

F. LeRon Shults

ICONOCLASTIC THEOLOGY

GILLES DELEUZE AND THE
SECRETION OF ATHEISM



Iconoclastic Theology

Plateaus – New Directions in Deleuze Studies

'It's not a matter of bringing all sorts of things together under a single concept but rather of relating each concept to variables that explain its mutations.'

Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*

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ICONOCLASTIC THEOLOGY
Gilles Deleuze and the Secretion
of Atheism



F. LeRon Shults

EDINBURGH
University Press

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Edinburgh University Press Ltd
The Tun – Holyrood Road
12 (2f) Jackson’s Entry
Edinburgh EH8 8PJ
www.euppublishing.com

Typeset in Sabon by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire,
and printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 8413 7 (hardback)
ISBN 978 0 7486 8414 4 (webready PDF)

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The author of this book has received financial support
from the Norwegian Non-fiction Literature Fund.

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Acknowledgments

I want to thank the many Deleuzian Friends who encouraged me (explicitly or implicitly) in the wake of the fifth International Deleuze Conference in New Orleans in 2012 to contribute a volume to the *Plateaus* book series, and especially its editors Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook for supporting the project. Special thanks to Jeff Bell, Joe Hughes, John Protevi, Dan Smith, Nathan Widder, and James Williams. Thanks also to Carol MacDonald and her excellent team at Edinburgh University Press for such a pleasurable publishing experience.

List of Abbreviations

AO	Anti-Oedipus
B	Bergsonism
C1	Cinema 1 – The Movement-Image
C2	Cinema 2 – The Time-Image
CC	Coldness and Cruelty
D1	Dialogues
D2	Dialogues II
DR	Difference and Repetition
ECC	Essays Critical and Clinical
EP	Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza
ES	Empiricism and Subjectivity
F	Foucault
FB	Francis Bacon
K	Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature
KCP	Kant's Critical Philosophy
LS	Logic of Sense
N	Negotiations
NP	Nietzsche & Philosophy
PI	Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life
PS	Proust and Signs
SPP	Spinoza: Practical Philosophy
TF	The Fold
TP	A Thousand Plateaus
TR	Two Regimes of Madness
WP	What is Philosophy?

To Gro Anita Homme

my happy atheist

Hammering Theology

The impact of Gilles Deleuze's philosophical corpus resounds within and resonates across disciplines as diverse as physics, psychology, political science and the performing arts. Theoreticians and practitioners in these and other fields have been discovering what his literary body can do – and what can be done by extracting the revolutionary force of his massively energetic texts. My project is the extraction of resources for the production of an *iconoclastic* theology. I will argue that Deleuze's whole oeuvre is a *theological* icon-breaking machine that liberates thinking, acting, and feeling from the repressive power of Images of transcendence. His work is not only this, but all of his work is also this. This introductory chapter sets out my plan for tinkering with Deleuzian concepts, connecting them with insights from the bio-cultural sciences of religion, and releasing revolutionary forces that have for too long been domesticated within the discipline of theology.

In his last book with Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze insisted that “Wherever there is transcendence, vertical Being, imperial State in the sky or on earth, there is *religion*; and there is Philosophy only where there is immanence . . . only friends can set out a plane of immanence as a ground from which *idols* have been cleared.”¹ Throughout his writings, Deleuze hammered away at all sorts of figures of transcendence, psychological and political as well as priestly. The task of the Deleuzian Friend is clearly a destructive one, especially when it comes to religion. For Deleuze, however, critique and construction always go together. As we will see, many of his most celebrated conceptual creations were engendered by penetrating the thought of philosophers who dealt with religious and theological themes.² Obviously, he considered chipping away at the repressive representations of religion to be valuable in and of itself, but Deleuze also found that religion itself produced something of considerable value. “Religions are worth much less than the nobility and the courage of the *atheisms* that they inspire.”³

Iconoclastic theology, I will argue, has a special role to play in

the production of an inspiring atheism. Deleuze claimed that there is “always an atheism to be extracted from religion,” suggesting that Christianity *secret*es atheism “more than *any other* religion.”⁴ Why Christianity? We will explore the reasons for the prodigality of this religion’s atheistic secretion as we go along. I hope to show how the creative flows released by Deleuzian critique, such as his rigorous analysis of psychoanalysis and capitalism (*Anti-Oedipus*), can be complemented and intensified by an equally rigorous analysis of religious icons, especially *the* Icon of Christian theology (*Anti-Christ*). I want to illustrate to Friends of Deleuze (from all fields) how productive it can be to poke around the sedentary edifices of traditional theology, as he himself so often did, prying open the cracks in its Iconology, flattening its religious Figures, forging new conceptual tools and weapons with the fragments, and assembling creative atheist machines.

Atheism, religion, theology – these are contentious terms. Their usage becomes even more contested when we try to make transversal connections across disciplines. This sort of endeavor often requires the creation and clarification of new distinctions. Below I will set out a conceptual matrix that will serve as a heuristic device throughout the book. Before starting our extractions from and protractions of the relevant bodies of literature, it is important to begin to unpack the sense in which the Deleuzian corpus may be considered *theological*.

The Science of Non-Existing Entities

Although Deleuze appreciated the contributions of a few select theologians, his attitude toward the discipline as a whole was generally dismissive or even derisive. In his early book on *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, for example, he decried the “theological character” of modern philosophy, the “theological subjection” of thought, and the “theological crime” against the spirit that enslaves it to sadness and *ressentiment*.⁵ This is not surprising since, in fact, the term “theology” itself has traditionally been associated with the defense of the religious coalition that Deleuze, like Nietzsche, held most responsible for the establishment of slave morality. Throughout his career, Deleuze often depicted theology as an uncreative mode of thought bound to religious phantasms of transcendence.⁶ As we will see, he also consistently worked at overturning the priestly curse on desire, combating the “judgment of God,” and leveling images erected and selected as true representations of transcendence.

Hammering Theology

And so the idea of a *Deleuzian theology* might seem oxymoronic indeed. Nevertheless, Deleuze also made space – indeed space he himself took up – for a “theology” that is both *atheistic* and *productive*. In an appendix to *Logic of Sense* in which he discusses the relation between bodies and language in the work of Pierre Klossowski, Deleuze provocatively suggests that theology can be understood as “the science of non-existing entities, the manner in which these entities – divine or anti-divine, Christ or Antichrist – animate language and make for it this glorious body which is divided into disjunctions” (LS, 322). Now several aspects of this citation are important for our purposes, but let us begin with the definition of theology as the *science of non-existing entities*.

For at least two reasons, this description of the discipline is not as insulting as it might initially appear. First, Deleuze *himself* is a scientist of non-existing entities. Earlier in the main text of *Logic of Sense*, for example, he argues that sense itself is “not of being . . . sense does not exist” (LS, 38). Similarly, he describes the event as “that entity which addresses itself to thought, and which alone may invest it – extra-Being,” and sets out an ethics of counter-effectuation, which involves the “liberation of the *non-existent entity* for each state of affairs.”⁷ As we will see, several of the other key creative concepts in Deleuze’s writings – including the problematic, the virtual, ?-being, chaos, the Disparate, the aleatory point, the paradoxical instance, the abstract machine, and the Body without Organs – all designate “entities” (or realities) that do not “exist.” These terms refer to the transcendental conditions or sources of genetic determination for the becoming of existing entities. These (very real) “non-existing” entities are immanent causes of the animation of language, the movement of thought, the differentiation of singularities, the differentiation of individuals, the dramatization of concepts, etc. In this sense, Deleuze is the consummate *theological scientist* – albeit of the *Anti-Christ* sort.

A second reason this description of theology is not as offensive as it appears (or at least is not offensive for this most apparent reason) is that it is commonplace even for Christian theologians to acknowledge that there is an important sense in which the object of theological inquiry does not “exist.” For example, John of Damascus, in his seventh-century summary exposition of “the orthodox faith,” insisted that God does not belong to “the class of existing things” but is “above all existing things, nay even above existence itself” (*De fide Orthodoxa*, I.4). Similar sentiments can be found among most of

the leading theologians of the Christian tradition, as well as among scholars from other religious traditions that trace their roots to the axial age.⁸ For example, Nirguna Brahman, Sunyata, Wuji, and Dao are not typically conceived as determinate entities that stand-out (ek-sistere) in relation to other finite objects or even finitude as a whole, but as realities that condition all determinate existence.

The absolutely *infinite* cannot be de-fined as standing-out in relation to other finite things, nor even conceived as *a* determinate entity over against finitude as a whole, for then it would be represented as *finite*, i.e., as limited or bounded by another entity or entities that it is *not*, in which case it would not be *absolutely* unlimited. In the case of Christianity, this philosophical insight comes into conflict with religious belief in a God who is represented as an infinite Person in a determinate relation with a finite world that he has created and (at least part of which) he plans to redeem. Jewish and Muslim religious scholars have similar difficulties. Christian theologians, like their counterparts in the other monotheistic traditions that originated in west Asia, have developed a variety of strategies for dealing with this tension within their religious coalitions. I will try to illuminate the motivation for such strategies, and explain the sense in which their failure secretes atheism.

The main point at this stage is that many theologians would not at all be offended at the idea that their discipline deals with that which is “beyond being.” The problem they will have with Deleuze is his a-theism; that is, his denial of the reality of a specific kind of non-existent Entity, a personal and transcendent God who establishes moralistic codes for a religious coalition. As we will see in the following chapters, Deleuze is not a big fan of *religion*. From his first (acknowledged) book, on Hume, in which he equates religion with the fanciful and illegitimate use of extensive rules of association (ES, 76), to his last book (with Guattari), in which he argues that monotheism and despotic, imperial States are intrinsically linked (WP, 43), Deleuze rejected modes of argumentation that appeal to dogmatic images of an allegedly transcendent, morally relevant Entity.

So, why would we call what Deleuze is doing – or what I want to do with Deleuze – *theology*? There are good reasons to hesitate.⁹ This term is often (indeed usually) identified with debates among rival coalitions over the correct interpretation of the revelation of the God of Jesus Christ, and the correct practice of the rituals through which shared engagement with that God is mediated. We could point out that there is a long precedent for the use of the term “theology”

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by non-religious philosophers – from Aristotle to Žižek – to describe aspects of their projects.¹⁰ But do we have any good reasons to call *Deleuze* a theologian and, if so, in what sense? Throughout the book I will examine specific elements of his work that illustrate his contribution to the science of non-existing entities that condition real experience. However, it is also important to note that throughout his writings he deals with issues that can be considered “theological” in a wider sense.

Deleuze’s speculation on theological themes is evident already in his earliest esoteric (and later repudiated) writings,¹¹ but our focus will be on his acknowledged works. All of the monographs he wrote on particular philosophers in the 1960s (including Hume, Nietzsche, Kant, Bergson, and Spinoza) dealt with the transcendental conditions for real, finite experience, for which the term “God” (*theos*) has traditionally been used. In fact, Deleuze himself uses this term surprisingly often, although his creation of new concepts radically alters its function. “To anyone who asks: ‘do you believe in God?’ we should reply in strictly Kantian or Schreberian terms: ‘Of course, but only as the master of the disjunctive syllogism . . . the sole thing that is divine is the nature of an energy of disjunctions” (AO, 14). Later in *Anti-Oedipus*, he differentiates between the “schizophrenic God” and the “God of religion,” but insists they are related to the same syllogism (AO, 85). In *A Thousand Plateaus* he has Professor Challenger assert that “God is a Lobster” (AO, 45). Such expressions are obviously meant to be humorous – but Deleuze is not joking.

Deleuze is interested in the practical as well as the speculative tasks of theology. For most theologians (of whatever tradition) philosophical reflections on the conditions for the existence of finite reality are connected to pragmatic questions about how to live with (or in) the intensely real experience of being-conditioned as finite. Often such questions are gathered under the heading “spirituality.” Deleuze sometimes utilizes such language to describe his own proposals, as when he calls for spiritual repetitions, spiritual becomings, and even a sort of “spiritual philosophy.”¹² As with his use of the term “God,” however, Deleuze’s occasional references to the “spiritual” have nothing to do with disembodied *intentional* forces. What interests him is the intense construction of “a life” in the encounter with infinite intensities of difference. Christian spirituality, of course, answers such questions by appealing to the Spirit of Christ. As we will see in the following chapters, Deleuze’s answers include references to demonic geneses, diabolical principles and pacts with the

Devil. Such expressions are obviously meant to be provocative and playful – but, in a sense we will need to unpack as we go along, Deleuze is quite serious.

Anti-Oedipus, Anti-Christ

Throughout his work Deleuze combats forces that restrain thought, regiment behavior and repress desire. This is particularly evident in *Anti-Oedipus*, his first collaborative effort with psychoanalyst Félix Guattari. I will explore this book in more detail in Chapter 5, along with its companion volume *A Thousand Plateaus*. In a sense, however, the whole of Deleuze’s philosophy is “Anti-Oedipus,” a combat against psychological and social representations that turn life into a tragedy. In several places Deleuze points briefly to parallels between Oedipus and Christ, but he never analyzed the repressive power of the latter in as much detail as that of the former. Let us begin with a brief description of the critical and creative aspects of Deleuze’s engagement with “Oedipus” and some of the ways in which my project expands upon his efforts through a more explicit theological engagement with “Christ.”

Anti-Oedipus? In his collaboration with Guattari, one of Deleuze’s most popular targets was a psychoanalytic obsession with the resolution of the Oedipal complex, which he argued reinforces a triangulation of desire within the daddy-mommy-me structure of the “holy family,” and serves a colonizing function within the capitalist mode of inscribing the *socius*. However, the problem is much larger than a particular interpretation of Freudian analysis and the successful resolution of adolescent identity issues during the genital stage of development. “Oedipus” can refer more broadly to representations or “images” that inscribe lack, law, and signification into desire. Deleuze calls this inscription the *priestly* curse on desire. “Every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it. The priest cast the triple curse on desire: the negative law, the extrinsic rule and the transcendental ideal” (TP, 171).

The psychoanalysts Deleuze criticizes so harshly in *Anti-Oedipus* are portrayed as only the latest mediators of this priestly curse. The repressive power of regulative ideals that inscribe deficiency into life saturates the entire field of social-production. Before and after Deleuze, many psychologists and scholars from other disciplines have criticized the Freudian conception of the Oedipal complex for a

wide variety of reasons (challenging its phallocentrism, questioning its empirical warrant, etc.). Below I will argue that the Deleuzian project can be rendered even more powerful by linking it to concepts derived from recent theoretical developments based on empirical research in cognitive science and other disciplines. It is important to keep in mind that the critique of psychoanalysis was only a small aspect of Deleuze's lifelong combat with the repressive power of psychological, political, and philosophical "representations."

Anti-Oedipus? Deleuze and Guattari call their project "schizoanalysis" (or pragmatics) and there is no doubt that it has a *negative* task. "Destroy, destroy . . . Destroy Oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration" (AO, 342). This comprehensive critique of Oedipus, and all that it "represents," plays a crucial role in their attempt to unveil the reasons why people seem to desire their own repression and even embrace fascism, while disavowing both. However, critique and creation always work together. As we will see, schizoanalysis also has *positive* tasks such as liberating and mobilizing the "schizzes" of desiring-production and assembling revolutionary "machines." Analyzing and producing the break-flows that dissolve Oedipus require aggression, but an aggression that – like Nietzsche's – is always and already an affirmation. Not only *Anti-Oedipus*, but the whole of Deleuze's corpus is an affirmative pragmatic machine that releases the productivity of thinking, acting, and feeling from their bondage to images that are intended to mediate transcendent ideals.

Anti-Christ? For the purposes of my project, there are several good reasons for prying into and knocking around within the edifices *Christian* theology. First, Deleuze himself consistently focused on the special role of Christianity in western philosophy and culture throughout his work, and often used the label Anti-Christ to describe aspects of his own proposals. Of course, interest in the psychological and political influence of Christianity on late modernity goes far beyond Deleuze studies. A second reason, then, is that such a focus may contribute to wider conversations among contemporary continental and political philosophers, as well as "new atheists." Third, a set of personal reasons: Christianity is my religious family of origin, the dominant religious force in my social context and one of the areas of study in which I have the most academic expertise. This is not a book about Christian doctrine, but about the secretion of productive atheism that is stimulated by Deleuze's creation of concepts. My interest here is not in the details of intramural doctrinal disputes,

but in enhancing that secretion by attending to the repressive function of representations of “Christ” in the mental and social space of *religious* coalitions and the theologies bound to them.

It is important to emphasize that hammering away on *Christ* has very little to do with the historical man Jesus of Nazareth, just as Deleuze’s attack on *Oedipus* was only indirectly related to the fictional character in Sophocles’ tragic play. Deleuze was interested in the way in which this literary figure was taken up later in the imagination of others, and came to represent a particularly powerful psycho-social process of repression and oppression. I am interested in how beliefs about the historical figure of Jesus were formed later in the imagination of others, and came to function within the doctrinal formulations and ritual practices of a particular religious coalition, which eventually came to dominate most of the western world. The problem is not Jesus who, as best we can tell, was a relatively compassionate revolutionary with good intentions (who, like Oedipus, apparently had mother issues and struggled with alienation from a Father figure). The problem is the way in which Paul, John and later theologians imaginatively constructed “Christ” as the Son of God, the heavenly High Priest and idealized moral Judge of all humanity. As we will see below, the motivations for such constructions can be illuminated by attending to the human cognitive and coalitional defaults that so easily engender widespread imaginative engagement with supernatural agents (like Christ), which in turn reinforces anxiety about personal and in-group identity.

Anti-Christ? My critique will focus on the way in which “Christ” (as one important example of a religious Image taken as a mediator of transcendence) functions within what I will call *sacerdotal* theology. It is not my intention to destroy the coalitions of Christianity (or any other religion). I am not heralding the coming of the Beast from the thirteenth chapter of the Apocalypse of John, whom the latter envisioned as persecuting believers and dominating the world economy. It is hard to imagine anything less Deleuzian! In his epistles John warns believers that Antichrists have already come into the world, which is a sign that it is “the last hour” (1 Jn. 2:8). Antichrists are those who deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (2 Jn. 1:7). Assuming that this refers to the idea, expressed in the prologue to John’s Gospel, that the divine “Logos” became flesh and lived among us, then it is safe to say that, after reading this book, John would consider me and Deleuze to be Antichrists. One of my main concerns in what follows is to show why and how anxiety about properly

detecting Christ and anxiety about protecting Christian in-group cohesion are interrelated.

This “Anti-Christ” project is also meant to be constructive as well as destructive. In his book on Nietzsche, Deleuze argues that the opposition of Zarathustra or Dionysius to Christ is a “differential *affirmation* . . . against all nihilism and against this particular form of it.”¹³ As Deleuze chipped away at Oedipus (as well as the dogmatic image of thought and moral images of transcendence), he also created novel concepts and assembled new, productive schizo-analytic and pragmatic machines. By chipping away at the iconic function of Christ, I hope to help unveil the dynamics that lead people to desire their own *religious* repression. This too will require creating new concepts and making new connections. How does one go about the process of construction? Deleuze recommends that one must begin within the social formation in which one finds oneself. “Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times” (TP, 178).

The social formation in which I find myself is largely stratified by monotheistic religions, even – or especially – when the role of these coalitional forces is ignored or downplayed. Increasingly one hears the voices of “new atheists” protesting against this stratification. Why is it so easy for most people to ignore these protests? My strategy is to begin from the inside, so to speak, and to work outward, testing Deleuze’s suggestive hypothesis that Christianity in particular has a special role to play in the secretion of atheism. What potential movements of deterritorialization, what possible lines of flight can we find already *within* Christian theology itself? As atheists have learned over the centuries, however, poking at problematic doctrinal reasoning or questionable moral practices in religion has surprisingly little effect. If we really want to dissolve the power of *religious* repression, we need more leverage; we need to understand the mental and social mechanisms that surreptitiously produce and automatically reproduce this phenomenon across cultures. Here we are aided by discoveries within the bio-cultural sciences of religion, which have exposed the evolved cognitive and coalitional processes through which the gods (including Christ) are imaginatively born(e).

Anthropomorphic Promiscuity and Sociographic Prudery

I use the phrase “bio-cultural study of religion” to designate the heterogeneous conceptual space within which an expanding number of disciplines are converging in support of the claim that religious phenomena can be explained by the evolution of cognitive processes that over-detect human-like forms and coalitional processes that over-protect socially inscribed norms. The empirical research that supports this sort of hypothesis comes from fields as diverse as cognitive science, archaeology, evolutionary neurobiology, moral psychology, social anthropology, and political theory. I do not have the space here to review all of the various trends in these and other disciplines that bear on these issues.¹⁴ Happily, such a review is not required for our current purpose, namely, providing a conceptual framework derived from this research that we can use as a heuristic device in our analysis of Deleuze and as a wedge for splitting apart two distinctive trajectories in theology.

Figure 1.1 is a coordinate grid that depicts a correlation between cognitive and coalitional tendencies that developed together in mutually reinforcing ways in the evolution of *Homo sapiens*. This

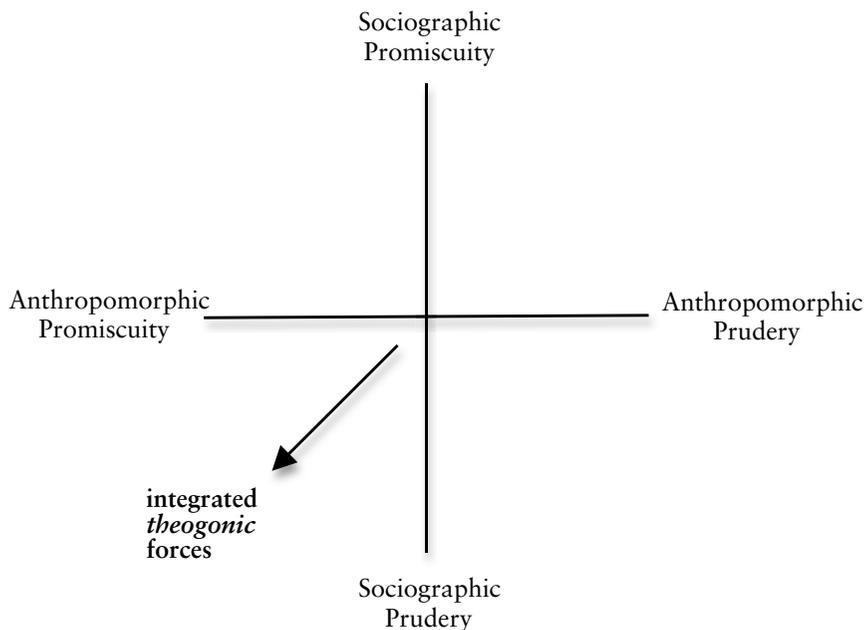


Figure 1.1

Hammering Theology

framework does not capture all of the important distinctions within and between the various theories in the bio-cultural study of religion, but the distinctions it does make can help us render more explicit the connections between them and more easily link them to Deleuze's project in the chapters that follow. It can also help us unveil the secrets of theogonic reproduction.

The horizontal line indicates a continuum on which we can mark the tendency of persons to guess "human-like intentional force" when confronted with ambiguous phenomena in the natural environment. The anthropomorphically *promiscuous* are always on the lookout, jumping at any opportunity to postulate such agents as causal explanations even – or especially – when these interpretations must appeal to disembodied intentionality, i.e., "supernatural agency" in a sense explained below. The anthropomorphically *prudish*, on the other hand, are suspicious about such appeals. They tend to reflect more carefully before giving in to their intuitive desire to ascribe intentionality to unknown causes.

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

The evolutionary default is toward the integration of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery. In other words, human beings today are intuitively and naturally drawn into the bio-cultural gravitational field of the integrated tendencies in the lower left quadrant. Why? In the environment of our early ancestors (Late Pleistocene Africa) the selective advantage went to hominids whose cognitive capacities enabled them to quickly detect relevant agents in the *natural* environment, and whose groups were adequately protected from the dissolution that could result from too many defectors and cheaters in the *social* environment. Prior to the pressures

exerted by population expansion or by reduced access to ecological resources, hominid groups may well have been less prudish in their sociography. Whatever the unique conditions were that led some groups out of Africa, however, it seems clear that their survival was enhanced by the integration of theogonic forces.

The evolution of cognitive mechanisms like the Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD) would have helped them survive by increasing their success in avoiding predation and in finding prey, protectors, and partners. However, it also would have made our ancestors prone to perceptual mistakes, such as interpreting a noise in the forest as a tiger when it was only the wind. When it comes to detecting potential agents in the environment it is better to be safe than sorry; better overly sensitive and often wrong than in-sensitive and eaten once. Despite the many false positives, natural selection would have rewarded this perceptual strategy. The interpretation of ambiguous phenomena increasingly defaulted to “intentional force.” If no physical tiger could be found, this default would have contributed to the likelihood of guessing “animal-spirit” or some other invisible power like “ancestor-ghost.” Such guesses would have been reinforced as other default cognitive processes kicked in, such as the Theory of Mind Mechanism (ToMM) and intuitive dualism, further strengthening the tendency to postulate the existence of disembodied agents with mental and emotional states when confronted with ambiguous phenomena.¹⁵

Ideas of disembodied intentional forces may have been engendered by overly sensitive cognitive *detection*, but it was overly sensitive coalitional *protection* that determined which ideas were maintained and nurtured by human groups. In other words, imaginative ideas about ghosts, gods or other supernatural agents are easily born in cognition but they must also be borne in cultures. Such ideas multiply rapidly in the mind, but the images that stick around are those that are more easily transmitted across generations and contribute to the cohesion of the group. A variety of theories within the bio-cultural sciences contribute to our understanding of the role of religion in sociographic prudery. For example, belief in ghosts or gods who could always be watching the behavior of the natural agents in the coalition, and who had the power to bring misfortune or blessing, would decrease the likelihood of cheating or defection to other groups. Even if no one else sees me, a god might catch me cheating and I (or the whole group) could be punished.

In addition to enhancing moral behavior, imaginatively intense

forms of communal engagement with supernatural agents (e.g., chanting or singing together, dancing or other synchronic movement and other activities that lead to altered states of consciousness) would also have strengthened emotional bonds within human coalitions, enriched social intelligence, and even increased susceptibility to the placebo effects of ritual healing. But religion often involves painful rituals and self-destructive behaviors that do not seem to promote health. At the very least, they take time, energy, and resources that could be used in other ways that would more directly contribute to the survival of the coalition. Such behavior can be illuminated by costly signaling theory. A willingness to undergo painful rituals, perform time-consuming devotional exercises, or express emotional dedication to a god in other ways, powerfully signals a person's commitment to the group. Such persons are more easily trusted and granted status within the group. Archaeological evidence suggests that sometime during the Late Pleistocene, some of these "god-bearing" (theogonic) groups left Africa, eventually out-competing all other hominid species and spreading out across the Levant and into Europe and Asia. All contemporary humans share a phylogenetic heritage that was shaped by adaptations to this ancestral environment, and that still influences social entrainment practices across cultures today. This helps to explain why religion comes so naturally to most people.¹⁶

The conceptual integration of *bio*-logical and *cultural* aspects of religion within this interdisciplinary field provides an easy point of contact with the Deleuzian project. Deleuze makes similar transversal moves throughout his work, exploring (for example) the relation between bodies and language in *Logic of Sense* and the relation between desiring-production and social-production in *Anti-Oedipus*. At one point in the latter volume, he even suggested that the theory of schizophrenia is "biocultural."¹⁷ Of course, he could not have meant this in the technical sense developed above since the most relevant empirical findings only began to emerge, and the relevant disciplines only began to converge, in the 1990s. In *Difference and Repetition* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, among other places, Deleuze often reached across academic fields and extracted concepts from (for example) mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, archaeology, and cultural anthropology. There are several creative attempts to demonstrate the importance of Deleuze's philosophy for a wide variety of sciences in the secondary literature, but none have applied it to this constellation of disciplines as they bear on the phenomena of religion.¹⁸

At one level, my project is meant to contribute to Deleuze studies by reading him at the intersection of fields within what I am calling the bio-cultural study of religion. At another level, it is meant to demonstrate how Deleuzian philosophy can contribute to this interdisciplinary discussion by encouraging more rigorous reflection on the existential conditions and practical implications of some of the findings within these sciences. My primary concern, however, is fabricating an iconoclastic theology out of resources extracted in the process of reading these two bodies of literature together. Given the empirical complexity of the bio-cultural study of religion and the conceptual complexity of Deleuze's philosophy, it will not be possible to provide exhaustive summaries or detailed analysis of even the most important ideas within either. My more modest goal is to demonstrate the way in which integrating concepts derived from both can unveil and weaken the power of the theogonic forces of anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery, opening up new creative possibilities for theology.

In the next five chapters, I will follow the increasingly common practice in the bio-cultural study of religion of referring to all disembodied intentional forces postulated across cultures as "supernatural agents" (or "gods").¹⁹ In order to include imagined agents that are temporarily embodied even if they have not always been, no longer embodied even if they once were, or potentially embodied even if they might not ever be, perhaps we should say "contingently-embodied" instead of simply "disembodied." For such a force to play a religious function within a coalition, it must be attributed intentionality or related human-like features, such as consciousness or the capacity for symbolic communication. Moreover, belief in the axiological relevance of the postulated agent must be widely shared and ritually mediated in a way that bears on the normative boundaries and behavior of members of the in-group.

I have argued elsewhere for the appropriateness of using the term *religion* to designate "shared imaginative engagement with axiologically relevant supernatural agents."²⁰ This is obviously not the only aspect of the complex phenomena wrapped up within and around what is commonly referred to as "religion," but it does pick out a distinctive feature that is particularly relevant for our purposes. I will continue to use this vocabulary here, but for the sake of this experimental exploration of Deleuzian theology I will also refer to the supernatural Agent (or "God") postulated in monotheism as a "transcendent moralistic Entity," for reasons that will soon become

clear. Oedipus and Christ; both are born(e) as a result of naturally evolved and socially entrained tendencies that most people are happy to leave secret. Theologians do not have this luxury.

Sacerdotal and Iconoclastic Trajectories

If we think of “religion” as shared imaginative engagement with supernatural agents, Deleuze is quite clearly *not* religious. To understand more clearly why it makes sense to say that he *is* a “theologian,” we need to make some more distinctions. We will continue to utilize Deleuze’s own (Klossowski-inspired) description of theology introduced above throughout the book, but I would also like to introduce another description that is consistent with his but can more easily be brought into the dialogue fostered by the bio-cultural study of religion. Broadly speaking, we may think of theology as the critique and construction of hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement. We find ourselves bound together with others within psychologically complex and shifting social boundaries, enmeshed within ongoing processes of evaluating and being evaluated. What are the sources of determination that account for the existence of all this pragmatic evaluation? What engenders this binding normativity in which we live and move and have our valuing? To use Deleuzian terms, which we will have to unpack in the chapters that follow, what are the transcendental conditions for the real experience of creating new values?

Most hypotheses about the conditions for the real experience of axiological engagement have been of the sort that flow easily from the default tendencies produced by the integration of evolved theogenic forces; they appeal to supernatural agents that care about the survival and flourishing of “our” in-group. These are “hypotheses” in the broadest sense, i.e., abductive inferences or “best guesses” that are shaped by prior experience but whose plausibility depends on their ongoing explanatory and pragmatic functions. In small-scale societies, the tendency to guess “animal-spirit” or “ancestor-ghost” when confronted with ambiguous phenomena comes naturally and is reinforced by emotionally arousing rituals, participation in which provides an ongoing opportunity to signal commitment to the group. Ideas about this sort of “god” are minimally counter-intuitive, which makes them easy to remember and transmit across generations.²¹ In such contexts, beliefs about supernatural agents are not held onto as “hypothetical” in a narrower sense (postulates that might or might

not be true) because everyone in the group *knows* about the *powers* of these disembodied intentional forces.

When all humans lived in such coalitions, there was no need for theology. As societies grew in size and complexity, however, new strategies were needed for dealing with an increasing plurality of competing abductive inferences (whose gods?, which spirituality?). Appealing to the relatively small supernatural agents of local coalitions no longer sufficed. Bigger gods were needed for bigger cultures to manage difference and doubt. This required “high gods” who were smarter and stronger, who could judge commitment to the shared moral codes of the larger culture more accurately, and whose power to punish or reward behavior reached across the in-groups that were being subsumed into such civilizations. Within the complex literate states that came into dominance during the axial age, we find the emergence of the idea of an all-encompassing Force, which in some way transcends finite, human existence and originates, orders and orients any and all axiological engagement whatsoever. This is an example of a retroductive hypothesis.

As inferences that “lead away from” (*ab-ducere*) old and toward new inductions and deductions, *abductive* hypotheses often work automatically – as long as they work. *Retroductive* hypotheses intend to “lead back” (*retro-ducere*) from more or less stable abductive hypotheses about a phenomenon to the conditions without which the phenomenon could not be as (or become what) it is. In other words, they are claims about that which renders a phenomenon possible (or actual). Theology makes retroductive inferences about the conditions for the existence of finite axiological engagement itself. Because it makes abductions explicit, however, retroductive argumentation also automatically alters the conditions that affect their plausibility and stability. This means that theology is “about” the pragmatic conditions of axiological engagement as well. That is to say, insofar as its theoretical hypothesizing is wrapped up within and around the abductive inferences operative in the practices of human coalitions, theology *makes a difference* in the conditions for thinking, acting, and feeling. In this sense, theology can engender *new* conditions for axiological engagement.²²

In east and south Asia, retroductive theological hypotheses included concepts like Dao and Dharma. In the major religious traditions that arose in west Asia, however, the dominant hypotheses that emerged involved appeals to a much more person-like and coalition-favoring supernatural Agent. As we will see, the obsession with identifying

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One source of determination was influenced in part by the Platonic and Aristotelian categories that influenced the intellectual leaders of these religions. However, belief in one Personal God, whose law-giving and care-giving are mediated within and by a particular group, was also shaped by the way in which the identity of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim coalitions was tied to narratives about the creation of Adam and the call of Abraham (paradise lost, and found, in west Asia). The main debates among these coalitions revolve around the extent to which Moses, Jesus or Muhammad mediate the revelation of and ritual access to the one true God. Monotheism is anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery gone wild – taken (and applied) to infinity. When theologians from these traditions operate under the influence of the bio-cultural gravitational pull of the integrated theogonic forces, they are following what I call the *sacerdotal* trajectory of theology (cf. Figure 1.2).

This trajectory is “sacerdotal” in the sense that it is nurtured by and reinforces shared imaginative engagement with a transcendent moralistic Entity, whose “making-sacred” of a coalition is mediated by “priests”; that is, by religious leaders who interpret divine revelation and codify or police the rituals of the group. My project here focuses on the sacerdotal trajectory within Christian theology and

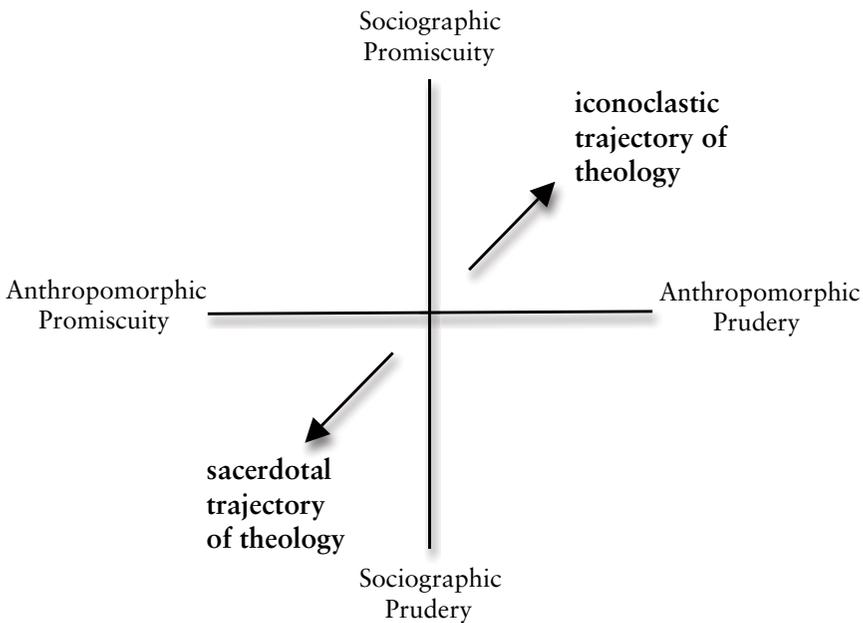


Figure 1.2

the function of the image of *Christ* in the priestly mediation of divine intentionality.

However, this is not the only sort of trajectory in theology. Appealing to a supernatural Agent detected by a particular religious coalition is not the only way to construct retroductive hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement. In fact, even among Christian theologians one finds hypotheses that do not rely upon, and sometimes even challenge, the idea of an infinitely wise and powerful Person whose final eschatological redemption is limited to a select Group. At the end of Chapter 2, I will explore some of the ways in which the anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery that support or protect privileged religious representations are sometimes resisted by members of Christian coalitions, especially logicians, egalitarians, and contemplatives. Such resistance follows (at least partially) what I will call the *iconoclastic* trajectory of theology. The problem, however, is that these voices are almost always ignored, repressed, destroyed or domesticated by the overwhelming forces of the sacerdotal trajectory.

As we will see, Deleuze follows the iconoclastic trajectory radically or, I should say, rhizomically. His retroductive hypotheses about the conditions for real experience are exceptionally anthropomorphically prudish and sociographically promiscuous. In the following chapters, we will see that he sometimes refers to *transcendental* conditions, by which he most definitely does *not* mean *transcendent* conditions. His vocabulary shifts throughout his writings, but Deleuze will consistently argue against portrayals of the “non-existent entities” that animate language (and all that comes and goes with it) that represent them as transcendent to or as models of that which they condition. Values are not distributed and hierarchically organized by a moral Being; rather, the pure becoming of univocal being *is* the creation of new values. I hope to show how this sort of theological hypothesis, which breaks *icons* of transcendence and creates new *clastic* assemblages made up of productive fragments, can be rendered more plausible and productive in dialogue with the bio-cultural study of religion.

As the critique and construction of retroductive hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement, in the sense explained above, “theology” only became necessary (and perhaps only became possible) as societies became more complex and densely populated, creating new psychological and political challenges in the axial age. The sort of hypothesis that eventually came to dominate most of west

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Asia and Europe (and much of the rest of the globe) relied on appeals to a transcendent moralistic Entity, imaginative engagement with whom reinforced the hopes of souls and empires for immortality. This strategy was motivated, in part, by anxiety about the doubt that began to secrete within pluralistic encounters. Why do other groups have such different gods? Why does our god not seem to be helping us? Sacerdotal hypothesizing works hard at defending the truth of “our” interpretation of supernatural Agency, and the necessity of “our” ritualized engagements with that Agency.

A quite different sort of strategy emerges when one begins to resist the default forces of theogonic reproduction. Perhaps we can explain ambiguous phenomena and create shared values without appealing to the authority of a supernatural Agent. Perhaps axiological engagement has nothing to do with gods. Naturalism, secularism, and atheism were also born in the axial age, but they were very nearly starved to death. In our late modern globalizing context, which is characterized by ever more complexity and plurality, it will be increasingly important to explore the sort of theoretical and pragmatic hypotheses that are produced by the iconoclastic trajectory of theology. Theology may have evolved within particular religious traditions, but like all of the other sciences, it too can escape the domination of religious coalitional authorities, and have its own productive life. It may well be, however, that some of the most productive hypotheses that flow from this iconoclastic trajectory will be those that begin by poking around the cracks in the conceptual edifices erected within a particular monotheistic Coalition.

The Secrets of Theism

In *Nietzsche & Philosophy*, Deleuze wrote that the atheism secreted by Christianity is that of a bad conscience and *ressentiment* (NP, 154). In his later works, however, he came to see this secretion as potentially more positive. In his book on the painter *Francis Bacon*, for example, he suggested that “Christianity contains a germ of *tranquil atheism* that will *nurture* painting.”²³ We will explore this relation between atheism and artistic expression in more detail at the end of Chapter 5, but Deleuze’s comments on painting and philosophy can help us introduce his broader point. In his 1980 lectures on Spinoza, he insisted that “atheism has never been external to religion: atheism is the artistic power at work on religion.” Deleuze argued that when Renaissance painters began to take seriously the

claim that God could not be represented, they felt freed to portray figures, even and especially the Figure of Christ, in a plurality of strange and creative ways. He suggests that, in a similar way, the struggle with the idea of “God” in philosophy provided it with an irreplaceable opportunity to free concepts from the constraints of “representation.”²⁴ This suggests that it is precisely here, in the process of revealing the failure of theistic attempts to represent the infinite that the aesthetic power and philosophical productivity of atheism can begin to flow.

First, what is the relation between theist secrets and atheist secretion? Deleuze describes secrets in a way that resists a simple binary distinction between the secret and its disclosure. A secret is not a static content that is *either* hidden in a box *or* out in the open. It is the nature of secrets that something oozes out of the box and that something is perceived through or in a partially opened box. Secrets are always in motion, always being secretly perceived. “The secret as secretion” (TP, 317). Deleuze was partial to the literary form of the novella, whose very form is Secrecy (What Happened?), and he saw the “becomings” of secrets as playing an important role in his own authorship.²⁵ For our purposes at this stage, the important point is a distinction Deleuze makes in the ways in which societies treat their secrets. The secret has its origin in the nomadic war machine, where it is treated with celerity – always in motion, molecularized, becoming imperceptible in a pure moving line. Within the State apparatus or a monotheistic religion, however, secrets are treated with gravity – acquiring an infinite form, a molar organization protected by a paranoid insistence on absolute imperceptibility. However, “the more the secret is made into a structuring, organizing form, the thinner and more ubiquitous it becomes, the more its content becomes molecular, at the same time as its form dissolves” (TP, 319).

We will unpack some of this language in more detail in Chapter 5, but we can already pose the key questions: How does theism treat its secrets? What does theism secrete? In this context, my interest is in two types of secret, or two modes of secretion, both of which have to do with the issue of *representing* the infinite God of orthodox Christian doctrine. This supernatural Agent is not as easy to bear as the finite gods that have populated most human coalitions throughout history and, indeed, that continue to populate the imaginative worlds of most Christians; e.g., heavenly saints, angelic messengers, demonic tempters and, in a distinctive sense we will unfold throughout the book, Christ himself.

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The first type of secret in theism is connected to the problem of *revelation*, and is primarily related to anthropomorphic promiscuity. Sacerdotal coalitions are held together, in part, by shared engagement with an ambiguously perceived supernatural Agent. Classical theism asserts that God is impassible, immutable and transcendent to creation. But how can one comprehend an infinite Person? How can such a God be detected? On the one hand, most theologians want to maintain divine infinity (to avoid limiting God), and so insist that a God comprehended is no God (the apophatic move). That may well be, but a wholly incomprehensible God is axiologically irrelevant. Religious people need to know, at least, *that* God somehow knows something about them in some sense. However, it seems that a supernatural Agent with infinite knowledge (omniscience) would know everything all at once about everyone in any and all coalitions, past, present, and future; such knowledge has little practical import in the quotidian life of a religious coalition. So, on the other hand, sacerdotal religious leaders make all sorts of positive assertions (multiple kataphatic moves), claims about specific things we can know about God and about specific things that God knows about us, both of which are required in order to render divine knowledge relevant for daily practice.

Without some appeal to revelation, members of the group would be ignorant about God, and it would dissolve as a *religious* coalition. It is no secret that sacerdotal theology depends heavily upon divine revelation. Enormous energy is spent trying to discern what God *meant* to reveal in Scripture, what the revelation of Christ *means* for everyday life. However, precisely by treating this problem with such gravity, a suspicion secretes within this monotheistic Religion: is anyone really able to detect the intentions of a transcendent moralistic Entity? Christianity cannot hide this secret, nor does it try. The various coalitions within Christianity cohere precisely because of these ongoing lively debates about the meaning of divine revelation. However, not much can be said about a wholly transcendent, infinite Person, and so hyper-active cognitive default mechanisms latch onto more anthropomorphic and socially relevant supernatural agents. Christ in particular plays a key role in revealing secret divine knowledge because he is imaginatively engaged as the ideal *representative* of the infinite God. The problem of ignorance about the latter is dealt with by appealing to special revelations of the former, which are only properly detected and interpreted by members of the in-group. However, such appeals also allow the secret to ooze more

freely: the infinite deity allegedly revealed in Christ is so maximally counter-intuitive that its detection plays no relevant role in the lives of most Christians.²⁶

A second sort of secret has to do with the problem of *ritual* in sacerdotal coalitions, and is more closely related to sociographic prudery. The orthodox God of Christian theism is portrayed as omnipotent as well as omniscient. However, an infinite God whose all-powerful will pre-ordains everything from all eternity is also not of much use when it comes to holding together a religious coalition on a daily basis. How can such infinite power be mediated? On the one hand, an absolutely powerful God can eternally protect the in-group and eternally punish defectors and out-groups. Sociographic prudery writ large. On the other hand, why would it even be necessary (and how would it be possible) to ritually engage a transcendent Entity whose moralistic determinations are irresistible? It is hard to make sense, for example, of the effect that prayer could have on such an Agent. Oddly enough, divine omnipotence is equivalent to divine impotence, when it comes to the everyday management of axiological engagement within a religious coalition – except insofar as the intellectually costly profession of belief in such apparently absurd ideas signals a strong commitment to spiritual kith and kin and thereby reinforces in-group cohesion.

Without some ritual mediation of the power of God, the smaller coalitions within a monotheistic Religion would dissolve as *religious* groups. It is no secret that the rituals of Christianity do not always work. Baptisms do not always produce holy people. The Eucharist does not create a unified Church. Prayers seem to go unanswered. One of the purposes of sacerdotal theology is to explain these ritual failures. The implausibility of such explanations is less interesting than the fact that the explanations themselves secrete the flow of atheism, precisely by displaying the apparent irrelevance of an infinite supernatural Agent. The sorts of small-scale societies in which our ancestors evolved were held together, in part, by shared participation in rituals with just the right balance of sensual pagantry, emotional arousal, frequency and perceived involvement of human-like, coalition-favoring supernatural agents.²⁷ A transcendent moralistic Entity gets no traction with these evolved cognitive and coalitional mechanisms. As we will see, this is why Christian sacramental rituals and other related practices (such as joint worship and prayer, Bible studies, etc.) so quickly default to shared imaginative engagement with more human-like and coalition-favoring “gods”

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who could appear out of nowhere at any time to give concrete guidance or to punish cheaters. The risen Christ surprises Saul on the road to Damascus and blinds him because he is persecuting in-group members (Acts 9). Ananias and Sapphira fall down dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit about their donation to the church (Acts 5:1–6). This is the sort of supernatural agent that encourages group cohesion.

In Christianity, the image of Christ is at the center of revelation and ritual. He is imaginatively engaged as the *representation* of the infinite God, manifesting and mediating divine intentionality, which always remains secretive even as it is ambiguously perceived. Those who follow the sacerdotal trajectory treat these secrets with gravity, working hard to keep them from dissolving the molar organizations of the Religion. To follow the iconoclastic trajectory is to treat these secrets with celerity, sending them flying into contact with other hypotheses that challenge their anthropomorphic promiscuity and sociographic prudery or, in Deleuzian terms, clearing the ground of idols of transcendence in order to create new concepts on a plane of immanence.

Scholars familiar with the complexities of the historical development of Christian doctrine, and the nuances of Christology in particular, might already be wincing at some of my generalizations and are sure to wince further as the argument unfolds. For the purposes of this project, however, the utilization of such generalizations is both necessary and sufficient. It is necessary because of the limitations of space and the nature of the intended audience. It is sufficient because the argument I am trying to make about the function of Christ in Christian theology and religious imagination is not dependent on the details of any particular formulation of doctrine. In fact, one of the main take-away points of the project is that the attempt on the part of theologians to pull the conversation back into debates over the “right” interpretation of Christian revelation or the “best” way to organize Christian rituals and polity is itself an excellent illustration of the operation of the theogonic forces within the sacerdotal trajectory. The iconoclastic theologian refuses to be pulled in, and stays focused on the extent to which an enterprise that appeals to supernatural agents, which are detected only by members of the in-group it helps to protect, remains a plausible and productive way of explaining the natural world and inscribing the social world in an increasingly complex and pluralistic global environment.

An allegedly transcendent moralistic Entity who is unknowable

and immutable might as well not exist. Nietzsche wondered whether the gods died laughing. The God of Christian theism dies of boredom. Iconoclastic theology has little or no interest in his death. It is much more interesting to explore how this God is – or fails to be – born(e) in human minds and culture, and to develop new non-religious hypotheses about the conditions for axiological engagement. Deleuze’s hypotheses are varied and complex. I will not argue that he is “right” or “best” but that he is “productive.” Deleuzian secretions get us moving. Connecting them to insights derived from the bio-cultural study of religion can move us even further: “one can never go far enough in the direction of deterritorialization: you haven’t seen anything yet – an irreversible process” (AO, 353).

For Deleuze, the philosopher’s critique is not a re-action, but an active mode of existence, a way of being-philosopher that “intends to wield the differential element as *critic and creator* and therefore as a *hammer*.”²⁸ Likewise, iconoclastic theologians wield hammers in ways that are constructive as well as destructive. In fact, there are many ways of using a hammer. Nietzsche himself hammered gently as well as forcefully, creatively “sounding out” the world as well as smashing idols. At one place Deleuze cautions against using a “sledgehammer” in the dismantling of repressive organizations as one makes for oneself a Body without Organs (TP, 177). However, it would be quite un-Deleuzian to make this a universal rule, especially since in so many other places he celebrates the creative power of Nietzsche’s more violent atheist hammering²⁹ and consistently works to flatten icons of transcendence. Hammers can also be used to play musical instruments, and the human ear has one that enables it to listen. When used skillfully with an anvil, with the right mixture of heat and pressure, a hammer can help forge other tools or weapons.

Sometimes one needs to tinker and make new connections, or to tap and create new resonances. Sometimes one needs to knock down walls, or to crack apart the oppressive structures that bind thought, action, and desire. We do not yet know what theological hammers can do.