Finding Values in Christianity: A Response to “The Problem of Good (and Evil): Arguing about axiological origins in science and religion” by F. LeRon Shults

In his essay, Shults begins a project I’ve been looking for for a long time: utilizing the insights of the biocultural study of religion (BCSR) in the study of a particular religious tradition. As evidenced by its literature, BCSR is usually about religion considered “in general.” There is a great deal to be learned from this kind of study, which draws on the human sciences in a way that illuminates both the present and the past in a way that is truly fascinating. As a Christian theologian, my particular interest is in applying the insights of cognitive science of religion to the tradition in which I am a part. It is with open arms, therefore, that I welcome Shults’ essay which, as its first sentence says, “explores different ways in which questions about the origin of morality are addressed within Abrahamic religions and the biocultural sciences.”

For that reason, I approach “The Problem of Good (and Evil)” from within a Christian framework, and am interested in investigating Christian concerns. While obviously this is only one way to approach the essay, my hope is that it will be illuminating in its own way. Since Christianity is one item within the set called “Abrahamic religions,” it should be the case that one can take claims about the Abrahamic religions considered as a set and apply each claim to that one item. Analogously, if someone made a claim about cars, and I was an expert in Nissans, I could check the claims being made about cars in general against my knowledge of Nissans in particular, and expect the claims to hold if they are true. If they are not true about Nissans, then they can’t be predicated of cars considered as a set—though they may very well be true for other makes, even of every other make. So what I’d like to do is take the BCSR analysis in “The Problem of Good (and Evil)” and do something like BCSC: the biocultural study of Christianity.

1 “The Problem of Good (and Evil): Arguing about axiological origins in science and religion” was published in Science and the World’s Religions, eds. Wesley Wildman and Patrick McNamara.
Biocultural studies are, obviously, studies of biology and culture, of phenomena over time. The biocultural effort is descriptive, and the claims being made are empirical. As Shults writes, “My primary interest is not in defending a particular scientific or religious hypothesis, but in clarifying the different ways in which the relevant sciences and religions formulate their arguments” (2). It is an effort at “understanding the origins of our mutual evaluations of one another” (2). Origins are powerful symbols, as the influence of any culture’s founding myth will attest. As Shults writes, arguments about origins are also arguments about ethics, and many other loaded issues besides.

With my narrow focus, I’m especially interested in the biocultural claims the essay makes about a particular religious tradition. So the question arises: is the story the essay tells about Christian origins empirically true? To use the metaphor of scientific practice, Dr. Shults’ hypothesis describes the Christian tradition in a biocultural framework; the data is the religion itself, which will support the hypothesis, or not. I believe there are two hypotheses being offered in the essay, for which the theodicy argument functions as an example. If I could make an attempt at formulating them, again narrowing the focus to one item in the set, it would be this:

1) First, a fundamental feature of Christianity is that it assumes the existence of a supernatural agent who in eschatological time rewards and punishes based on group membership;

2) Second, the assumed existence of a supernatural agent amplifies in-group and out-group violence beyond what it would be without a supernatural agent.

Assuming these hypotheses are true, the conclusion that the essay naturally draws is that we as a global, interconnected, society cannot afford anything that amplifies violence, even if it also amplifies altruism within groups.

One way of evaluating the essay, therefore, is to look at the data reported to see if it supports the hypotheses. Yet that is more difficult to do than would be expected. The reading of Abrahamic traditions, even considered as a whole, in the essay is curiously limited, especially given the theoretical set-up that promises an analysis of them. Further, the reading, when it comes, is surprisingly thin. In the section titled “Sanctifying supernatural coalitions” (or what I thought of as “the rubber meets the road” section),
much of the analysis is left to John Teehan. Teehan is paraphrased as saying (and I’m using my narrow focus here), “In [Christianity], the setting-apart…of the coalition is often understood as eternally secured by the eschatological promise of reward from a supra-natural Agent, which in turn entails the eschatological punishment of those from other coalitions” (18). Similarly, paraphrasing Teehan, the natural human cognitive and emotional disposition that is amplified by Christianity, he says, “sets a moral boundary around the in-group in such a way that a lower moral consideration for out-groupers appears to be authorized by a divine judge and enforcer” (18).

Is this true? These are, after all, empirical claims that should be identifiable through historical inquiry. However, in going from the set called Abrahamic traditions to the particular item called Christianity, the hypothesis loses a great deal of its punch. To just discuss the above, Teehan’s BCSR-inspired descriptions of Christianity don’t seem to fit the facts. Eschatological rewarding of the in-group and punishing of the out-group wasn’t the focus of Jesus or the early Jesus followers as they set themselves apart, whether it was apart from a sacralized Roman imperial government or apart from synagogue worship. If we draw from historical scholarship, we see that that simply wasn’t the principle that organized the community as its fellowship came about. Second, excluding the out-group from moral consideration is precisely what the tenor of the entire movement, including its origin, was opposed to. Without attempting to paper over any of the atrocities ever committed under the sign of the cross, those particular descriptions don’t stick as wholesale characteristics of the historical contexts that Teehan/Dr. Shults mention.

It appears that fitting the square peg of Christianity into the round hole of customary BCSR analysis involves sanding the corners way down, until the data will finally fit the hypothesis. But sanding off the corners is making a value judgment about what is the center of the tradition (for the essay under consideration, the in-group/out-group dynamic) and what are the incidental, marginal aspects of the tradition that aren’t essential for an evaluation of its identity and can thus be sanded off without significant loss. Holding that the center of the tradition is eschatological punishment of out-groups and reward of in-groups, however, is a highly-contestable empirical claim that, to be made convincingly,
would require a much more thorough and detailed historical analysis—exactly the kind of analysis that is absent from the essay.

An example may be instructive. One place where this sanding-down happens is on page 13, when the story of Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden is identified as a deeper source of shared identity for the three traditions than the call of Abraham. Dr. Shults writes, “When dealing with the problem of evil… it really makes more sense to call these religions the ‘Adamic’ religions.” But is this an accurate representation of Christianity—that, when describing it, it makes more sense to refer to it is “Adamic”? While the proposal serves a useful rhetorical function, if we follow the essay’s empirical stance and undertake historical study, we find the exact opposite of an “Adamic” religion in the Christian tradition; if anything, it’s a “New Adamic” religion. The choice to move Adam and Eve to the center, Abraham to the margin, and Jesus off the page, is again highly-contestable, especially when the effort at hand is supposed to be descriptive.

From a Christian point of view, the center or even foundation of morality is not with Adam and Eve but in the forgiveness offered by the resurrected Christ. The governing reality of the Christian tradition is the cross and resurrection, and the normative and regulative symbol of the community that derives from it is the Eucharist: that is what centers, founds, and sustains the tradition, and it is precisely opposed to things like “lower moral consideration for out-groupers.” That is the origin of morality for the worshipping community that calls itself Christian which is, after all, one of the subjects the essay is addressing.

I realize this foundation of Christian ethics in the resurrection isn’t shocking news for anyone in this room, but I didn’t see that reflected in the essay. What I unsuccessfully looked for in the paper was the referent to what was said on the first page: religion and science “share an interest” “in understanding that which originates, orders and orients the human experience of valuing and being valued” (1). With my narrow focus, I looked for the comparison of science with what the Christian tradition says is “that which originates, orders and orients the human experience;” which is the cross and resurrection. That’s obviously not the case for members of other religions, or those of no religion, but any discussion about
Christianity and its axiological origin cannot just leave the cross and resurrection out without no longer being a discussion about Christianity and its axiological origin. To claim otherwise is to sand down a corner because it doesn’t fit, to discard the data because it doesn’t confirm the hypothesis.

To be sure, Dr. Shults writes, up-front, that his main focus is “the conditions that generate the possibility of axiological engagement,” not what that engagement itself looks like (3). Later, it is said that the question that “lay behind” the question of evil involves the “condition(s) of the existence of theodicy-hypothesizing itself,” not the tradition that results. The limitation of that limitation, though, seems to be a version of the genetic fallacy. It’s saying that what really matters is not the content of a supernatural religious tradition, but the fact that there are supernatural religious traditions at all. That’s fine for a certain kind of study, but it seems a stretch to have it then be determinative of the valuation of the Christian tradition itself, supernaturalism included, much less the conclusion that it is too violent, and will always be too violent, because of its supernaturalism. It seems to me that what actually happens in the tradition should count as some kind of data for a descriptive exercise. I believe that science should act as a constraint on theology, but surely theology must be some kind of evidentiary constraint on the biocultural study of Christianity as well.

In conclusion, I certainly hope that I’m not falling into the trap Dr. Shults describes on page 17, of mere bemusement at the challenge to my own beliefs (though if I am, as the essay implies, I’d be the last to know), and the criticism offered here shouldn’t conceal the sincere appreciation I have for Dr. Shults’ essay. I too have invested time in the cognitive study of religion, and, even more to the point, I’m in full agreement that evil and suffering do push hard at the “omni” beliefs associated with the small-cap God found in the Christian tradition, and that attempts to explain suffering in that context are often attempts to explain it away, to forget it as suffering. In other words, as I said at the outset, I am entirely receptive to the project begun here, and I hope that my response can be received as a good-faith effort to encourage the development of BCSR as we seek to understand these fascinating, complex traditions, staying true to both cars in general and Nissans in particular.