

## Practicing Safe Sects

We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.

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For most of human history, theism – like racism, classism, and sexism – played an important role in the emergence of ever more complex and expansive forms of societal organization. The evolution and transmission of the perceptive and affiliative biases that foster religious reproduction facilitated the psychological internalization and political institutionalization of personal and social categories even – or especially – when those categories had the effect of repressing or oppressing the needs and drives of some individuals. Shared imaginative engagement with axiological relevant supernatural agents effectively held human beings together in increasingly differentiated cultural coalitions, strengthening their capacity for in-group cooperation and coordination.

In this sense, not practicing safe sects – *bearing gods* in mind and culture – “worked.” As we have seen throughout this book, however, there is another sense in which (re)producing supernatural conceptions is *unsafe*. The mutual intensification of superstitious beliefs and segregative practices that strengthens relationships within a religious coalition also covertly cements prejudice against and antagonism toward members of other religious (or non-religious) coalitions. This is the political tragedy of overtly *religious* attempts to promote peace: struggling against the effects of sociographic prudery (e.g., aggressive behaviors toward those who practice different supernatural rituals) while simultaneously embracing and encouraging anthropomorphic promiscuity (e.g., idiosyncratic beliefs about the role of in-group gods in shaping society) usually only makes things worse because the latter surreptitiously reinforces the former (and vice versa).

All of this is complicated by the psychological tragedy that the mental dissolution of the gods imaginatively engaged by the religious coalition with which one identifies can initially have a dis-integrating effect on one’s sense of

self.<sup>1</sup> This is why having “the talk” about religious reproduction requires sensitivity and patience. Shaming people for wanting to bear gods only makes them angry or more anxious, which further activates the defense mechanisms of theistic bias. I have not tried to hide my god-dissolving intentions in the contraceptive essays of this book. The goal of the central chapters was to demonstrate the anaphrodisiacal effect of scientific and philosophical perspectives on religious reproduction. It turned out that even theology – at least when it followed its iconoclastic trajectory – had a role to play in contesting the evolved biases that engender shared imaginative engagement with coalition-favoring disembodied intentional forces.

On the other hand, it is also important to be clear and straightforward when discussing the consequences of “doing it.” Religion did indeed promote the kind of small-group cohesion *Homo sapiens* needed to survive and thrive as they hunted and gathered in the upper Paleolithic. Today, however, most human beings live in large-scale, literate states governed by complex legal and political structures.

In this very different social context, the strong cohesion that religion promotes is of much less benefit to most of us than it was to the inhabitants of the pre-Neolithic world. But *the intolerance and hostility that religion promotes toward out-groups are harmful and threatening to us all....* The benefits of strong social cohesion that religion engenders may at one time have outweighed the costs entailed by out-group intolerance and conflict, but this is *likely no longer the case.*<sup>2</sup>

I have argued that it is definitely no longer the case that engaging in religious sects is a viable strategy for survival, at least if we are concerned about the well-being of the whole human race (and other species that share our ecologically fragile global habitat), and not merely with our own in-group.

Like unfettered population growth in the natural world, the continued expansion of the supernatural population in the human Imaginarium negatively impacts all of us. It may seem like the problem lies primarily in the astonishing fertility of god-bearing conservative groups, including my own religious family of origin (American evangelicalism). Liberal Christians sometimes roll their

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1 For a fuller analysis of other senses in which interreligious dialogue is “tragic,” see Chapter 5 of *Theology after the Birth of God*.

2 Clarke et al., “Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: Practical Implications for Social Policy,” in *Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation* ed. Clarke et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 272. Emphasis added.