit; it asks her to accept a complex theory of religious difference that challenges what she will eschatologically believe to be true—that her religious “end” really is the highest.

Pluralists also face this kind of problem, but I want to use this type of theology of religions to illustrate a third sense in which debates over religious supremacy are tragic. The Greeks not only gave us some of our most well-known theogonic myths, they also invented the “tragedy” as a theatrical form. In this sense, a *tragedy* is an aesthetic presentation of human suffering, a display of the weakness and limitations of the human condition, an offering of sensual engagement with the terrors of reality that is also intended to bring pleasure to the audience. Especially in the tragedies of Euripides and Aeschylus, this often involved the use of a *deus ex machina*, that is, an actor playing the role of a god lowered onto stage in a box whose arrival surprisingly and mysteriously provided the key turn in the plot.

This seems a fitting metaphor for sacerdotal theologies of religion, perhaps especially for classic forms of pluralism. I will take John Hick as my primary example. His work is motivated in part by the observation that human suffering is often intensified by competing claims about religious supremacy. A presentation of the limits of human knowledge is the philosophical core of his proposal. Adopting a Kantian distinction between noumenal reality and phenomenal appearance, he argues that “the Real” (which may also be called Ultimate Reality, the Transcendent, etc.) cannot be experienced “in itself.” However, its universal presence can be “humanly experienced” in the various (phenomenal) forms made possible by the “conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices” of the religions (2004, xix). The painful longing of finite humanity for a reality beyond our natural condition is both intensified and alleviated at the same time in this kind of presentation.

The tension between the sacerdotal and iconoclastic trajectories is evident in Hick’s theology of religions. The goal of his pluralist hypothesis was to resist “absolutized Christian patriarchalism” (1987, 34). Nevertheless, the various religious coalitions are still understood as mediating “soteriological alignment with the Real,” and “about to the same extent” although to different “groups of human beings” (2004, 375). He is well aware of the problems with thinking of the divine in terms of personal agency, and the philosophical preference across traditions for what he calls the metaphysical *impersonae* of the Real. Nevertheless, because of the human need to think and experience the Real as personal, he also insists that religious language about supernatural agency is “literally true” of divine *personae* (2004, xxxiv). By affirming a “cosmic optimism” that

"proclaims the real possibility, which can even begin to be realized here and now, of a *limitlessly better* state" (2005, 4, emphasis added), Hick introduces a *deus ex machina* that is apparently intended to give us pleasurable relief in the midst of a display of religious anxiety about finitude.

Yet, could one not argue that pluralism is worth fighting for? At least it might offer more hope in helping us avoid the actual tragedies so often connected to claims about coalitional supremacy. Isn't pluralism better than nothing? Well, it depends, of course, on what one means by "better" and whether "nothing" is really our only other option. Insofar as pluralist theologies of religion are under the influence of theogonic mechanisms, their presentations of human suffering (in which exclusivism gets much of the blame) will inevitably activate the naturally evolved cognitive and cultural processes that *intensify* a coalition's members' tendency to detect and protect (their) supernatural agents.

As we saw above, human cognition automatically defaults to the interpretation "human-like" when analysis breaks down. As Stewart Guthrie points out, it is relatively easy to weed out anthropomorphism and develop alternative interpretations in relation to things that are close to us, such as grass and wind. However, "when the things and events encompass 'ultimate conditions' the weeding becomes Herculean. Lacking a Hercules, we inhabit a world whose periphery is rankly overgrown. Approaching that periphery, whose 'ultimacy' means its very resistance to analysis, we find our critical tools, such as science and philosophy, do not penetrate. When we press on nonetheless, we are thrown upon intuition: that is, upon hypotheses lacking alternatives. Such hypotheses typically posit human attributes" (1993, 204).

Even the idea of "ultimate reality" can be construed as an example of anthropomorphism, and not only when it is explicitly imagined to be a supernatural agent.

Human beings do not have an evolved cognitive module for dealing with "all things," hardly the sort of tool our ancestors would have needed to survive. Such an abstraction is highly ambiguous; once it emerged as an idea it makes sense that humans would default to the "bet" that whatever conditions all of reality must be "most important." And what do humans tend to detect as most important? Human-like intentionality. Even if "ultimate reality" is not conceived as *a* person, it is "human-like" and "intentional" insofar as it is attributed with the teleonomic function of originating, ordering, and orienting the meaningfulness of human life.

Several psychological studies have shown that being reminded of death actually makes people more susceptible to believing counterintuitive ideas about supernatural agents and makes them more negative toward

out-groups (Atran 2010, 445; cf. Mikulincer and Shaver, 2001). This finding helps to clarify all three senses in which debates over religious supremacy can be “tragic.” As long as they include supernaturalistic ideas, such arguments will activate the anxious reactions that human beings naturally have when presented with their own finitude. Answering “yes” to the question represented in Figure 4.1 only intensifies the mechanisms that lead religious coalitions to try to configure their axiological engagement by appealing to supernatural agency. Reframing the options in light of Figure 4.2 opens up a new set of possibilities.

### TOWARD A NATURALIST THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

As with Figure 4.1, typifying theologies of religions in light of the trajectories of Figure 4.2 involves a clear distinction between other approaches and *naturalism*. In this case, however, the latter leads not to a theological dead end—a negative answer to a sacerdotally loaded question about the mediation of salvation in relation to ultimate reality—but into an open conceptual and pragmatic space constructed by its own iconoclastic energy. We might describe this approach (to paraphrase Nietzsche) as “doing theology with a hammer.” However, destruction is not the only use for hammers. Breaking up the cognitive and cultural iconography that reinforces the hyper-detection and hyper-protection of supernatural realms also clears out space for new creative construction.

Construction of what? Naturalist theological hypotheses about the conditions for the existence of religious modes of axiological engagement. What makes possible the human experience of valuing and being valued? Whence the human tendency to judge some things as more important, sometimes supremely more important, than others? How are we to explain the emergence of religious claims about that which originates, orders, and orients human coalitional norms? Both theologians and scholars within the fields of BCSR are interested in these questions. Above I described some of the hypotheses offered by scientists that help to make sense of these dynamics. I also described how (and indicated why) sacerdotal theologians answer these questions by appealing to supernatural agent coalitions.

However, I have also suggested that this is not the only theological option. Understanding theology in a broad sense as disciplined inquiry into the possibility conditions for any and all finite axiological engagement whatsoever is a first step toward overcoming the objection that theologians cannot be naturalists (and vice versa). Such inquiry can really be naturalist, in the sense that it rejects explanations that appeal to

supernaturalism or supranaturalism. Insofar as its hypotheses are about the conditions of finite existence, it is really *theological*. Elsewhere I have spelled out some of the methodological issues for arguments within and across disciplines about axiological engagement and some of the material issues that can be addressed by arguments that are both theological and naturalist (Shults, 2012).

Scholars in the field of theology of religions who follow the iconoclastic trajectory can bring a unique knowledge base into the interdisciplinary dialogue occurring within and around BCSR. They can contribute to the unveiling of theogonic mechanisms by complementing the scientific critique of supernaturalism with a philosophical critique of supranaturalism. In my view, the empirical findings and theoretical analyses of the disciplines of BCSR provide adequate warrant for using Ockham's razor on finite gods. These parsimonious hypotheses about the cognitive and cultural mechanisms that generate and sustain belief in discarnate intentional beings provide compelling reasons to delete supernatural agents from our ontological inventory list. Science does not "prove" that ghosts do not exist. However, it does offer a simpler, cleaner set of hypotheses for the diversity of beliefs in spirit beings across cultures than does the hypothesis that supernatural agents actually exist.

As I hinted above, things are different with hypotheses regarding supranatural agents, who are understood as conditioning not just other finite agents but as the condition for all finite intentional engagement whatsoever. Here one can argue, and theologians throughout the ages in the axial age traditions have argued, that the very idea is incoherent. In part, this is because Ockham's razor does not work on "infinity" in the same way; one cannot "cut" it off from the finite without thereby rendering it finite, since cutting is a form of limiting. Postulating a mystery behind a coalition's experience of such an agent is no answer (unless the question is how to bolster sacerdotal forces). The naturalist theologian of religions who has expertise in the philosophical debates within and around the axial age traditions can unleash and follow the iconoclastic lines of flight within them, maintaining a strict anthropomorphic prudery while opening up new possibilities for sociographic promiscuity.

Some might still object to calling this "theology." The task is more important than the term. A growing number of scholars are embracing the phrase "religious naturalism" as a way of describing philosophical approaches that reject supernaturalism but accept the importance (and the reality) of the intense human longing for (and experience of) meaning and value found among the religions (Stone, 2008). Wesley Wildman has retrieved "religious philosophy" as a phrase to describe a form

of multidisciplinary comparative inquiry that engages the “valuational depths” of nature (2010). This is exactly the kind of task that I have been urging upon theologians of religion. However, at least in the context of this particular multidisciplinary dialogue with the sciences of BCSR, in which the term *religious* denotes appeals to supernatural agents, it may make sense to explore other, perhaps complementary, nomenclatures.

Others might still object to calling such an approach to theology of religions “naturalist,” insisting that any discourse that tries to incorporate concepts like *infinity* and *value* are out of bounds for serious science. These concerns are unnecessary baggage left over from Newtonian physics and Comtean sociology. Infinity is no longer banished to a realm somehow beyond a closed universe; contemporary cosmologists and quantum theorists have no qualms about discussing intensive infinities “within” nature. Value is no longer imprisoned in a subjective realm somehow within the mind; post-positivist social scientists (at least those in the pragmatic tradition) have fewer qualms about discussing the axiological dimensions of reality. For those interested in exploring the conditions of finite axiological engagement, supernatural agency is no longer the only hypothesis in town.

In the limited space of this concluding section, I have only been able to point briefly to the possibility and promise of a naturalist theology of religions. Even if it is possible and promising, it will certainly not be easy. The biological, physiological, affective, and cognitive and cultural forces that contribute to committed belief in supernatural agents and coalitions are the result of millions of years of natural selection and millennia of social inscription. It is not surprising that the myth of religious supremacy appears to have an intractable hold within the mental and social space of contemporary human life. The mutual probative exploration of religious others is not too painful, and can even be fun, as long as everyone is polite. The experience can quickly change from ticklish to terrifying, however, once we begin to probe into the paternity of the (supernatural) offspring of religious aliens.

Yet this is precisely what will be required if we take seriously the claims of BCSR that the way in which God is born(e) is completely natural. God is a temporal progeny (whose birth in thinking comes easily) rather than an eternal progenitor (whose death is hardly thinkable). Postpartum theology will face different challenges than postmortem theology. Divine genitality is much more frightening than divine moribundity. Here the question is no longer about the genealogy of the (immortal) gods, but about the genesis of supernatural agent conceptions in the minds of (mortal) humans.

Detecting agency and protecting healthy coalitions remain as important as ever in contemporary human life. Without the over-detecting and

over-protecting habits of our ancestors—without “religion”—we would almost certainly not be here. My criticisms of the sacerdotal trajectory are not meant to imply that there is no value in religion. Clearly, the religious traditions have and can continue to promote ideas, feelings, and behaviors that are good for us—even today.

The task before us, I suggest, is learning how to retrieve and refigure these valuable resources as we creatively construct new modes of axiological engagement without the burden of supernatural (or supranatural) agents. A naturalist theology of religions, in dialogue with the disciplines of BCSR, can help. However, we will have to learn to engage in frank conversations about axiological engagement without our (supernatural) offspring listening in. Such mutual probation may be existentially painful, but it may also lead to the discovery that precisely in our shared finitude we are not so alien after all. We may finally learn to stop alienating one another, and that sounds like a pretty good—if not supremely valuable—end.

#### FURTHER READING

Most of my suggestions for further reading are indicated within each section of the chapter. For additional reading on the relation between violence and religion examined from the point of view of sciences within the orbit of BCSR, see Jones (2008) and Teehan (2010). For resources within various traditions for promoting openness to other religions, see Coward (2000), Esack (1997), and Armstrong (2006).

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