

Theology after Pandora

The Real Scandal of the Evangelical Mind (and Culture)

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Introduction

STAN GRENZ LOVED TO make connections between theology and popular culture, and he had a special predilection for science fiction—especially *Star Trek* (Next Generation, of course) and *X-Files* (like agent Mulder, he believed the truth was “out there”). He also knew that our fascination with extra-terrestrials is more about our own alienation, our own strangely anxious and hopeful sentience, than it is about imagined alien creatures. More than most evangelical theologians, Stan focused on what was happening here and now on planet Earth. Nevertheless, like every other evangelical I know, he also anticipated an eschatological renewal of this world, a new earth (and a new heaven), re-created in some sense by the supernatural agency of Christ. In this essay I borrow one of Stan’s well known methodological strategies, reflecting on theological themes in the context of engaging a popular science fiction film. Although he almost certainly would not have agreed with my material proposal, I know he would have welcomed the conversation.¹

1. I want to thank the editors of this *Festschrift* for their generosity in allowing me to contribute such a scandalous essay. As they wisely suggested, I have done my best to

One might think that the reference to “Pandora” in the main title of this chapter was to the Greek myth in which the first woman, modeled of clay by Hephaestus as part of Zeus’s punishment of mankind for Prometheus’ theft of fire, released evils into the world by opening a box (or jar) given to her by the gods. In the conclusion I will return to poor Pandora, but the reference here is actually to the planet Pandora in the 2009 film *Avatar*.² The film portrays the conflict between the Na’vi, the (mostly) friendly natives of Pandora, and the invading human forces of the RDA mining corporation, the (mostly) nasty humans bent on acquiring the aptly named “unobtainium” buried beneath the surface of the planet. I use this fictional account of a conflict of ideas and societies on Pandora as material for reflecting on the possibilities for theology to respond in new ways to the intellectual and political challenges we face here and now on planet Earth.

My sub-title plays on the title of the influential book by Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, which he begins by asserting that “the scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind. . . . American evangelicals have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life.”³ In his more recent *Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind*, Noll finds some signs for modest optimism but remains “largely unrepentant” of his negative evaluation.⁴ Stan Grenz was an obvious exception. His scholarship set a standard of excellence among those who self-identified as part of the North American evangelical subculture. Fundamentalists were often scandalized by his writings, not for Nollian reasons, but because he challenged the *status quo* they were so concerned to protect. Nevertheless, the existence of a few such scholars does not diminish the larger point: Noll is right to decry the lack of intellectual rigor among evangelicals. The problem, however, is much deeper and more serious than Noll acknowledges.

The real scandal of the evangelical mind cannot be separated from the scandal of the evangelical *culture*, and vice versa. Balancing piety with more appreciation of the Christian intellectual tradition will not solve the problem. Balancing social concern with better scholarship will not solve the problem. Such efforts merely reorganize the chairs on the deck of the sinking Titanic (to allude to another film by James Cameron). The deeper problem facing evangelicalism is one that is shared by other religious coalitions. Although the material details of evangelical belief in and hope for eschatological renewal have their own particularities, they are formally structured

maintain an irenic tone.

2. Directed by James Cameron, 2009 (20th Century Fox).

3. Noll, *Scandal*, 3.

4. Noll, *Jesus Christ*, 151.

by the same evolved tendencies that have contributed to the emergence of religion in every known human society: widely shared imaginative engagement with person-like supernatural agents who are interested in the moral activity of specific groups.⁵

Evangelicals will continue to stumble as long as they cannot see the hidden cognitive and coalitional mechanisms that shape their mental and social life. This essay is an attempt to unveil these mechanisms by engaging recent scientific discoveries about (and philosophical reflection on) the emergence, evolution, and transmission of human religiosity. Once we can see what we are doing, it will be easier to explore new possibilities for the discipline of theology. In the concluding section of this chapter, I propose a way of doing theology that does not appeal to extra-terrestrials (or supernatural agents) who favor a particular human coalition. For reasons I will try to make clear, I call this the *iconoclastic* trajectory of theology.

The first three sub-sections set out the basic argument of the chapter. First, I outline a conceptual framework that describes a convergence of findings and theories in the bio-cultural sciences of religion, which help to explain why “religion” is so prevalent in human cultures. Second, I use this framework to analyze the “theological” options portrayed in the movie *Avatar*, as the (increasingly) evil capitalists fight the (initially) naïve tree-huggers for control of the planet Pandora. This then sets the stage for a description of evangelical groups as examples of a particular kind of supernatural agent coalition, typical of those religions that trace their roots to the axial age, which normally follow what I call the *sacerdotal* trajectory of theology. The *real* scandal of the evangelical mind (and culture) is that evolved mechanisms are surreptitiously shaping its theological practices, reinforcing the psychological repression and political oppression that everyone sees but no one is sure what to do about. The last two sub-sections explore the possibility of a quite different approach to doing theology.

Bearing Gods in Mind and Culture

Why are we religious? Empirical findings and theoretical reflections across a variety of fields, including archaeology, cognitive science, evolutionary neurobiology, moral psychology, social anthropology, and political theory suggest that the contemporary human beliefs, activities, and emotions normally associated with “religion” are shaped by naturally evolved mechanisms that

5. I will explain my use of some of these contentious terms below. Some of the themes in this essay are treated in more detail in Shults, “Bearing Gods,” “Problem of Good,” “Science and Religious Supremacy,” and *Iconoclastic Theology*.

are part of our shared phylogenetic heritage. There is no space here to analyze, or even list, all of the important developments in these disciplines that bear on the bio-cultural study of religion. For my purposes here, however, it will suffice to provide a broad sketch of some of the significant trends within these fields, which coalesce in support of the general claim that shared imaginative engagement with gods naturally emerges in contemporary human minds and cultures as a result of cognitive and coalitional tendencies that helped our early hominid ancestors survive in small-scale groups, granting them a competitive advantage in the late Pleistocene environment. The question that faces us today is whether these tendencies are still adaptive in our rapidly changing, pluralistic, global environment. First, let me clarify my use of some key terms.

The term *bearing* has a double meaning, indicating the naturally evolved processes by which gods are *born* in human cognition (by the hyper-active detection of agency in the *natural* environment) and *borne* in human culture (by the hyper-active protection of coalitions in the *social* environment). By referring to these as *theogonic* (god-bearing) mechanisms, I mean to emphasize not their expression in literary accounts of the genesis of the gods, such as Hesiod's *Theogony*, but the way in which they engender any narrative imaginative engagement that reinforces the detection and protection of a specific supernatural agent coalition.

Scholars in the disciplines that contribute to the bio-cultural study of religion often use the term *god* as shorthand for any culturally-postulated, discarnate intentional force—as synonymous with “supernatural agent” or “superhuman entity.”⁶ In other words, not only Yahweh, Zeus, or Vishnu, but also ghosts, genies, and ghouls would be referred to as *gods*. The differences between these kinds of gods are obviously significant, but for the sake of participating in this interdisciplinary dialogue I will follow this usage in this essay. At this point, it is important to note that they all share at least two key features: intentionality and contingent embodiment.

I am using the term *supernatural* in this context to mean not necessarily embodied in the causal nexus of space-time-matter-energy as generally understood by contemporary physical cosmology. The qualifier “not necessarily” allows for the possibility that an imagined agent could be called supernatural if it is temporarily embodied but has not always been, or is potentially embodied although it might not ever be. By *agent* I mean any entity or force that is attributed intentionality or related human-like features, such as consciousness or the capacity for symbolic communication. In this

6. E.g., Tremplin, *Minds and Gods*; Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*; Boyer, *Future of an Illusion*; Pyysiainen, *Supernatural Agents*; and Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds*.

sense, gods are agents postulated to have some interest in and causal power over the members of the coalition that imaginatively engage them.

A supernatural agent *coalition* is a social nexus that is held together, at least in part, by appeal to the power or authority of gods allegedly watching the group and concerned about its members' evaluative judgments and moral actions.⁷ That is to say, the way in which members of the group evaluate one another's (and their own) beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes is in some way constituted or regulated by supernatural agents, who are taken to be strategic players in the survival of the group. All of this leads to my use of the term *religiosity* in this context to refer to "shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents."

With these definitions in place, I now turn to a conceptual grid (figure 1) that can help clarify the relation between some of the cognitive and coalitional tendencies studied by the bio-cultural sciences of religion. The relevant theories are more complex than I can convey here, but this framework is sufficient for its purpose, namely, as a heuristic device for showing the possible interactions between two basic sorts of proclivity found among all *Homo sapiens* (including evangelicals).

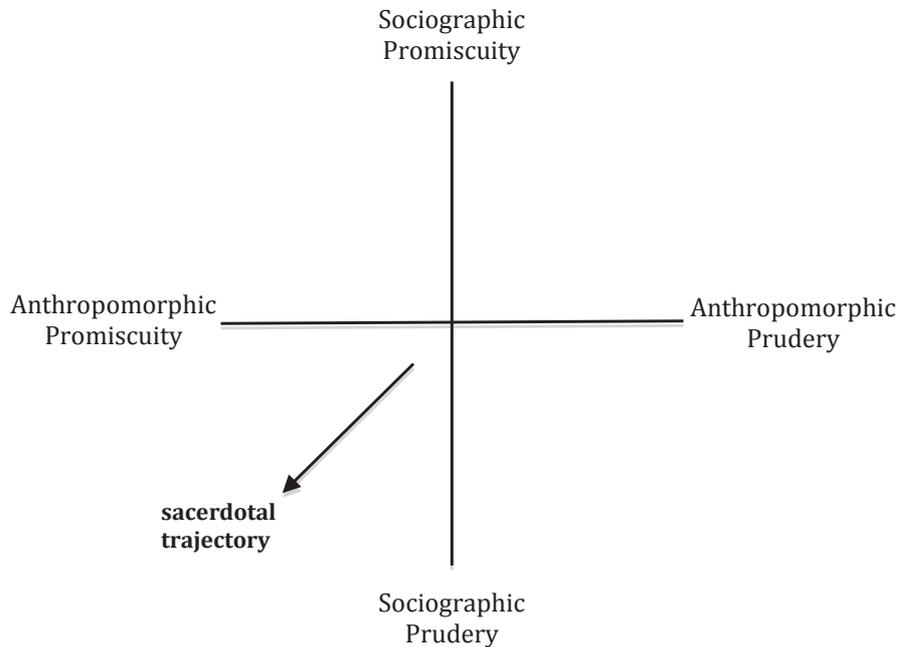


Figure 1

7. For theories that contribute to such claims, see Bulbulia, "Nature's Medicine"; Sosis, "Religious Behaviors"; Boyer, *Explaining Religion*; Teehan, *In God's Name*.

Along the spectrum represented by the horizontal line one can mark the extent to which a person will tend to guess “human-like intentional form” when confronted with ambiguous phenomena in the natural environment. Those who are *promiscuous* in their anthropomorphic detection are always on the lookout for supernatural agents, and leap rather quickly at opportunities to attribute causality to the gods of their group. An anthropomorphic *prude*, on the other hand, resists the temptation to appeal to disembodied intentional forces when interpreting an event. He or she will reflect more carefully before giving in to the intuitive desire to grab at supernatural explanations for strange occurrences.

The vertical line represents a spectrum that registers the way in which a person holds on to conventional modes of inscribing the social field, i.e., to the proscriptions and prescriptions that regulate the evaluative practices and boundaries of the coalition(s) with which he or she primarily identifies. The sociographically *prudish* are strongly committed to the authorized social norms of their in-group, following and protecting them, even at great cost to themselves. They are more likely to be suspicious of out-groups and to accept claims or demands that appeal to authorities within their own coalition. The sociographic *promiscuity* of those at the other end of the spectrum, on the other hand, leads them to be more open to interaction with out-groups about alternate normativities and to the pursuit of new modes of creative social inscription. Such persons are also less likely to accept restrictions or assertions that are based only or primarily on appeals to convention.

The integration of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery was an evolutionary winner. In the early ancestral environment the selective advantage went to hominids whose cognitive capacities enabled them to quickly *detect* relevant agents (such as predators, prey, protectors, and partners) in the natural environment, and whose groups were adequately *protected* from the dissolution that could result from too many defectors and cheaters in the social environment. Hyper-sensitive detection often led to false positives, e.g., identifying a noise in the forest as a predator (or prey) when it was really the wind. However, occasionally it really was a predator (or prey), and those whose detective capacities were weak or lazy—it’s probably just the wind—got eaten (or failed to eat), and so their genes were not passed on. Hyper-sensitive protection often led to serious punishment of cheaters, the demand for costly signals of commitment from those suspected of considering defection, and willingness to attack and kill members of out-groups. The good news (for the in-group) is that these strategies did in fact lead to stronger (longer-lasting) coalitions.

In fact *over*-sensitive detection and protection increased the chance of survival during a critical period of time in human history. A growing body

of evidence in archaeology, anthropology, and other fields suggests that by 90,000 years before the present some *Homo sapiens* groups had developed more complex beliefs and rituals in which they imaginatively engaged supernatural agents (such as animal-spirits) they detected in the environment.⁸ These contingently embodied intentional forces were believed to have the power to punish cheaters or defectors (or their family members); moreover, they might be watching at any time. Such beliefs would have increased the motivation to follow social norms. By around 60,000 years ago it appears that some of these “god-bearing” groups left Africa, out-competing all other hominid species and spreading out across the Levant and into Europe and Asia, eventually incorporating other kinds of supernatural agents such as ancestor-ghosts into their rituals and belief systems.

All living humans are the genetic offspring of these groups, and so share a suite of inherited traits that support the tendency to detect supernatural agents and protect supernatural coalitions. In other words, human beings today are intuitively and “naturally” drawn into the bio-cultural gravitational force of the integrated theogonic (god-bearing) mechanisms in the lower left quadrant of figure 1. These evolved traits were tweaked differently in various contexts, which led to the diversity of manifestations of religious life we see across cultures. That is to say, supernatural agent conceptions are never immaculate; the particular features of our gods betray our religious family of origin.

During the axial age (800–200 BCE), the challenges of pluralism and organizational hierarchy in complex literate states across west, south, and east Asia required more complicated and stronger forms of coalition. In other words, bigger cultures needed bigger gods. In the monotheistic religions that trace their roots to Abraham (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), this takes the form of belief in an infinite person-like supernatural agent who has power over all coalitions whatsoever. These religions are *sacerdotal* insofar as they require their members to signal commitment to the group by costly participation in “priestly” rituals that are intended to mediate the power of the “sacred.” When *theology* follows this sacerdotal trajectory, it reinforces detection of the particular supernatural agent concerned about the well-being (and obedience) of a particular coalition. Such an organizational strategy has worked relatively well for centuries, at least from the perspective of those coalitions whose crusades against and colonization of religious others has enhanced their own prosperity.

8. E.g., Rossano, *Supernatural Selection*; Lewis-Williams, *Conceiving God*.

Avatar Theology

What does any of this have to do with the imaginary planet of Pandora? Like most science fiction, the movie *Avatar* portrays a mixture of dystopian anxieties and utopian idealizations projected from the writers' own concerns or hopes about contemporary human society. As far as we can tell, nothing like an axial age had occurred on Pandora; the writers depict the Na'vi (and other indigenous tribes) as an odd combination of shamanic small-scale clans and proto-barbarian despotic states. The RDA corporation is a stereotypical organizational cog within an industrial-military complex, driven by nothing more than a lust for more profit. Some of the scientists hired by RDA, however, want to study (and perhaps even learn from) the Na'vi.

As we saw above, the evolutionary default for human beings on planet Earth is toward the integration of theogonic mechanisms, falling into the lower left quadrant of the grid introduced above. The two main groups combating in the movie *Avatar*, the Na'vi and RDA, can be taken to represent the upper left and lower right quadrants of the grid (figure 2) respectively. The way in which they integrate cognitive and coalitional tendencies lead to what I call the prodigal and penurious trajectories of theology.

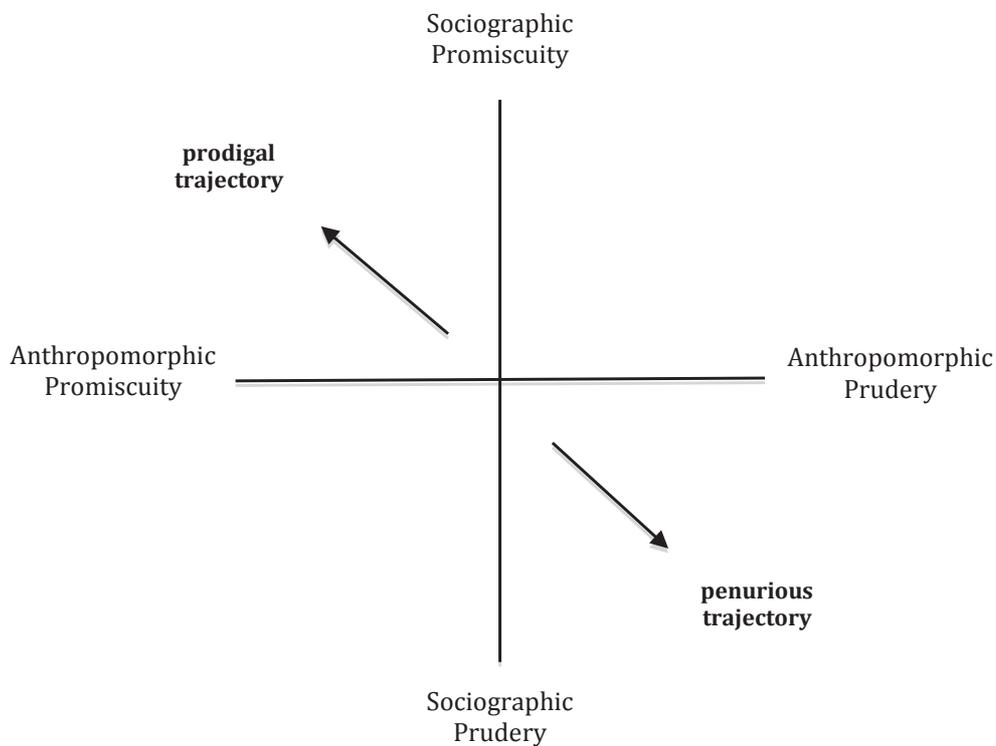


Figure 2

The Na'vi are anthropomorphically promiscuous: supernatural agency is detected at work in moss, trees, animals, and mountains. They are quite open (at least initially) to other modes of inscribing the socius, enthusiastically sending their children to the school run by the RDA scientists. The corporate leaders of RDA, on the other hand, are anthropomorphic prudes, refusing to acknowledge even the human-like agency of the Na'vi, whom they refer to as “blue monkeys.” Members of the RDA coalition are also prudish in their sociography, forcing their own norms upon others, with little patience for anything that challenges their capitalist inscriptions.

I call the trajectory in the upper left corner *prodigal* because it is promiscuous in relation to *both* the cognitive and coalitional tendencies; i.e., it can lead to an extravagant expenditure of energy on imaginative engagement with supernatural agents (ubiquitous detection of intentionality) and on profligate pursuit of ever new experiences with other groups (inadequate protection of sociality). The lower right trajectory is *penurious* in the sense that it is stingy in relation to *both* types of evolved mechanisms; i.e., it can lead to a tightfisted refusal to acknowledge members of out-groups (failure to “see” actual, natural intentional agents), and miserly resistance to sharing with and learning from other cultures (stubborn maintenance and expansion of in-group norms).

What does any of this have to do with *theology*? For the sake of this essay, I want to suggest a broad description of this field of inquiry: theology as the critique and construction of hypotheses about the conditions for finite axiological engagement. In this sense, both the Na'vi and RDA had their own theologies. Each group had its own (more or less explicit) hypotheses about that which makes possible the experience of valuing and being valued. Here we are not talking about this or that particular value, but that which generates the conditions for all valuation whatsoever. Now the *sacerdotal* trajectory in theology, by far the most common on Earth since the axial age, develops hypotheses that appeal to particular supernatural agents and their coalitions; “our God” is the basis of and judge over all values and actions. I will return below to the upper right quadrant, which I call the *iconoclastic* trajectory of theology.

My point here, however, is that the trajectories represented by the Na'vi and the RDA are indeed *theological*. What is it that makes possible (perhaps even originates, orders, and orients) value-laden engagements? The hypothesizing that guides the prodigal trajectory of the Na'vi is characterized by a relatively loose and open interaction with a pervasive field of supernatural agency that (early in the story) is not specifically concerned with protecting a particular coalition. The penurious hypothesizing of the RDA is guided by a strict allegiance to the invisible (yet quite “natural”) hand that guides the

flow of capital-money, and whose alleged neutrality justifies the behavior of those who learn to control it.

In the movie, of course, the planet of Pandora is portrayed as actually infused with the supernatural energy of a mother tree-goddess who (spoiler alert) eventually makes the animals of the planet fight against RDA. Jake Sully (the hero) becomes a kind of warrior-priest who is able to convince her of the evil of RDA. Because of her intervention, the RDA is thwarted and forced to leave the planet; the Na'vi coalition is saved.

But let's come back to Earth. Clearly there are some groups on our planet too who resemble the RDA and others who live somewhat like the Na'vi. However, neither of these theological strategies will be adequate for saving *our* planet; in our late modern, pluralistic, globalizing context, we will not be able to *live together* under these conditions. As several cinematic observers pointed out, the movie *Avatar* is rather obviously intended as a negative commentary on U.S. interventions in the Middle East. The Colonel with a southern accent (George W. Bush?) and the RDA Administrator in charge of doling out contracts (Dick Cheney?) are blind to everything but the “unobtainium” (oil) hidden under the land of indigenous peoples (Iraqis, Afghans, etc.).

My point here is that although we may well celebrate the movie's denigration of the trajectory represented by RDA, we humans do not actually live on Pandora and so the trajectory represented by the Na'vi is also doomed to fail. If in fact there were tree-goddesses to whom the colonized worldwide could appeal, things would be different; invading forces (military or economic) could be defeated by petitioning such supernatural agents who could harness the powers of nature. But there are not. And they cannot. Earth is not Pandora. I believe that the upper right quadrant is our best theological option, and can open up new ways to think about *God*. Before exploring this possibility, however, let me back up and demonstrate the way in which contemporary evangelicalism illustrates the *sacerdotal* trajectory, which has been the most popular mode of theological hypothesis construction for the last two millennia here on Earth.

Evangelical Supernatural Agent Coalitions

First, what is an “evangelical”? The question is not merely academic, as Stan Grenz, and those who tried to exclude him from this category, knew quite well.⁹ For my purposes, it suffices to use a broad definition of the term,

9. See D. A. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel!”

referring generally to those who participate in religious coalitions shaped by various attempts in the mid-twentieth century (by the likes of Billy Graham) to find a middle way between fundamentalism and liberalism in Christianity. Such groups have achieved dominance in many areas in the United States and Britain, and continue to expand in many parts of the world, including my new homeland of Norway. Although this was my own religious “family of origin,” I did not know how important this appellation was until I was informed of my “evangelical” identity at college.

Now many (but certainly not all) evangelicals would laugh at the idea of a tree-goddess who controls animals and cares about a small-scale coalition. However, most evangelicals do imaginatively detect a whole host of ambiguously discarnate or contingently embodied intentional forces who are interested in *their* coalition: angels, demons, disembodied ancestors (saints), etc. They also believe in a powerful and wise supernatural agent, God, who will punish cheaters and defectors and protect those who remain faithful to an in-group, rewarding them a place in an everlasting heavenly coalition. The fact that members of out-groups (other religions, or even other sorts of evangelicals who disagree on some point of polity or biblical interpretation) believe that *their* coalitions will be protected by the gods (or God) that *they* have detected is explained away as the result of demonic delusion or even sin. In my view, this appeal to the noetic effects of sin is one of the most appalling of noetic sins. But I digress.

While most evangelicals find themselves comfortably in the sacerdotal trajectory (the God we detect protects our coalition), it is interesting to observe how differently their right and left wings typically respond to the other two trajectories so far explored. In my experience, those on the evangelical “right” are usually more worried about New Agers (the prodigals) than they are about capitalist corporations that ravage the poor and the environment (the penurious). On the other hand, those on the evangelical “left” tend to react more harshly to RDA types and are less anxious about the touchy-feely spiritualism that characterizes some recent forms of the ecclesial socius. Which is more important—rejecting the (interpretation of) gods detected by others or expanding our own coalition by loosening social norms?

Wherever evangelicals fall in their answers to such questions, they remain within the sacerdotal trajectory. Here they are in good (or at least plentiful) company. Like the other Abrahamic religions, evangelical coalitions are held together by shared imaginative engagement with particular kinds of contingently embodied intentional forces. These may be explicitly divine figures detected at rituals (the presence of Jesus at the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit at a baptism) or lesser supernatural agents detected in everyday life (an angel when in need of protection, a demon when feeling temptation,

a former saintly coalition member when in need of inspiration). Evangelicals may be well trained in theological doctrine, and give orthodox answers to questions about divine infinity, immutability, aseity, and omniscience, but (like everyone else) they easily fall back into “theologically incorrect” models of God as a human-like intentional entity who is emotionally concerned with the struggles of their coalition in real space and time. This is because the default to evolved theogonic mechanisms naturally leads to images of finite gods who are watching over small-scale groups.¹⁰

Most professional theologians (at least in North America) are paid by institutions that support a particular religious coalition or set of coalitions that follow the sacerdotal trajectory. A great number of these institutions require faculty to sign “statements of faith,” signaling their commitment to the in-group. As one example, let us take the institution with which Mark Noll has been associated for much of his career. Wheaton College demands that the scholars it employs—the “evangelical minds” it hires—assert and re-assert every year that they believe *inter alia* in supernatural agents like Satan, that out-group members will be punished eternally, that a text revealed by a supernatural agent is the final authority on all matters it discusses, and that physical death entered the world when Adam and Eve, the historical parents of the entire human race, disobeyed God.¹¹

Similar claims could be culled from other statements of faith imposed by hundreds of similar institutions. But let us set aside for a moment the plausibility of particular assertions within such statements. The very fact that intellectual exploration is policed and restricted by forcing scholars to limit their claims (in any field) to assertions that are consistent with a particular coalition’s appeal to supernatural agents (which only they can appropriately detect and properly interpret) is a symptom of the *real* scandal of the evangelical mind (and culture).

Stan Grenz was a leader in reforming, renewing, and revisioning evangelical theology.¹² He was often attacked by other scholars who seemed to perceive his intellectually rigorous engagement with contemporary culture and science as a threat to their own coalitions. I always admired Stan’s courage and integrity in setting out his positions. He was the epitome of irenicism and never insisted that someone agree with him before (or after) engaging in serious theological conversation. I’m quite sure he would have

10. Slone, *Theological Incorrectness*.

11. <http://www.wheaton.edu/About-Wheaton/Statement-of-Faith-and-Educational-Purpose> (accessed 6 Jan. 2013).

12. His massive corpus is engaged in a variety of ways in other chapters in this *Festschrift*. Excellent examples of his efforts at reformation include *Renewing the Center*, and *Revisioning*.

resisted the radical proposals that I set out in the next section, but equally sure he would have encouraged me to tell it like I see it.

Iconoclastic Theology for Terrestrials

We do not live on Pandora. There are no tree-goddesses to save us. Those of us who agree that unbridled capitalism requires an infinite expansion of resources, and is rapidly depleting our finite ecological limits, have little faith in the RDAs of planet Earth. Given our evolved tendencies to detect supernatural agents, and our social entrainment within west Asian religious traditions, it is easy to believe that our only and best option is the sacerdotal trajectory. This adaptive strategy may have worked well (in terms of holding together complex social groups) during the axial age; it still feels natural to us, but the integration of these cognitive and coalitional mechanisms lead us to misinterpret ambiguous natural events (like tsunamis) or to ignore clear natural events (like global warming), appealing instead to supernatural causes or promises. The same evolved tendencies that aid in the coalescence and maintenance of relatively large religious coalitions, like evangelicalism, also fuel antagonism toward perceived in-group defectors (like Stan Grenz) and a willingness to sanctify violence against out-groups. The sacerdotal trajectory helped the species hold together during a difficult period, but the exponential growth and rapidly increasing global connectedness of the human population require new ways of constructing and criticizing hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement.

How could theologians possibly participate in the iconoclastic trajectory, which is diametrically opposed to the theogonic forces that have nurtured their traditions? In fact, most Christian theologians have indeed followed this trajectory—at least sometimes, at least partially. The real question is whether they can follow it consistently.

When theologians resist their evolved tendencies to over-detect agency and over-protect groups, they are pressing toward the upper right corner of Figure 3. In this case they construct and criticize hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement without immediately appealing to a particular supernatural agent revelation or to the rituals and social norms of their in-group. In other words, they become more sociographically promiscuous and anthropomorphically prudish. I call this trajectory *iconoclastic* because the integration of these tendencies has a jarring, and potentially destructive, effect on the religious images (icons) shared by the coalition, weakening their explanatory and cohesive power.

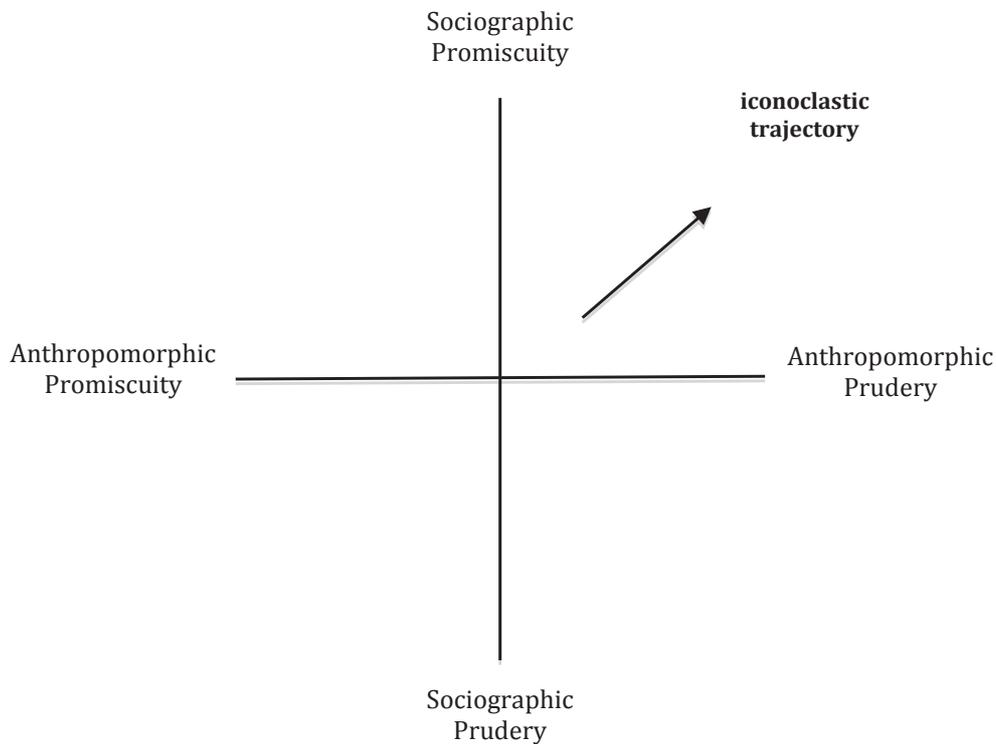


Figure 3

Before offering examples of sacerdotal *theology*, let me illustrate the integration of these mechanisms in non-theological scholarship. In sciences such as physics and chemistry, for example, scholars resist (or at least try to resist) the tendency to appeal to discarnate intentional forces or to the beliefs of politicized organizations with some investment in the research. If something strange happens in a test tube, the chemist's first guess is not "ghost." If a laboratory heavily funded by a pharmaceutical company announces that the drug produced by that company is more effective than previously thought, other scientists will remain skeptical until the research is repeated by another group. Even in sciences like sociology and political theory, which do indeed need to detect human agents and whose subject matter includes the dynamics of group cohesion, their *scientific* explanations of these phenomena do not appeal to supernatural agents or insights available only through revelation to a particular coalition. If they did, they would not be taken seriously as scholars. Anthropomorphic prudery and sociographic promiscuity are the (preferred, ideal) defaults of the academic community.

What about *theologians*? Can someone who is anthropomorphically prudish and sociographically promiscuous still talk about *God*? Could an *evangelical* theologian? Yes. In fact, many—perhaps even most—evangelical theologians sometimes do resist (or at least strongly qualify) the idea of God as a coalition-favoring, person-like being. The problem is that their movement in this direction is pulled back by the bio-cultural gravitational force of the theogonic mechanisms. The sacerdotal trajectory easily and “naturally” overrides the iconoclastic because such theologians are operating within coalitions whose cohesion depends on shared imaginative engagement with supernatural agents. A first step for theologians interested in pursuing the iconoclastic trajectory—if they dare—is to trace and liberate lines of flight already present within the axial age religions, in which they are expert; for evangelicals, this usually means Christianity.

We can identify at least three different pathways or *modes of intensification*, already present (albeit suppressed) in the Christian tradition, which lead in this direction. The first is what I call the *intellectual* mode, in which the intensification of *conceptual analysis* leads to a recognition of the logical incoherence of the idea of *an* infinite supernatural agent. If “the infinite” cannot be thought as one object distinct from “the finite,” else it would be limited by the finite and so itself finite, then *a fortiori* it cannot be thought of as one supernatural *person* distinct from other persons, who favors one *polity* distinct from other polities. This is the pathway (partially) taken by most of the leading theologians of the axial age religious traditions. Stan Grenz’s robustly Trinitarian theology is an excellent example; he clearly saw the logical problems with the idea of a single infinite subject.

A second mode is *pragmatic*; here, the intensification of *compassionate action* leads to liberating efforts on behalf of those oppressed or excluded by the dominating policies of the elite within a supernatural agent coalition. Many evangelicals, especially those interested in challenging the racism, sexism, and classism within their coalitions have proactively developed new ways of inscribing the socius and questioned the extent to which particular interpretations of supernatural agents (and their role in personal and social transformation) are necessary conditions for fellowship. It is easy to see why such “emergent” movements are so vigorously and violently vilified by the (white, male, upper middle class) evangelical power elite. In fact, reaching out with authentic openness to members of out-groups (and defectors, like ex-evangelicals) is indeed dangerous for such religious in-groups, whose cohesion depends on clear statements about the boundaries of faith.

Third, there is a *mystical* mode in which the intensification of *contemplative awareness* leads to experiences that alleviate anxiety about being-limited by an infinite person-like supernatural agent and the need to protect

the power of a particular group. One can find examples of this mode within all of the religious traditions that trace their roots to the axial age, and often evangelicals who begin to follow this trajectory explore meditative practices that evolved within other traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Daoism, Sufism, etc.). In Christianity, this mode is often linked to the apophatic way, in which the power of human language to comprehend the divine is rigorously denied. Evangelicals are permitted to express their ignorance about the essence of a transcendent supernatural agent, as long as they *also* express their confidence in cataphatic statements about the anthropomorphic attributes of that agent. In other words, the risky adventure of the iconoclastic trajectory must be domesticated within and subordinated to the sacerdotal trajectory.

For obvious reasons, most theologians have preferred the intellectual pathway. Not uncommonly, however, concerns about the plausibility of the idea of God as an infinite supernatural agent who favors a human coalition are driven by moral and aesthetic sensitivity as well as by conceptual reflection. It is important to ask why it is usually systematic theologians, rather than biblical scholars or historians (like Noll), who get drawn into evangelical heresy trials. Scholars of Scripture or Christian history are not required, and indeed sometimes actively discourage one another, from trying to provide a coherent, explanatory account of the discrepancies within the texts or disparities across the eras they study. Systematic theologians, on the other hand, are pressured to follow out the logical implications of the assertions of their religious coalitions as far as possible—before appealing to mystery. If a theologian follows the intellectual mode too far, she gets in trouble. This is the real scandal of evangelical culture and its oppression of evangelical minds.

Noll decries the lack of integration between intellectual rigor and *piety* in evangelicalism. This is only a symptom, not the root of the problem. Insofar as pious devotion imaginatively engages ritually-mediated, discarnate intentional forces concerned about “my” in-group, it *is* the hyper-active detection of coalitional gods—postulated as causal explanations for ambiguous natural phenomena. Insofar as pious activism is driven by an attempt to participate in and expand the kingdom of “our” God, it *is* the hyper-active protection of a supernatural coalition—interpreted as the best way to inscribe the global socius. In this sense, piety directly compromises inter-subjective discourse about natural phenomena and inter-communal discourse about social phenomena. It cannot be integrated with the intellectual rigor that is characteristic of the other sciences, which attempt to follow the trajectory in the upper right corner of Figure 3.

Sacerdotal appeals to “mystery” use the in-conceivability of infinity as a veil of ignorance—a learned ignorance that veils the hyperactivity of the

religious family's shared imaginative engagement with God. The inability of finite creatures to conceive the infinite (or even all finite things), suggests an (infinite) vacuum in human knowledge. Abhorred, the theogonic mechanisms quickly and easily fill it by detecting and protecting manifestations of a particular coalition's supernatural agent.

In contrast to the domesticating effect of the sacerdotal forces, the *iconoclastic* trajectory of theology de-personifies, de-politicizes, and, in a certain sense, de-objectifies the existential conditions for axiological engagement. It is true that the "object" of theology is not like the objects of other disciplines; the relation between infinity and intentionality cannot be objectified like finite relations. That which conditions the existence of all finite valuations cannot itself be finite or even evaluated in the same sense. Rather than using this as an excuse for appealing to the mystery of a particular coalition's interpretation of a supernatural agent, however, the iconoclastic theologian can explore other ways of making sense of this being-limited of thought (or being-thought of limitation) which can indeed be "objectified" (as the reader is currently doing).

The integration of anthropomorphic prudery and sociographic promiscuity are not merely *destructive* of certain religious images; as we can see from the other sciences, they also have a *creative* power. In the case of theology, they can facilitate the construction of new hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement that avoid personifying or politicizing "infinity." For example, one might think of the conditions for finite human intentionality as in some sense "infinitely" enfolded within and unfolding among the energetic relational fields of space-matter-time (*intra*-natural, rather than *super*-natural). I do not have the space to set out such a proposal here, so I devote the remainder of the chapter to a discussion of the possibility and promise of the iconoclastic trajectory.

Theology after Pandora (and Eve)

Back to Pandora—but not the planet this time. The ancient Greeks were not the only ones to develop a myth in which the actions of the first woman are blamed for the evils in the world. Like Pandora, Eve's curiosity killed the race—or at least its chance for immortality. Both in early Greek and in Abrahamic religions, new and other gods were invented; (mostly) male heroes whose supernatural powers could provide remedies for humanity. The stories of Pandora and Eve teach us that it is dangerous (especially for women) to question divine things, to look into the forbidden black boxes of divine intentionality. Inquiring too persistently into the mechanisms

by which discarnate intentional forces punish and reward us threatens the shared imaginative engagement that holds the coalition together, and so it is taboo. As long as evangelicals, or members of any other religious in-group, protect the cohesion of their communities and institutions by encouraging detections of hidden supernatural powers only “we” know how to interpret by, for example, insisting that theologians sign coalitional statements of faith, they will not ever be able to engage in serious constructive scholarship in dialogue with other sciences.

I was an evangelical theologian long enough to know how my friends and former colleagues might respond to such claims. St. Paul acknowledges that God uses the “folly of what we preach to save those who believe,” and that Christ crucified is “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:21–22). Blessed are those who are not scandalized, but signal their commitment to the coalition by faithfully adhering to apparent foolishness. Similar texts and similar strategies are present in other religions. But why accept the Bible as the revelation of a contingently embodied intentional force in the first place? Or why not accept the Qu’ran, the Book of Mormon, or the Dhammapada? Human beings have evolved cognitive and coalitional mechanisms that short-circuit such questions. *We* know that our (interpretation of) shared imaginative engagement with *our* supernatural agents is true. Every other religious group (or denomination) says the same thing. At best, the leaders of such groups come to abstract agreements that have little effect on everyday religious practice; at worst, they start “holy” (or “just”) wars against one another. Is it any wonder that intellectuals in other fields hesitate to take (sacerdotal) theology seriously?

Several other objections will certainly arise from my religious family of origin. Wouldn’t my proposal for taking more seriously the discoveries of the bio-cultural study of religion mean the dissolution of evangelicalism, indeed the destruction of Christianity itself? Doesn’t the fact that Shults has clearly gone off the deep end prove that, in fact, engaging modern science and culture really is dangerous—too dangerous? Perhaps the conservative Christian political “right” is right; sectarianism may be the only hope for protecting the purity of particular Christian coalitions.

I have several responses to these kinds of questions and concerns. First, we should begin by admitting that the dissolution of *other* supernatural coalitions is exactly the goal of most Christian evangelism and missions. If evangelicals want believers in other supernatural agents (whom they take to be “false” gods) to consider with all seriousness that they may be wrong, they should be willing to take their own medicine.

Second, do evangelicals want to believe what is true or do they want what they already believe to be true? Is being a Christian, or an evangelical,

more important than being right—or even making sense? We have evolved to think that fitting into our coalition is indeed the most important thing in the world. We have learned to stifle our questions about the contents of the divine “black box” hidden in plain sight in the religious imagination and rituals of our in-groups. We are cognitively and coalitionally wired to ignore the psychological repression and political oppression caused by our own religious tribes.

Scholars, activists, and contemplatives are trained *not* to ignore them. My challenge to evangelicals who are also *iconoclasts* (in any of the three modes of intensification) is to take seriously the importance of the following questions: is contemporary shared imaginative engagement with supernatural agents the result of evolved hyper-active perceptive and cooperative strategies that helped our ancestors survive in small-scale societies? Are these strategies now obsolete in a complex, pluralistic social environment? If so, what can we do about it? What new ways can we find of talking about “God” in this context?

Third, iconoclastic theology does not necessarily lead to the destruction of social groups; the complete dissolution of evangelical coalitions is not the only option here. Like many other such religious in-groups, evangelicals have played an important role in developing strategies for caring for human persons and coalitions, including out-groups. The hard work ahead for the iconoclastic theologian (or activist, or contemplative) is to imagine and enact new and creative ways to live in community that do not rely on the mechanisms of the sacerdotal trajectory. This may very well, indeed we should expect that it would, include forms of axiological engagement that are inspired by exemplars like Jesus of Nazareth (among others).¹³

The best hope for theologians to join other scholars of religion in serious inter-disciplinary conversation, and to participate with other groups in serious inter-cultural conversation, is to liberate the iconoclastic trajectory from the sacerdotal. Like their colleagues in other disciplines, theologians must learn to resist the evolutionary defaults that reinforce cognitive and coalitional biases. This does not at all mean giving up on the real *intensity* of the human experience of being-limited, the intense *reality* of being-conditioned in all of our axiological engagements. Reflecting on these really intense experiences of encountering infinite intensities remains an important task in human life.

Even if we could reconstruct this discipline into a critique of axial age religious conceptions and new hypothesis-construction, would it be appropriate to call it “theology”? In fact this term has been used historically,

13. Cf. Shults, “Ethics, Exemplarity and Atonement.”

from Aristotle to Žižek,¹⁴ to refer to arguments about the existential conditions for human axiological engagement that do *not* appeal to human-like, coalition-favoring gods. In the long run, whether or not we keep the term “theology” is less important (I vote “yes” for now) than undertaking the task of reconstructing this mode of inquiry so that it can fully enter into the significant dialogue among academic disciplines on these issues. This can only happen if we honestly discuss how God is born(e) among us, however embarrassing the “facts of (religious) life” may be to evangelical (and other sacerdotal) theologians.

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14. *Metaphysics* 1025a.19, 1064b.3; Žižek, *Parallax*, 68.

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