Theology after the Birth of God
Radical Theologies

Radical Theologies is a call for transformational theologies that break out of traditional locations and approaches. The rhizomic ethos of radical theologies enable the series to engage with an ever-expanding radical expression and critique of theologies that have entered or seek to enter the public sphere, arising from the continued turn to religion and especially radical theology in politics, social sciences, philosophy, theory, cultural, and literary studies. The post-theistic theology both driving and arising from these intersections is the focus of this series.

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Theology after the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture  
By F. LeRon Shults
For Wesley J. Wildman
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Series Preface

Radical Theologies encompasses the intersections of constructive theology, secular theology, death of god theologies, political theologies, continental thought, and contemporary culture.

For too long, radical theology has been wandering in the wilderness, while other forms of theological discourse have been pontificating to increasingly smaller audiences. However, there has been a cross-disciplinary rediscovery and turn to radical theologies as locations from which to engage with the multiplicities of twenty-first-century society, wherein the radical voice is also increasingly a theologically engaged voice with the recovery and rediscovery of radical theology as that which speaks the critique of “truth to power”.

Radical Theologies reintroduces radical theological discourse into the public eye, debate, and discussion by covering the engagement of radical theology with culture, society, literature, politics, philosophy, and the discipline of religion.

Providing an outlet for those writing and thinking at the intersections of these areas with radical theology, Radical Theologies expresses an interdisciplinary engagement and approach that was being undertaken without a current series to situate itself within. This series, the first dedicated to radical theology, is also dedicated to redefining the very terms of theology as a concept and practice.

Just as rhizomic thought engages with multiplicities and counters dualistic and prescriptive approaches, this series offers a timely outlet for an expanding field of “breakout” radical theologies that seek to redefine the very terms of theology. This includes work on and about the so-labeled death of god theologies and theologians who emerged in the 1960s and those who follow in their wake. Other radical theologies emerge from what can be termed underground theologies and also a/theological foundations. All share the aim and expression of breaking out of walls previously ideologically invisible.
Crazy people are often difficult to ignore, especially when they are yelling provocative things like “God is dead” in the midst of a busy marketplace. The madman in Nietzsche’s famous aphorism, however, despite the intensity of his message and style of delivery, was met with relative indifference. When they heard him crying out that he was looking for God, some of the nonbelievers paused long enough to tease him: Has God lost his way like a child? Is he afraid of us? Has he emigrated? The madman jumped into their midst, piercing them with his eyes. “Where is God?” he cried; “I’ll tell you! God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him… We are all his murderers. But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?… Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sidewards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren’t we straying as though through an infinite nothing?” The crowd just looked at him—a bit disconcerted, but silent. Smashing his lantern on the ground, the madman sighed: “I come too early… my time is not yet.”

No doubt many readers will have jumped past the quotations in the first paragraph, skipping ahead to this one to see if it offers anything more interesting. We’ve all heard this before. Claims about the death of God are deathly boring. Depending on whether or not one is an active participant within a religious in-group, such proclamations seem either obviously wrong or wrongly obvious. The message that “God is dead” gets surprisingly little traction in our mental and social worlds. It lacks sex appeal. For reasons we will explore in detail below, the idea of divine genitality is much more interesting—and disturbing—than the idea of divine
mortality. Insights from a wide variety of scientific disciplines are converging to help explain how gods are conceived within human minds and nurtured within human groups as a result of naturally evolved, hypersensitive cognitive and coalitional tendencies that produce perceptual errors and cultivate out-group antagonism. The theoretical and practical relevance of this message will make it much more difficult to ignore.

Nietzsche also portrays the madman as bursting into churches and singing *requiem aeternam deo* (grant God eternal rest). Even there, among the believers, he is met relatively calmly and politely ushered out. Business—and church—carry on as usual. For the most part, the academic discipline of theology has also carried on as usual. Like many other modern masters of suspicion, as well as the “new atheists,” Nietzsche goes out of his way to criticize the problematic assumptions and deleterious consequences of monotheism, especially the slave morality of the Christian religion. Yet, theologians bound to such coalitions have found it surprisingly easy to immunize themselves from such challenges. Even within the academy and the public sphere, they go on appealing to the authoritative revelations of the supernatural agents putatively engaged in the religious rituals of their own groups. A growing number of scholars within other disciplines, as well as policy makers within pluralistic contexts, find this so annoying that they are tempted to ban theology from the marketplace of ideas.

This temptation is especially strong for atheists, and understandably so. However, I will argue for a different sort of atheistic strategy as well as a different atheistic message—both of which emerge out of philosophical reflection on empirical findings and theoretical developments within the biocultural study of religion. All of this will require a reconceptualization of religion, theology, and atheism. In the sense in which I will use the term, *religion* has characterized small-scale human groups for at least the past sixty thousand years. *Theology*, on the other hand, only emerged during the first millennium BCE within socioecological niches that required new ways of adapting to the increased psychological and political pressures of life in more heavily populated, complex literate states.

A specific conception of “God”—an infinite person with an eternal plan for human groups—has played a central role in the (re)production of the major religious traditions that trace their roots to the West Asian axial age. However, as many reflective individuals within and around those traditions have repeatedly pointed out, albeit for different reasons and with varying degrees of intensity, this idea is simply unbearable. Nevertheless, like the members of the religious coalitions they serve, most theologians, grinning or not, have continued trying to bear it.
Why Is Nietzsche’s Madman So Easy to Ignore?

God seems to have survived his death without much difficulty. Why do religious people find it so easy to dismiss the idea that “God is dead”? The problem was not that the madman had come too early. No, if his goal was to disrupt people’s reliance on supernatural agents to make sense of the world and act sensibly in society, as they stray “as though through an infinite nothing,” he had the wrong message. Had the madman read carefully through the last couple of decades of scientific literature in the biocultural study of religion, he would proclaim instead that the gods are born—and we have borne them! As we will see, this message opens up a new way of conceiving atheism as a positive force, rather than merely as a negative reaction to (mono)theism. In fact, one of the negative implications of the latter, often taken as “gospel” by members of religious coalitions, is that humans can not adequately interpret the natural world or appropriately inscribe the social world without help from imagined disembodied intentional forces. Atheism, on the other hand, is conceived as an affirmation: yes, we can. Or, at least, we can live trying.

But why is it so difficult to engender atheism? The reasons why most people seem impervious to objections to the notion of a personal God who cares for their own group can be clarified by a set of hypotheses that have emerged within and across disciplines such as evolutionary biology, cognitive science, neuropsychology, archaeology, cultural anthropology, behavioral ecology, political economics, and comparative religion. Theoretical insights from these (and many other) fields, which contribute to what I will call the biocultural study of religion, are converging to support the claim that supernatural agent conceptions are naturally reproduced in human thought as a result of evolved cognitive mechanisms that hyperactively detect agency when confronted with ambiguous phenomena and, once conceived, are culturally nurtured as a result of evolved coalitional mechanisms that hyperactively protect in-group cohesion. These tendencies are part of our phylogenetic and cultural heritage.

In other words, gods are easily “born” in human minds and “borne” in human cultures today because contemporary Homo sapiens share a suite of perceptual and affiliational dispositions that were naturally selected in early ancestral environments where the survival advantage went to hominids who were able to quickly detect relevant agents such as predators, prey, protectors, and partners in the natural milieu, and who lived in groups whose cohesion was adequately protected by attachment and surveillance systems that discouraged defecting, cheating, and freeloading in the social milieu. In chapter 2, I will return to
these two sorts of theogonic (god-bearing) mechanisms, which I call *anthropomorphic promiscuity* and *sociographic prudery*, and outline the ways in which they reciprocally reinforce each other in the ongoing reproduction of gods in groups. As we will see, these evolved defaults aided human survival in a variety of ways, solidifying personal identity and enforcing social order. However, this is also true of other tendencies that seem to come to us “naturally,” such as racism, sexism, and classism. Such biases may have helped bind selves and societies together for millennia, but this does not mean that we have to hold onto these old habits as we continue adapting within (and altering) our rapidly changing late modern environments.

Of course, the original message of Nietzsche’s madman has not been completely ignored. Some conservative Christian theologians reacted by appealing to classical apologetic proofs (God cannot be dead because his existence must be thought) or to contemporary spiritual experiences (God cannot be dead because his presence is actually felt). Some liberal theologians tried to incorporate the madman’s proclamation directly into their doctrinal constructions: the death of God *is* thinkable, but only as a moment of divine “self-emptying” disclosed in the cross of (a now resurrected) Christ. Thomas Altizer, whose *Apocalyptic Trinity* was an earlier volume in the Radical Theologies series in which the present book appears, has been a central player in the “secular” theology movement since the 1960s. In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, he argued that it was through the “self-annihilation” of the “originally transcendent” God, who became “fully and totally” incarnate in Christ, that humans now “truly know this divine process of negativity.”

Insights from the biocultural sciences of religion can help us understand why this “death of God” movement died out so quickly, leaving room for a whole host of “post-secular” proposals for faith in a “weak” biblical God who suffers with his people. For reasons we will examine in the following chapters, the latter sort of proposal is more easily embraced within local religious communities than the former. Assertions about the alleged moribundity of God are so maximally counterintuitive that they do not even distract people from their practical work in the marketplace, much less disrupt their ecclesiastical rituals. The role played by gods in the shared imagination of religious groups makes their death (nearly) unthinkable. The radical theology I advocate here is not another search for an “authentic” version of Christianity—or any other religious coalition whose cohesion depends on the revelation of (and ritual engagement with) supernatural agents. On the contrary, I will argue that after the discovery of the “birth of God,” theology can now follow a radically atheist trajectory that has long been suppressed within it.
For reasons I hope to make clear, the challenges and opportunities faced by *postpartum* theology will be very different than those of *postmortem* theology. The critiques of religion (and theology) that have emerged out of the biocultural sciences are significantly different than those leveled by Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and other twentieth-century skeptics. They are not simply newer versions of classical *projection* critiques, which have been surprisingly easy for religious people to dodge. The various scientific models we will explore in the following chapters could more properly be called *detection/protection* theories of religion. They unveil the very mechanisms that have enabled the religious evasion of complaints about anxiety-based projections.

Human beings evolved to detect other agents and to protect their own groups, but the integration and intensification of these hypersensitive tendencies led to the mistaken detection and violent protection of supernatural agent coalitions. The instincts behind these theories are not wholly new. At one point, Nietzsche himself suggested that what led to belief in “another world” among early humans “was *not* a drive or need, but an *error* in the interpretation of certain natural events, an embarrassing lapse of the intellect.” Decades earlier, Feuerbach had criticized the Christian religion not only for its anxious projection of a transcendent divine father figure, but also for its limitation of the allegedly universal love of God to a particular group. What the combined insights of the biocultural study of religion provide, however, are *empirically based* scientific theories that explain the *actual mechanisms* that lead to the *generation* of religious conceptions in human cognition and to their *reproduction* in human cultures.

**Bearing gods in Cognition and Culture**

It should be clear enough by now that my use of the term *bearing* is meant to do double duty, indicating the way in which gods are both *born* in human cognition (due to an overactive detection of agency) and *borne* in human cultures (due to an overactive protection of coalitions). The concept of *gods*, however, calls for further clarification. In common parlance, the term “god” usually evokes images of (male) Greek deities, Buddhist devas, or even the “God” of the Abrahamic monotheisms. Among scholars operating within the biocultural study of religion, however, it is a common practice to use the label “gods” as a shorthand way of referring to all kinds of culturally postulated discarnate entities, including animal spirits, ancestor ghosts, angels, bodhisattvas, and jinn, as well as more powerful divine
beings like Zeus, Yahweh, or Vishnu. For the sake of this multidisciplinary dialogue, I will follow this practice, using the terms god and supernatural agent interchangeably as designations for any putative disembodied (or contingently embodied) force that is attributed intentionality (or related person-like qualities) and imaginatively engaged in ways that bear on the normative judgments of a human coalition.

Supernatural agents multiply like rabbits in the human Imaginarium, reproducing rapidly in fertile cognitive fields cultivated by participation in religious rituals. But only some of these god conceptions have been domesticated and bred across generations: those that are imaginatively engaged in ways that reinforce cooperation and commitment in human groups. For reasons we will explore in detail below, the reproductive success of this sort of supernatural agent within (some) Homo sapiens coalitions during the Upper Paleolithic provided a survival advantage to the individuals within them. Eventually some of these small, “god-bearing” groups moved out of Africa and into the Levant. Their genetic offspring outcompeted all other hominid species and spread across the continent into Asia and Europe, and eventually into Australia and the Americas. Their descendants—all living humans—share a phylogenetic inheritance, reinforced by millennia of social entrainment practices, that predisposes them to keep on bearing gods.

Making sense of these complex phenomena, which are shaped by the reciprocal interaction of cognitive and cultural dynamics, requires the integration of insights from a wide variety of perspectives. Some scholars within the social sciences and humanities looking over the disciplinary wall at scientists in fields like evolutionary psychology have worried about a rigid biological reductionism that would render their own fields irrelevant. Some cognitive scientists looking back over the wall have worried about a relativist social constructivism that does not take their own fields seriously. One still finds these extreme positions in some circles, but, as the suspicion on both sides has begun to subside, new conceptual space is being created and explored using new experimental methods that embrace explanatory pluralism. Biology and culture, genes and memes, brains and groups are so entangled in mutual resolving evolutionary processes that they can only be explained together.

My use of the phrase “biocultural study of religion” is not intended to blur the appropriate lines between distinct research communities, or to demarcate a new singular academic field or discipline. Given the astonishing fruitfulness of the open integration and overlapping application of these diverse theories and research methods to religious phenomena, trying to set such boundaries would be counterproductive. We might think of it as a “field,” but the metaphor should be construed not in geographical
but in physical terms: a dynamic force field of interconnected and open explanatory events. If we think of it as a “discipline,” the focus should not be on deciding its departmental location but on disciplining ourselves to remain interconnected and open during every event of explanation. The theoretical and empirical literature that creates and fills this multidisciplinary conceptual space is rapidly expanding. In the following chapters, I will introduce and explicate a heuristic framework, based on a reconstruction and integration of some key concepts derived from this research, which I hope will help to unveil the mechanisms that continue to reproduce supernatural agents in contemporary minds and cultures.

Divine reproduction has always been a popular theme within religious mythology. When couched in the context of such world-founding narratives, the idea of the birth of gods (or the birthing of goddesses) has not been that difficult for most people to accept. Insofar as we conceive supernatural agents in our own image, they naturally fit into our intuitive familial categories. It is not at all surprising to hear that they (like us) are already spawned and always spawning. Their behavior in such stories, however, is often quite surprising. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, for example, Gaia is angered by Uranus’s treatment of their children (the Titans), and so gives a sickle to her youngest son, Chronos, who castrates his father and throws his testicles into the sea (from which various divinities emerge). Chronos now controlled the cosmos, but a prophecy foretold that one of his own children would destroy him. And so he devoured each of his children (the gods) soon after his wife Rhea gave birth to them. However, Rhea tricked Chronos into swallowing a stone instead of his youngest son, Zeus, who escaped and eventually did overthrow his father.

Stories about the bearing of gods do not always involve castration and cannibalism—at least not explicitly. One of the core narratives in the Christian religion is the birth of the baby Jesus in a Bethlehem manger. While most religious practitioners intuitively find such ideas compelling, many reflective theologians find them troubling. If Jesus really was the Son of God, truly divine like his eternal Father, and if Mary was his temporal mother, then it would seem to follow that she was the bearer of God (*theotokos*). On the other hand, if Jesus did not have a human father, as many Christians came to believe within a few decades after his death, then how could he be truly human? This sort of question proliferated and fueled the major Christological debates in the patristic period and beyond. Can the finite bear the Infinite? How could the body of the heavenly (risen) Christ be truly present in the earthly (unleavened) bread consumed at mass? How and why did the Holy Spirit inseminate the body of this unwed Jewish girl? The doctrinal inventions of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist and of the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary
are not so thinly veiled expressions of cannibalistic and castration themes found in other theogonies.

My interest here, however, is not in the details of any particular myth, but in unveiling the cognitive and coalitional forces that generate and sustain all kinds of theogonies. I am using this latter term not in the narrow sense of popular literary accounts of the genesis of the gods, as in Hesiod’s portrayal of the swallowing of divine offspring and the mutilation of titanic genitals, but more broadly as a way of referring to any narrative imaginative engagement that reinforces god-conceptions within a particular religious coalition. My concern is not with debates over whether Mary, for example, can be considered theotokos (the God-bearer), but with the sense in which our species as a whole can be considered Homo deiparensis (god-bearing hominids).

Religious conceptions can become a heavy burden in human life, bearing down on us in ways that are psychologically and politically painful. Must we continue to bear them? The message that the gods are born(e) in the mental and social space of human life has the potential to accomplish what the proclamation of the “death of God” could not. It may help us learn to let the gods go so that we can learn to live together—on our own. As we will see, the monotheistic idea of God is becoming increasingly unbearable—philosophically, psychologically, and politically. We need a new way of dealing with religious conceptions.

Conceiving Religion

How should we conceive of religion? Like the phenomena it is often used to describe, this pregnant—all too pregnant—concept engenders enormous controversy. Some scholars have argued that the term ought to be secluded from polite academic society. Does the baggage borne so long by the Western concept of “religion” mean that we should set it aside? Such questions are important not only to scholars concerned about academic compliance to hotly contested disciplinary definitions, but also to those whose alliance to a particular tradition or defiance against all such traditions compels them to join the increasingly polemical public discourse about the value of “religion” in human life. Clearly articulating a conceptual apparatus that can guide such conversations is an important and ongoing task, one that I will begin to take up in the next chapter.

However, it is equally important to ask what religion conceives and how it goes on reproducing itself. Where do “religions” come from? How—and what—do they reproduce? What engenders religiosity, and
how is it nurtured? In the following chapters, I will suggest an answer to all of these questions: *shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents*. Axiology is the study of value (*axios*), which, at least in the pragmatic philosophical tradition, can include discourse about the dynamics of and criteria for intellectual and aesthetic as well as ethical engagements. All natural human agents—including atheists—imaginatively engage one another in ongoing processes of evaluating and being evaluated, processes that interact at multiple levels (biological, psychological, political, etc.). Religion, however, involves imaginative interactions with *supernatural* agents, whose axiological relevance for a particular group is constituted and regulated by its members’ shared belief in manifestations—and shared practice in manipulations—of those agents.

Scholars within the humanities and social sciences are often wary of theoretical conceptions of religion because of the way in which they have sometimes functioned under the constraints of essentialism and colonialism. The former refers to the way in which terms can be utilized as though they represent unchanging ideas that are actualized more or less fully in particular cases. The latter refers to the way in which essentialist terms that are (supposedly) fully actualized in one in-group are taken as the basis for evaluating out-groups, authorizing or condoning force to make “them” assimilate to (or keep away from) “us.” Categorizing specific persons into generic groups has indeed too often contributed to our anxious attempts to “colonize” others based on preconceived “essentialist” notions of race, class, or gender. All sorts of terms can be, and have been, used in this way (Western, civilized, rational, etc.). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term “religion” was in fact utilized in this way, provincially defined by Christian scholars who saw their own as the “consummate” religion, the final step on a long path that had begun with “primitive” forms of animism. After the historicist, contextual, and linguistic turn(s) in the philosophy of science, most scholars of religion today work hard to distance themselves from such narrow conceptions.

One strategy is to use extremely broad definitions of religion such as “concern about issues of ultimate importance” or “awe-filled response to the universe.” These conceptions are usually offered in the context of arguments about whether it is possible to be a naturalist (or a secularist) and still value “religion.” For the purposes of our philosophical reflection on the relation between theology, atheism, and religion, however, such definitions are too broad to pick out anything empirically relevant or conceptually interesting. Many members of communities normally considered “religious”—whether aboriginal tribesmen or evangelical Christians—have no time for (or interest in) reflecting on ultimacy and wondering at the cosmos. On the other hand, many atheists are passionate about exploring issues of ultimate
importance and are fascinated by the physical universe, which they find awesome indeed. In their evaluations of the order of nature and society, however, atheists are most definitely not involved in shared imaginative engagement with the supernatural agents of a particular coalition. As we will see, leaving these aspects out of discussions of “religiosity” is also problematic because it leaves hidden the ongoing activation of mechanisms that continue to reinforce the violent protection of in-groups based on the mistaken detection of coalition-favoring gods.

In the context of this book, I will use the term “religion” to indicate this emergent, complex set of integrated features that has in fact been discovered in all known cultures: shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents. This terminological strategy is not intended as a general solution to a general methodological problem. It serves a particular function: addressing the problem of conceiving religion—in both senses—in the context of a reconstructive analysis of empirical findings within the biocultural sciences and an exploration of their theoretical and practical implications for the discipline of theology and the future of atheism. This is not the only way to conceive of religion, but all “religions” may be conceived in this way. This is not all that religions produce, but everywhere it is produced I will call it “religion.” This strategy is also both antiessentialist and anticolonialist. It provides the conceptual tools for understanding—and a pragmatic impetus for dissolving—the evolved cognitive and coalitional forces that intensify abstract idealizations and group conflicts.

Theologians have traditionally operated within intellectual workshops sponsored by specific religious coalitions, within which they offer reflections on divine revelation and guidance on ritual practices. Many scientists and philosophers assume that this is all theology does and all that it can do. In dialogue with the biocultural study of religion, however, theologians can rediscover and renew a critical and creative practice that has long been suppressed by or domesticated within religious groups. I will argue that this ancient discipline, if appropriately reconstructed, can play an important role in liberating us from God-conceptions, freeing up energy for wholly naturalist interpretations and creatively secularist inscriptions of our shared worlds.

Atheist Conceptions after the Birth of “God”

Nietzsche’s madman could assume that those at work in the marketplace and at worship in the churches already knew whom he had in mind
when he announced the death of *God*. But how was this particular idea of a supernatural agent conceived—and why has it stuck around? The term “God” has a wide semantic range, so wide that one even finds it used by scientists who are committed atheists, as when Stephen Hawking described the quest for a unified theory of physical cosmology as a search for the “mind of God.”10 In his early work, even Nietzsche had used the term to indicate the “artist’s meaning (and hidden meaning) behind all that happens—a ‘God,’ if you will, but certainly only an utterly unscrupulous and amoral artist-God who frees himself from the dire pressure of fullness and *over-fullness*, from *suffering* the oppositions packed within him.”11 Many philosophers and theologians use the word “God” as a placeholder for that which in some sense conditions all finite entities or events, the absolute infinite, or “ground of being,” without attributing it any human-like and coalition-favoring features. The word is also occasionally used to refer to the highest (male) supernatural agent within a religious tradition, such as Brahman or even Buddha.

The most common sense in which the term “God” is used, however, is to designate the Deity imaginatively engaged by coalitions affiliated with the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. People today who argue about whether (or simply assume that) God is dead are usually members of societies that have been deeply shaped by these monotheistic religions. Acknowledging the diversification and syncretism that continue to characterize and modify religious practices around the world, for the sake of conceptual analysis, scholars of comparative religion still distinguish between the traditions that trace their origins to developments during the first millennium BCE in East Asia (Confucianism, Daoism), South Asia (Hinduism, Buddhism), and West Asia (Judaism, Christianity, Islam).12 Karl Jaspers was the first to use the phrase “axial age” to indicate the revolutionary phase of human history that lasted from approximately 800 BCE to 200 BCE and significantly altered the psychological and political landscape of human life across the most densely populated areas of the globe. Research on this important era has escalated in recent years and, although scholars debate dates and details, it is still considered a key turning point (axis) in civilizational transformation.13

In the wake of the West Asian axial age, a new sort of religious conception was born(e) within the doctrinal formulations of the major monotheistic traditions. God was portrayed as the infinite personal Creator of all finite reality, an all-knowing and all-powerful disembodied intentional Force. In order to avoid confusion with other usages of the term “God,” and for other analytic reasons to be explained below, I will designate this idea as GOD (with small capitals). It was the attempt
to conceptualize infinity as *intentional*, or to represent the intentionality of the coalition’s most important supernatural agent as *infinite*, that led to the birth of God. One of the tasks of this book is to explain how this religious conception was engendered, and why it continues to be borne despite the philosophical, psychological, and political problems it produces.

However, the main focus of my project, as the title suggests, is the discipline of theology, which has played a central role in bearing God. As we will see in chapter 3, this academic field has been bombarded by attacks from scientists in the biocultural study of religion. Instead of avoiding or defending against such attacks, I want to intensify the critical gaze upon theology; the glaring light of these sciences can help us more clearly see (and so finally be able to separate) two very different trajectories within this discipline. The main purpose of my project, as the subtitle suggests, is the liberation of an atheistic trajectory that has been bound up within this field of inquiry, a reflective and innovative force that was also conceived during the axial age. The idea that humans can understand nature and arrange society without the help of the gods was only rarely borne in antiquity, but it was in fact born (e.g., in the schools of Epicurus, Cārvāka, and Zhuangzi). As the concept of God has become increasingly unbearable over the centuries, however, the plausibility and feasibility of atheistic conceptions have grown, eventually contributing to the emergence of naturalism and secularism.

What does this have to do with theology? I propose a reconceptualization of this field of inquiry as *the construction and critique of hypotheses about the existential conditions for axiological engagement*. Most theological hypotheses have indeed been religious. That is to say, they have appealed to supernatural agents taken as axiologically relevant within the shared imagination of the monotheistic traditions to which theologians have been traditionally bound. Although a variety of finite gods play a role in the evaluative practices of such groups (e.g., angels, demons, saints, jinn, etc.), it is God who allegedly determines the conditions for the very existence of all finite axiological engagement. Ideas about limited, changing gods (of a certain sort) are easily reproduced within minds and groups, but the arrival of—and the attempt to nurture—the idea of an unlimited, unchangeable God exerted unimaginable mental and social pressure on human life.

There have always been voices within these religious traditions that have resisted this concept of God, challenging its theoretical coherence, practical consequences, and affective constraints. For a variety of reasons, many intellectuals, activists, and mystics within monotheistic religions have pushed back against notions of an anthropomorphic (male) Deity.
who exercises absolute control over the inscription of every psyche and polis. For the most part, however, these voices have been silenced or domesticated, pulled back into the biocultural gravitational field created by the integration of evolved theogonic mechanisms. Theology emerged within the socioecological niche we call the axial age, playing an important adaptive role in helping to hold together expanding empires and to promote an expansive individualism. Today we live in a very different niche, with new global challenges—and new opportunities. I hope to show how the discovery of the birth of god within religion can contribute to the liberation of an atheistic trajectory within theology, disclosing and releasing the generative power within atheism.

The key question is whether theology (in the sense defined above) can be emancipated—like the other sciences—from religion. During the high Middle Ages, theology was considered the “queen” of the sciences. As the explanatory power of the other sciences grew in early modernity, she was slowly nudged off the throne. Today, her place in the academic court is dubious, at best. She gets very few invitations (to mix metaphors slightly) in the interdisciplinary dating game. It is not hard to understand why. It is no fun dating someone who keeps talking about an invisible father figure (or heavenly big brother), whom she believes is always watching. But what if theology could wean itself from its reliance on the sustenance of religious groups and its habit of nurturing gods? If theology can learn to stop coddling religious conceptions, and instead generate critical and creative hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement that do not appeal to supernatural agents, it can serve a useful function in the ongoing conversation about religious reproduction. After all, the erstwhile queen knows what a royal pain it can be to bear and care for the gods.

**Having “the Talk” about Religious Reproduction**

Where do babies come from? Why do parents keep them around? Even though they may embarrass or annoy some of the adults to which they are directed, these are quite natural questions for children to ask. As the oldest of six, I had five rather obvious opportunities to pose them—and I learned over time that it was best to curb my curiosity about human reproduction in certain contexts. For scientists who research human cultures—past and present—the sudden arrival of (and provision of care to) infants comes as no surprise. Archaeologists do not need to dig around for answers to such questions as they uncover artifacts at historic
(or prehistoric) sites. Anthropologists do not need to include interview questions on these themes to make sense of the replenishing of the living populations they investigate.

Scholars who study human societies do indeed refine their hypotheses as they try to develop ever more plausible interpretations of the distinctive patterns of kinship structure, courting and mating rituals, pregnancy and birthing practices, and neonatal health-care policies of specific communities. However, if an earlier civilization was composed of anatomically modern humans, then historians can reasonably assume that infants appeared within the population as a result of the same basic procedures that produce them today, when... well, you know. If the members of a contemporary collective are *Homo sapiens*, then sociologists can appropriately surmise that they naturally reproduce and care for their offspring in the same general way—and for the same basic reasons—that the rest of us do.

As a result of a convergence of theoretical proposals based on empirical findings within a wide variety of disciplines that meet in the “field” of the biocultural study of religion, scientists are now gaining a similar level of confidence about the processes by which conceptions of supernatural agents arise and are tended to within the imaginative intercourse of human groups. Like natural human offspring, different supernatural progeny have different features and are treated differently across religious families of origin. Nevertheless, they are all (re)produced by the same basic cognitive and coalitional mechanisms. Participating in sexual and religious reproduction comes relatively easily for most people in all known human societies. Why? Because these activities are motivated by naturally evolved tendencies that are part of our shared phylogenetic inheritance and have been reinforced across generations through social entrainment.

Having “the talk” should involve more than simply explaining how “it” works. It is equally important to work out the physical, emotional, and social consequences of “doing it.” This is just as true for religious education as it is for sex education. We need a theological version of “the birds and the bees” that deals with the dynamics by which gods are reproduced in human minds, and the consequences of nurturing them in human groups. Part of the problem is that we are socialized not to ask where gods come from; we learn early that it is not polite to ask folks why they keep them around. When it comes to having the talk about where babies come from and what it takes to care for them, we know that waiting too long can have devastating effects. Of course, it can be equally devastating if the conversation makes people feel attacked, afraid, or ashamed. The activities that lead to sexual and religious reproduction can feel terrific to our bodies, but baring our souls about them can feel terribly vulnerable.
When discussing such intimate issues, it is important to be sensitive—but it is also important to be direct.

A growing number of scholars in the biocultural study of religion are arguing that the empirical findings in these fields do more than help explain the origin and evolution of belief in gods. They also provide adequate warrant for rejecting the existence of such culturally postulated disembodied intentional forces. As we will see, these sciences do not provide deductive logical arguments that disprove the existence of gods or inductive evidence that invalidates claims about their causal relevance, but they do offer powerful abductive and retroductive arguments that render their existence implausible. It makes more sense to think that shared imaginative intercourse with supernatural agents emerged over time as naturally evolved hypersensitive cognitive tendencies led to mistaken perceptions that slowly became entangled within erroneous collective judgments about the extent of the social field.

The reader might wonder why I so often engage Christian conceptions of God in my exploration of the challenges and opportunities for post-partum theology. First, a growing number of scientists in the biocultural study of religion go out of their way to single out this monotheistic religion for critique. Christianity was also the main target of Nietzsche’s pronouncements about “the death of God.” So in this interdisciplinary context, it makes sense for me to use this tradition to illustrate the challenges and opportunities for theology after “the birth of God.” A second reason for focusing on the way in which alleged supernatural agent revelations are interpreted and ritually engaged in Christianity is that this is my own religious “family of origin.” In chapter 5, I will argue that one way to facilitate healthy conversations about religious reproduction is to maintain emotional contact with one’s original “family system” while differentiating oneself from the triangulation of gods that binds anxiety within it. In our pluralistic, globalizing environment, however, it is becoming increasingly important to have “the talk” across religious boundaries. This is why I also often compare and contrast the religious conceptions of traditions that emerged in the East and South Asian axial age with the God of the West Asian monotheisms.

In many contexts, engendering atheism will be extremely difficult; in some contexts, it may turn out to be impossible. Letting the gods go can be a painful experience for those whose mental and social lives have been saturated and structured by shared imaginative engagement with them. Conceptions of gods, selves, and worlds come and go together; they hang together—that is, they hold together or they die together. This is why the very idea of the dissolution of the gods makes the worlds of human selves feel extremely vulnerable. The way in which one imagines the gods of