

Strategies for Promoting Safe Sects: Response to Brandon Daniel-Hughes and Jeffrey B. Speaks

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I. Introduction

I am extremely grateful to Brandon Daniel-Hughes and Jeffrey Speaks for their careful reading of my proposals in *Theology after the Birth of God* and *Practicing Safe Sects* and for their insightful suggestions for clarifying the project and following out its social implications. Both essays were instructive and provocative, providing exactly the kind of critical and constructive commentary that authors hope their work will evoke. We share a great deal in common, including a robustly naturalist metaphysics, an appreciation for the pragmatic philosophical tradition, and a deep (even “pastoral”) concern about the psychological and political shape of future human communities (“sects” in the most general sense). Instead of focusing primarily on these points of agreement, however, I will highlight the main differences that remain between us, those relatively small differences that make the most difference in our proposed rhetorical and practical strategies.

This response essay contains three main sections. Although both authors’ descriptions of my proposals were clear, neither included a holistic summary of theogonic reproduction theory or the conceptual grid I typically use when outlining its basic hypotheses. And so the first section provides a brief summary of the theory in light of that heuristic framework. The second and third sections focus on the two main issues about which I still disagree with Daniel-Hughes and Speaks: how to *talk* about sects and how to *experiment* with sects. Here too, I think, we are largely in agreement, but the differences that remain, while not huge, are hugely important—not only for “religious naturalists” and other readers of this journal but for all those of us who would just like to enjoy some good, healthy (and sometimes intense) sects without somehow inadvertently making life miserable or impossible for our conspecifics.

II. Theogonic Reproduction Theory

Before responding to my friendly critics, let me offer a brief overview of the theory under debate. The basic empirical claim of theogonic reproduction theory (TRT) is that gods (supernatural agent conceptions) are *born* in human

minds and *borne* in human cultures as a result of a complex set of reciprocally reinforcing, phylogenetically inherited, and socially sustained cognitive and coalitional biases. There is a closely related pragmatic claim: although these biases were naturally selected for their survival advantage in early ancestral environments, today they are maladaptive in a growing number of contexts because of the way in which they can implicitly intensify superstitious beliefs and segregative behaviors of the sort that exacerbate contemporary challenges related to escalating cultural conflict, extreme climate change, and excessive consumer capitalism.¹

All of this is behind my desire to encourage more people to have “the talk” about where gods come from—and the consequences of nurturing in-group ritual engagements with such imagined supernatural agents.

The evolutionary roots of theogonic (god-bearing) mechanisms help to explain why gods are so easily born(e) in the mental and social imaginarium of human life. Most contemporary *Homo sapiens* are naturally drawn into the biocultural force field created by the integration of two reciprocally reinforcing evolved tendencies that I call anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery (see fig. 1). These cognitive and coalitional dispositions are part of our phylogenetic inheritance and have been reinforced by millennia of social entrainment practices. In the environment of our early ancestors, the selective advantage went to hominids who were able to quickly detect relevant agents in the natural environment and whose groups were adequately protected from dissolution by reducing the number of cheaters and freeloaders in the social environment, both of which were buttressed by “religion.”

The horizontal line in figure 1 represents a continuum on which one can mark a person’s tendency to guess “hidden human-like supernatural force” when confronted with ambiguous or frightening phenomena in the natural environment. This general tendency can be fractionated into a host of evolved biases and personality factors that are distributed differently among individuals, such as ontological confusion, magical thinking, and schizotypy. An anthropomorphically promiscuous person will always be on the lookout for intentional causes, jumping at explanations that appeal to “agency” even—or especially—when such inferences are not verifiable. Individuals leaning toward the far left end

1. For a fuller argument and analysis of empirical data and trends, see F. LeRon Shults, *Theology after the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Shults, *Iconoclastic Theology: Gilles Deleuze and the Secretion of Atheism* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Shults, “How to Survive the Anthropocene: Adaptive Atheism and the Evolution of *Homo Deiparensis*,” *Religions* 6, no. 2 (2015): 1–18; Shults, *Practicing Safe Sects: Religious Reproduction in Scientific and Philosophical Perspective* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2018).

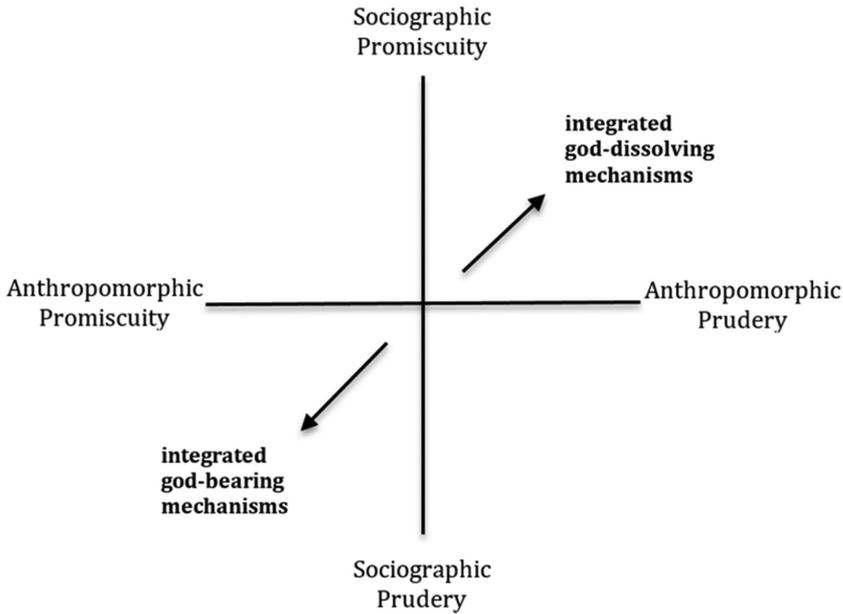


Figure 1. Theogonic and theolytic mechanisms.

of the spectrum are more likely to commit errors when making judgments about the presence of other minds or the purposiveness of apparent patterns, especially under stressful conditions. The anthropomorphically prudish, on the other hand, are suspicious about hypotheses that appeal to disembodied intentional forces. They prefer to reflect more carefully before grabbing onto supernatural agent interpretations.

Think of the vertical line as representing a continuum on which one can register how tightly a person tends to bind him or herself to conventional religious modes of inscribing the social field, i.e., to the proscriptions and prescriptions that regulate the practices and boundaries of the coalition with which he or she primarily identifies. This general tendency may be shaped by a variety of other differentially distributed biases and personality factors, such as risk-aversion, susceptibility to charismatic leaders, and out-group prejudice, which can be ratcheted up by stressful contextual conditions. Sociographic prudes are strongly committed to the divinely sanctioned social norms of their in-group, following and protecting them even at great cost to themselves. Individuals at the low end of this spectrum are more likely to be suspicious of outsiders and to accept claims or demands that appeal to the allegedly supernatural authorities of their own in-group. On the other hand, the sociographic promiscuity

of those oriented toward the top of the spectrum renders them more open to intercourse about alternate normativities with out-groups and to the pursuit of innovative modes of creative social inscription. Such persons are also less likely to accept restrictions or assertions that are based only (or even primarily) on appeals to a religious tradition.

As both authors point out, one of the key hypotheses of TRT is that the two types of god-bearing mechanisms that are integrated in the lower left quadrant of figure 1 are *reciprocally reinforcing*. Daniel-Hughes refers to this as my “automatic reciprocity” thesis, which is understandable since I do write that this mutual amplification can be “somewhat automatic” in *Theology after the Birth of God*. In *Practicing Safe Sects*, where I discuss the empirical literature in far more detail, I try to avoid the idea of automaticity and emphasize the conditions under which various components of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery are likely to reinforce one another. However, I stand by “somewhat automatic” because those conditions, which are linked to both individual and contextual variance, are in fact the kind of conditions under which most people on the planet today regularly find themselves. One of the pragmatic implications of the reciprocity hypothesis is that those who want to challenge sociographically prudish tendencies (as most liberal theologians do) must also challenge anthropomorphically promiscuous ways of engaging religious symbols, and vice versa.

TRT also generates hypotheses related to the other quadrants of figure 1, but here I will focus on the god-dissolving (theolytic) mechanisms that are integrated in the upper right. Anthropomorphic prudery can be fostered by critical reflection and especially by training in the sciences, which are naturalistic (at least methodologically). Sociographic promiscuity can be fostered by encounters within pluralistic societies and especially by relatively transparent democratic states, which are secularistic (at least methodologically). The good news, from my perspective, is that as *naturalist* explanations of the world and *secularist* inscriptions of society take root and grow within a population, people start to lose interest in engaging in religious sects. They become better at making sense of the world without relying on supernatural agents and better at acting sensibly in society without complying with supernatural authorities. This, in turn, makes it easier to discuss and explore solutions to the contemporary global challenges I identified above.

Both Daniel-Hughes and Speaks are naturalists and secularists (in my sense). They both want to have “the talk” about religious reproduction and facilitate the dissolution of the god-bearing mechanisms. Like me, they are worried about the ease with which linguistic symbols of transcendence erected and protected by priestly elites can activate and amplify imaginative engagement with person-like,

coalition-favoring disembodied intentional forces, further intensifying superstitious beliefs. Like me, they are worried about the ease with which in-group religious rituals can activate and amplify anxiety about and antagonism toward out-group members, further intensifying segregative behaviors. Like me, they are worried about the *sacerdotal* trajectory of theology (which flows into the lower left quadrant of fig. 1) and are willing to put the necessary energy into promoting the *iconoclastic* trajectory of theology (which fosters the theolytic mechanisms integrated in the upper right quadrant). That is a lot to hold in common. Our main differences have to do with the ways in which we want to talk about—and to experiment with—participation in *religious* sects.

III. *Talking about Sects*

As both Daniel-Hughes and Speaks emphasize, one of the main bones of contention upon which we are all gnawing is the appropriate use of the highly contentious term “religion.” This is not the place to rehash the problems related to essentialist and colonialist uses of the term, which all three of us eschew. Speaks helpfully sets this controversy within the broader context of the general differences in the ways in which terms are handled in the academic work of scholars in theology and religious studies, on the one hand, and scholars in the scientific study of religion, on the other. For the latter, the important thing is to operationalize one’s terms so that they can function well within testable empirical hypotheses about statistically measurable traits. For the former, the important thing is to clarify one’s terms so that they can function well within narrative interpretations of artefacts, institutions, norms, and experiences entangled within complex human traditions. So “scientists” and “humanists” have different (albeit often overlapping) concerns about the use of terms in academic research.

Both of my interlocutors accept the basic scientific claims behind my hypotheses about the role of supernatural agents and authorities in the quotidian lives of the laity, as well as the value of my definition of religion (shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents) for the purposes of scientific research. However, they seem to prefer a particular humanist-leaning rhetorical strategy when it comes to talking about *religious* sects, especially when “the talk” is meant to occur in communities that self-identify as religious rather than in scientific journals or conferences. Daniel-Hughes wants to disentangle “religion”—understood as “engagement with disembodied intentional agents”—from the “otherwise valuable axiological dimensions of religious practice” (p. 000). Similarly, Speaks argues that the problem with my “narrow” definition is “that belief in, and engagement with supernatural agents is not the only aspect of life that religion offers,” and that I “mistake one aspect of religion for the whole” (p. 000).

Notice, however, that both authors seem to be begging the question. They assume that “religion” refers to an extremely broad range of phenomena and then complain that my use of the term does not incorporate some variables that they think fall into that range. Speaks prefers definitions that include a more “comprehensive understanding of their subject,” and rejects my definition because it is “incapable of registering naturalistic forms of religious expression” (p. 000). Daniel-Hughes worries that I have thrown out the baby (other aspects of “religion”) with the bathwater (beliefs and behaviors related to supernatural agents), and points to the possibility of enjoying those “exaptive and spandrel-like qualities [of religion] that have little to do with supporting in-group solidarity among non-kin and out-group hostility toward outsiders” (p. 000). But this simply presupposes the appropriateness of their broad use of the term to refer to the general subject of intense human experiences that are common across narrative traditions.

Of course, one can use terms however one likes, as long as one is clear what one means, but in my view it is important to have good theoretical reasons (I will return to pragmatic reasons below) for one’s usage. I prefer my definition because it is able to pick out an empirically relevant and conceptually interesting set of phenomena in human experience, while the broader definitions championed by Daniel-Hughes and Speaks render “religious” and “human” almost synonymous. They are not alone. The idea that our species *is* simply *Homo religiosus* is a notion long sponsored by scholars such as Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, to whom both of my current interlocutors refer.

Speaks alludes briefly to Wildman’s “five elements that religion typically offers its adherents” (p. 000). Here is Wildman’s full list of these elements or “features” of religion:

A way to relate every aspect of life to something ultimate and fundamental, in terms of ideas, values, and practices; An answer to concerns about death and immortality, including the ultimate origins, fate, and meaning of human life and all of reality; A means of bonding human beings tightly together through obligation, responsibility, and ritual, in order to stabilize social life and realize relational ideals such as peace, pleasure, power, or prosperity; A solution to the problem of human evil and a means of healing, liberation, social transformation, and personal self-cultivation; A source of orienting narratives by which we discern our place in a cosmological framework and gather the courage to make moral decisions.²

2. Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 37.

Notice, first, that all five of these features could just as easily apply to individuals and groups committed to atheism or humanism as they do to those committed to the Islamic State or American Evangelicalism. The worldview and lifestyle of Richard Dawkins—to pick the standard example of someone who radically rejects religion—seem to contain all of these elements. In fact, these features can be applied to every human being I know, although some people take them more seriously and reflect on them more intensely than others. This approach to defining the term is so broad that it is not clear what analytical work it is doing that similarly vague but less confusing categories such as “worldview” (or “lifestyle,” “human culture,” “meaningful life,” “axiological intensity,” etc.) could not do equally well.

Second, notice that none of these five features include any reference to imaginative engagement with *supernatural agents*—the feature that scholars who study these phenomena scientifically almost unanimously agree demarcates the “religious” from other aspects of human life. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses of psychological and sociological datasets have consistently found latent variables tied to *supernatural* beliefs and ritual behaviors. For example, one recent experimental psychological study found that “supernatural content” was “the *only thing* that distinguishes religiosity from non-religiosity.”³ In fact, a review of the literature suggests that “supernatural-related belief/practice” is “the *only unique diagnostic feature* of religiosity. . . . and empirically distinct from sociability, virtue, hope, etc.”⁴ Factor analyses of online surveys and the International Social Survey Programme dataset have also demonstrated that beliefs and practices related to *supernatural* forces form relatively independent clusters of variables.⁵

3. Marjaana Lindeman, Annika M. Svedholm-Häkkinen, and Tapani Riekkö, “Skepticism: Genuine Unbelief or Implicit Beliefs in the Supernatural?,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 42 (2016): 225, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2016.03.019>, emphasis added.

4. James Schuurmans-Stekhoven, “Are We, like Sheep, Going Astray: Is Costly Signaling (or Any Other Mechanism) Necessary to Explain the Belief-as-Benefit Effect?,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 7, no. 3 (2017): 258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2016.1156558>, emphasis added; Schuurmans-Stekhoven, “As a Shepherd Divideth His Sheep from the Goats’: Does the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale Encapsulate Separable Theistic and Civility Components?,” *Social Indicators Research* 110, no. 1 (2013): 131–46, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9920-8>.

5. Malcolm B. Schofield et al., “Mental Representations of the Supernatural: A Cluster Analysis of Religiosity, Spirituality and Paranormal Belief,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 101 (2016): 419–24, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2016.06.020>; Carlos Lemos, Ross Gore, and F. LeRon Shults, “Exploratory and Confirmatory Analyses of Religiosity: A Four-Factor Conceptual Model,” Cornell University Library (website), arXiv, <https://arxiv.org/abs/1704.06112v1>, 2017. The techniques used in the sort of research cited in this and the previous two footnotes, including exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis,

But perhaps I am the one begging the question? Am I simply assuming my narrower definition is correct and inappropriately complaining that “religious naturalists” are placing too many other phenomena into the category of “religion?” Of course, there is no abstractly “right” definition of any term. And, again, one can stipulate the use of terms however one likes but it should be clear (especially for pragmatists) what they are supposed to be *doing* conceptually. The real issue is how terms *work*—in this case, how they work when we *talk about sects*. My goal in using the term “religion” is to differentiate between ways of participating in human sects that involve ritually engaging allegedly disembodied spirits (which intensifies superstition and segregation under a wide range of conditions) from those that do not. My narrower definition does this differentiating work. How does the fuzzy use of the term preferred by Daniel-Hughes and Speaks work? Whatever else it may do, in my view, this kind of liberal permissivism confuses nonscholars and provides cover for the copious fertility of god-bearing conservatives and fundamentalists.

I am not denying the value of the typically “humanist” approach to terminological usage; it is one I have practiced for decades and plan to continue using in my philosophical and historical writings. My concern is with this particular way of using the term *religious* to refer to such a wide swath of human experience that it encompasses virtually every individual and all human groups, thereby blurring the very important distinction between two ways of holding individuals and coalitions together: those that rely on idiosyncratic inferences about and parochial preferences for imagined supernatural agents and authorities, and those that do not. I can understand why conservative religious apologists would want to use such a vague notion of “religion”: it evokes intense feelings about aspects of being alive that almost everyone finds valuable and obscures that which distinguishes the sort of in-groups to which they belong from other ways of participating in human sects—unfalsifiable beliefs about and ritual practices oriented toward appeasing invisible punitive spirits.

But neither Daniel-Hughes nor Speaks (nor Wildman nor Neville) are conservative apologists. They are scientific naturalists and liberal secularists, eager

and covariance analysis, are able to tease apart the relationships between variables drawn from responses in surveys or psychological experiments. One might worry that the surveys are biased toward defining religiosity in relation to supernaturalism, but they contain a wide variety of questions, in some cases many dozens of questions, that have nothing to do with supernaturalism. The main point is that variables related to supernatural beliefs and behaviors cluster together and are distinct from other variables related to morality, sense of purpose, community, meaningfulness in life, and other vague categories with which they are often confounded or confused.

to discover new ways of understanding the world and to chart new ways of organizing the social field that do not depend on supernatural agents or authorities. Continuing to call themselves “religious” is confusing to everyone who is not already part of an ongoing conversation among a relatively small group of naturalist philosophers who, for one reason or another, value some of the distinctive features of one or more religious traditions. Why do they insist and persist in this unusual usage of the term despite all of the confusion it engenders? I think their essays engaging my work make it clear that their motivation is pastoral: they are concerned about the future of their own (and other) religious communities in a world where a growing number of individuals and groups are learning to live together and enjoy sects without worrying about whether any supernatural agents are watching.

IV. *Experimenting with Sects*

Despite our disagreement over how precisely to talk about sects, we share an interest in “sectual” experimentation that does not lead to supernatural agent conceptions. In fact, our pragmatic strategies for promoting “safe” sects are quite similar. It seems to me that one of our basic differences has to do with the level of optimism we feel about the prospects of engaging in such experimentation within the confines and configurations of traditional “religious” communities. Daniel-Hughes and Speaks are enthusiastic about the idea. They read me as far less sanguine than I actually am, perhaps, in part, because of the terminological confusion outlined in section 2 above. Their pressing me on this issue provides a fresh opportunity to clarify my theoretical position and pragmatic orientation.

What Daniel-Hughes considers his “small contribution” in the conclusion of his article is, in my view, an extremely important contribution and the moment in this exchange that has had the most profound effect on my thinking around these issues. I believe he is right to alert us to the importance of stressing the continuity between supernaturalist and naturalist chapters in the story of human evolution: “If metaphysically naturalist axiological narratives are to have any chance of competing for even a portion of the popular religious imagination, they must emphasize the *continuities*, not only between multiple traditions and in-groups, but also between the theistic and postpartum chapters of the story” (p. 000, emphasis added). Daniel-Hughes encourages us to resist the “impulse to read religious theists as out-group antagonists. The goal should be to narrate naturalist theology, not as a tale of supercessionism in which ‘Brights’ vanquish ‘Supers,’ but instead as a story of *continuous* axiological ingenuity in which humanity has developed

an impressive capacity to solve bioenvironmental and biocultural problems, to learn from its successes and errors, and to exercise a modicum of personal and communal self-control over its instincts and intuitions” (p. 000, emphasis added).

Daniel-Hughes is fair in his (implied) criticism of me for not adequately emphasizing this continuity. He does acknowledge that I explicitly propose interrogating the iconoclastic trajectories of the great theological traditions to extract their god-dissolving resources, a strategy that he refers to as “ransacking the closets of traditional religions” to find ways of resisting “theologically incorrect” default inferential habits (p. 000). And he rightly interprets my postpartum theology as “an *intensification*, rather than a break with this [naturalist, iconoclastic] tradition of working to bend the cost curve of religious inquiry away from cheap intuitive defaults and toward more promising, but more expensive, creative, living experiments” (p. 000, emphasis added). However, I read this last section of his article as a gentle, indirect reprimand for my failure to highlight the continuities within the ongoing narrative of the evolution of human modes of configuring social space (having sects).

Indeed, I confess that I have spent more time offering passionate pleas for driving a conceptual wedge between two basic ways of having sects (outlined above) than I have emphasizing that this does not entail driving a demographic wedge between two basic types of people. I do make this latter point in *Theology after the Birth of God* and *Practicing Safes Sects* as well as in other more recent writings.⁶ However, if a careful reader like Daniel-Hughes can imagine a “strongest reading” of my thesis as suggesting that “in-group coalition building, even in the name of postpartum axiological experimentation, must be resisted” (p. 000), then clearly I need to stress this point more often and more forcefully. Humans need sects, and I have no desire to dissuade them from enjoying its pleasures. Although I have consistently called for the dissolution of gods, I have explicitly rejected the idea that religious communities must be dissolved. In *Practicing Safe Sects*, for example, I urge iconoclastic theologians (and activists, and contemplatives) within religious traditions “to imagine and enact

6. F. LeRon Shults, Ross Gore, Carlos Lemos, and Wesley J. Wildman, “Why do the Godless Prosper? Modeling the Cognitive and Coalitional Mechanisms that Promote Atheism,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 3 d(2018): 218–28; Shults, “Can We Predict and Prevent Religious Radicalization?,” in *Violent Extremism in the 21st Century: International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, edited by Gwyneth Øverland (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, forthcoming); Shults, “A Germ of Tranquil Atheism,” *Svensk teologisk kvartalsskrift (STK) / Swedish Theological Quarterly* (forthcoming).

new and creative ways to live in community that do not rely on the [theogonic] mechanisms of the sacerdotal trajectory.”⁷

So, how are theologians (or naturalist philosophers of religion) embedded within particular religious traditions supposed to go about this postpartum pastoral task? Here too Daniel-Hughes is exactly right when he interprets me as “suggesting that we attempt to intervene in agent-detecting inferential process at the predeductive, preinductive, postabductive moment of hypothesis selection (retroduction) and attempt to exercise a kind of communal self-control that would resist our biologically, cognitively, and culturally inherited preference for agent-hypotheses” (p. 000). I agree with him that axiological experimentations involving “small-scale creative explorations” are the most likely to succeed, and that identifying “semiotic resources” in the “venerable” traditions that can be marshalled for “resisting habitual and traditional domestications of naturalist projects” (p. 000) is a particularly promising strategy. This will be strongly countered, of course, by those whose sense of identity or even livelihood depends on the domesticating forces of the sacerdotal trajectory, but it is still worth the effort.

To be clear: I do see the potentially positive benefits of working with, and within, religious traditions and their sign networks. However, my preference would be that this pastoral work involve straightforwardly challenging any and all use of religious symbols that smack of supernaturalism. The scientific study of religion has demonstrated how easily (and covertly) the latter activate superstitious interpretations, which in turn amplify segregative behaviors (under a wide variety of conditions), accelerating a whirlpool of reciprocally reinforcing god-bearing mechanisms. Iconoclastic pastors and philosophers participating in small-scale religious communities have a unique opportunity to help people learn how to see and resist their theistic biases. In fact, I would say that this “internal” strategy is a healthy and even crucial complement to the broader “external” strategy of working to increase access to humanist and scientific education and to reduce the dysfunctional socioeconomic and political conditions that foster religious beliefs and behaviors in the first place.

Speaks also emphasizes the value and importance of having “the talk” *within* religious communities, noting the remarkable power that ministers have to shape the imaginations of their congregants. Like Daniel-Hughes, he is concerned that I am insufficiently attentive to the importance of maintaining continuity within traditions. However, Speaks expresses his worry far more strongly: “For Shults, there does not seem to be *any way* in which to ‘practice safe sects’ while retaining *any* semblance of *continuity* with existing religious traditions”

7. Shults, *Practicing Safe Sects*, 178.

(p. 000, emphases added). I am not sure what to make of this reading. At the very least, this tells me that I need to emphasize even more strongly than I have in the two books under discussion that my goal is to *intensify* (rather than ignore) the iconoclastic trajectories within the axial age religious traditions and to *transform* (rather than dissolve) the coalitions in which the vast majority of the human population live and move and have their valuing.⁸

Speaks's misinterpretation of the pragmatic and normative implications I draw from the empirical findings and theoretical developments behind theogonic reproduction theory demonstrates how easily confusion can arise when one switches back and forth between specific, empirically based, operationalized definitions and broad, narrative-oriented, hermeneutical definitions of religion. This is perhaps best illustrated in his reading of me as promoting an "abstinence-only" approach to religious education, which he contrasts to his own proposal for "safe and responsible God-talk." Of course, I knew I was asking for trouble when I chose to frame theogonic reproduction theory with such *sectsy* metaphors. Like all analogies, the comparison between talking about (and experimenting with) "sex" and "sects" eventually breaks down. However, the problem here is not simply that Speaks pushes the analogy too far. It is rather a case of clouding the comparison with a confusion.

He suggests that my narrow definition of religion "would be akin to defining human sexuality as 'the creation of a baby by means of heterosexual intercourse'" (p. 000). This is mistaken for at least two reasons. First, and most importantly, Speaks's way of framing the analogy presupposes that I see "religion" only as the act of *conceiving* gods. But it takes a village to raise a god, and this occurs through in-group ritual interactions that are supposed to appease or affirm the imagined anthropomorphic entity in question. His proposed analogue does not adequately take into account the *communal* dimension of my definition of religion: "*shared* imaginative engagement with *axiologically relevant* supernatural agents." For me the problem is not only the way in which gods are born in human minds but also the way in which they are *borne* in human *societies*. As I have shown in the books under review, theistic credulity and conformity biases engender (and are psychologically and politically entangled within) other socially toxic biases such as sexism, racism, and classism. That to which I want people to "just say no" (although I realize it is not so easy because of the covert operation of evolved biases) are the affective *and collective* drives that lead to *bearing gods* in cognition *and culture*.

8. Shults, *Theology after the Birth of God*, 13–16, 44–47, 75–78, 139–47, 179–82, 195–202; Shults, *Practicing Safe Sects*, 7–14, 63–67, 104–7, 124–27, 170–79, 193–209, 218–45; see also Shults, *Iconoclastic Theology*, 56–61, 95–100, 134–39, 178–82, 185–96.

Second, and closely related, Speaks's way of discussing his proposed analogue not only implies that my definition of religion ignores its non-conceptual (extracopulative) dimensions, it also wrongly suggests that I have disregarded the importance of the intensity and the value of the diversity of ways in which people express themselves in sects *in general*. As I have tried to make clear in several places (see citations above), I am all for intense sectual experimentation and have no qualms about consenting adults (of any gender and culture) engaging in whatever sort of "intimate," "life-enriching," and "existentially gripping" experiences they find satisfying and salubrious. Moreover, I have no interest in regulating the positions people ought to take as they articulate their bodies politic. Speaks is right that abstinence-only approaches to sex education do not work; simply pressuring people to abstain from coitus is not going to help. Neither will forms of religious education that simply tell people not to fantasize about gods (or forbid them to engage in responsible God-talk).

But that is not my project. I am quite happy for people to go on experimenting with creative modes of sectual intercourse within their traditions; however, I want to encourage them to think through the consequences that bearing gods has on their own religious families of origin, as well as on other, nonfamiliar social coalitions near and far. To be clear: I am not at all against having sects. On the contrary, we humans cannot thrive—or even survive—without sects. I am against the reproduction of supernatural agent conceptions in communities in ways that bind people together by impeding critical thinking and instigating assortative prosociality.

V. Conclusion

Our desires and fears related to talking about and experimenting with sects are shaped by our personal histories and social contexts. I am certainly no exception. I lived in the U.S. for most of my life, and during that period I pretty much took for granted the relevance and even the necessity of religion for maintaining the social fabric of human life. I agree with Daniel-Hughes and Speaks that all human beings need ways of orienting themselves in the world, narrative frameworks for their lives, ways of managing self-transformation and social interactions, etc. After twelve years in Norway, however, I am now convinced that "religious" institutions are not at all necessary for fulfilling these needs. Religious beliefs and church attendance are astonishingly low in Scandinavian populations, and yet these countries are ranked among the highest in the world in terms of happiness, social and gender equality, existential security, and nonparochial altruism.

To put it bluntly, in societal contexts where people have universal access to health care, free university education in the humanities and sciences, strong

economies, and relatively transparent democratic governments, they don't really need churches—or religious clergy. They get along fine creating new ways of exploring and enjoying sects without any need for religious symbols. This suggests that working for economic justice and building strong secular institutions are among the most important ways to promote safe sects.

I enthusiastically endorse the commitment by Daniel-Hughes and Speaks (and others) to having “the talk” about religious reproduction within the coalitions to which they are pastorally connected, but I would encourage them to be even more radical in their promotion of anthropomorphic prudery and sociographic promiscuity in such contexts. When it comes to sects, people are more flexible and adaptive than you might think. Yes, continuity matters, and we should continue ransacking our cultural traditions for resources. We are indeed all part of the same story, and we are in this together. However, the adaptive challenges our species now face are new, and the changes in our environment are nonlinear; it is imperative that we let go of our religious (theistic) inhibitions and experiment a bit more radically if we hope to keep our (and everyone else's) sects safe.