

F. Leron Shults

Theology After the Birth of God: Atheist Conceptions in Cognition and Culture. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 256. USD 95,00 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-137-36454-8.

In *Theology After the Birth of God*, F. Leron Shults argues for his proposal for the creation of an atheistic theology that makes axiological truth claims exclusive of religious guidance. Religion persists, Shults asserts, because atheists have not approached the nature of the gods in a way that considers their defensive biocultural mechanisms.

Shults begins by explaining that Nietzsche's Madman is correct that the gods do not exist but is wrong about their demise. From the first chapter, Shults insists that the gods are the children of humanity, and any conversation that involves recognizing the truth of atheism must involve sensitivity to potential postpartum reactions by those who are being confronted with the reality that the gods are the children of human imagination.

Chapters two and three establish the basis for his assertions stemming from the biocultural study of religions. Shults emphasizes the tendency of the human mind to attribute identity to everything and the need for social cohesions. The conflation of these two cerebral tendencies results in the invention of supernatural agents to explain the unknown while reinforcing cohesion in social groups. Shults also underscores individual and social interactions like anthropomorphic and sociographic promiscuity and prudery that account for deviation from and/or the protection of social norms. These concepts provide the core of Shults's understanding of theogenic mechanisms which lead theologians towards atheistic truth but almost inevitably pull such 'iconoclastic' trajectories back into the fold of social tradition.

The next three chapters comprise the main thrust of Shults's direct argument against theism. First, he posits the logical inconsistencies of religion (especially Christian religion) which, when combined with the assertion that the gods do not exist, results in a world in which the atheist has every right to make axiological judgments. Furthermore, Shults examines relationships and anxiety to explain why theists have a hard time releasing their gods. Finally, the continuation of biocultural studies suggests how society can be capable of functioning without religion.

In chapter seven, Shults directly attacks the usefulness of religion. He summarizes his arguments and challenges his readers to strategically promote the truth of atheism but cautions them to remain cognizant of the biocultural factors influencing theists.

Perhaps the most important theme in this work is the idea that moral thought/practice/reality can be understood in purely atheistic terms, that is,

without the need for religious contribution. It is evident from the first chapter that Shults has given much thought as to why it is that Nietzsche's works have not made religious practice a thing of the past in the modern world. The simple change in perspective of humanity's role in religious thought from that of executioner to that of mother brings with it profound implications for axiological engagement. By utilizing biocultural studies of religion, Shults identifies many points of intersection between survival traits and social tendencies. The implication of this research put forth by Shults is clear: the existence of biological/social mechanisms removes any mystery from thoughts of deity and divine ordinances on morality. Shults states, "I propose ... *the construction and critique of hypotheses about the existential conditions for axiological engagement.*" (12) Simply put, Shults attempts to lay bare the inner workings of religion and show that the man behind the curtain of religion is humanity. For Shults, the more accurate realization that humanity gave birth to deities finally allows humanity to take full ownership of axiological thought without the crutch of relying upon 'disembodied supernatural forces.' Shults states, "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.*" (13) It is the biocultural study of religions that opens the door of understanding for Shults to propose an 'atheistic theology,' a theology in which there are no gods and naturalism is the sole governor of axiological thought.

While unashamedly atheistic, Shults contributes to discussions of religion that are beneficial to theists. Though theists are likely to disagree with Shults's presuppositions and conclusions, how people respond when their perceptions of deity are challenged is something worth considering, whether one is an atheist or a theist. Recognizing the mechanisms does not necessitate full agreement with Shults but may assist religious leaders in preparing effective responses in defense of the faith. These benefits notwithstanding, Shults's work contains a significantly different perspective on theological foundations, one that is antipodal to evangelical theology.

Throughout the book, Shults affirms the non-existence of the supernatural. Since the gods do not exist but morality does exist, Shults asserts the possibility of atheistic axiological engagement with no need for the supernatural. In short, conceived supernatural forces helped primitive humanity to cope with moral concepts but engagement with the supernatural is not necessary for moral discourse. However, nowhere does Shults discuss the probability, on naturalism, of humanity's ability to make a mental leap to the supernatural as opposed to projecting their imagination onto the natural when confronted with the unknown. The evolution of supernatural identification is taken for granted because of

the historical existence of religion and the presupposition that the supernatural does not exist, but there are prior questions that need to be asked here. If the supernatural does not exist, what should be expected of primitive humanity – to identify a phenomenon of nature as something supernatural (something with which they could not have had any experience) or as some kind of unknown creature similar to a creature they have already encountered? Similarly, what conclusions of existence should be expected of primitive humanity if the supernatural does exist? Does moral obligation make more sense if there is a supernatural standard of morality or if there are only naturalistic standards of morality? It is questions like these that Shults does not engage. By neglecting the body of discourse on moral obligation that has been put forth by theists, Shults's argument is not as strong as it might otherwise be.

One other area of this work that the reader is left with an incomplete discussion involves the application of Shults's critique of religion to atheistic ideologies. Sadly, this is a subject that is only briefly touched upon in this work. Although Shults does recognize that Stalin is often held as an example of atheism applied towards intolerance (186) he does not apply his socio/cultural critique of religion to non-theistic ideologies, including Stalin's, in any serious way. Shults intends the book to show that atheism is the best way forward for human flourishing, but the reader is ultimately left with little to no evaluation of atheistic ideologies as is applied to theism.

The reader may find Shults's argument for the biocultural mechanisms at work in religious groups to be compelling. Additionally, this work does challenge the theist to consider the forces at play in religious thought. However, Shults does not seriously address what would be expected if 'GOD' is involved in the lives of humanity. Without such evaluation, Shults's work entails a one-sided argument for the validity of atheistic axiological thought unfettered by religion.

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