

As noted in Chapter 1, the psychological–referential model of revelatory experience that I have advocated was, in my first two books, developed primarily through reflection on the Christian revelation, but has more recently been set out in terms of five theses through which the model may be explored from within any faith tradition. As the reader will recall, the pluralistic model that arises from these theses takes into account naturalistic understandings of the development of the cosmos. This means that it is more naturalistically oriented than many comparable kinds of pluralism, which still tend to see divine revelatory actions in terms of how God at times interferes with the world as a result of choosing to ‘respond’ to particular historical circumstances that arise. (As noted in Chapter 1, classic perennialism is particularly blind to any understanding of nature that gives it a positive role of any sort, let alone a vital role of the kind that I envisage. This is one of the major differences between classic perennialism and the kind of neo-perennialism that I have advocated.)

In relation to the concept of the psycho-cultural niche, the naturalistic perspectives that I have advocated incorporate an expansion of the evolutionary understandings now universally accepted in the community of biologists. In a theological context, the application of these perspectives is – as we shall see in Chapter 10 – reinforced by the growing recognition within the scientific community that, although the *particular* evolutionary paths that led to the development of our planet’s species could not have been predicted, the eventual development of certain types of creaturely functioning

was still broadly predictable. This insight, I shall argue, allows an expansion of the kind of ‘theistic naturalism’ advocated by Arthur Peacocke (and echoed by many participants in the science–theology dialogue). In this theistic naturalism, the world is seen as having been ‘designed’ by God in such a way that it is able to ‘make itself’ so that God’s ultimate intentions for it are brought about. (This notion of ‘design’, it should be noted, focuses not on the components of the cosmos but on the whole, so that it is quite different from the so-called ‘intelligent design’ understanding attempted by those who wish to challenge evolutionary theory in quasi-scientific terms.)<sup>1</sup>

By extending Peacocke’s kind of understanding to the evolution of human psychology, I shall suggest, we are able to attribute to God the specific goal of bringing creatures into existence – perhaps not

<sup>1</sup> This focus on the whole allows Peacocke to understand the universe’s development from the moment of the Big Bang in a naturalistic way, and no divine interference with that developmental process is envisaged. By contrast, the ‘Intelligent Design’ (ID) movement asserts that certain aspects of the created order manifest an ‘irreducible complexity’ that could not have come about through a process of natural selection through random mutation. In its earlier and more simplistic forms, this ID movement’s supporters tended to rely on arguments about things like eyes and wings. Without design, they asked, how could the complexity of the eye possibly have evolved gradually from something simpler? What, they asked rhetorically, could be the advantage of a sort of half-eye? How could feathers have come about, they asked, when you can’t have flight without them, but without flight there would be no evolutionary advantage to having feathers? Evolutionary biologists did not find it hard, however, to point out that there would clearly have been selective advantage in the kind of simpler light-detecting organ from which a more complex eye evolved, and that feathers would have had an advantage in providing thermal insulation long before they took on a role in flight. The proponents of ID had to work harder than they had, therefore, to attempt to sustain their kind of objection, and in due course came up with more complex arguments involving abstruse details of certain organisms, such as the flagella of certain bacteria. In no case, however, have biologists in general – religious believers included – found these arguments convincing. In fact, they have in all cases answered these challenges with at least a plausible evolutionary scenario, making the important point that (as in the case of feathers) the current functional role of any characteristic of a particular species does not need to be the same as that which gave a selective advantage to that species’ distant ancestors, in which that characteristic originally evolved.

only on Earth<sup>2</sup> – in whom authentic revelatory experience naturally occurs when certain conditions are satisfied.<sup>3</sup> In this way, I shall argue, we can answer Peacocke's question of how 'the notion of religious experiences [can] be accommodated by, be rendered intelligible in, be coherent with the understanding of God's interaction with the world that we have developed in the perspective of science'.<sup>4</sup>

That question was, in fact, a problem for Peacocke because – although he liked to think of himself as a 'theistic naturalist' – he was only what I have called a 'weak' theistic naturalist because he was unable to fit what he saw as divine 'communication' with humans into a fully naturalistic understanding. He therefore insisted that some kind of 'special divine action' must be necessary to explain such communication, over and above the 'general divine action' that occurs purely through naturalistic processes. This meant that, although he put a great deal of stress on naturalistic perspectives, and thus focused largely on the importance of 'general divine action', he still envisaged at least some events as resulting from God's temporal interference with the world. My own psychological–referential model, by contrast, manifests the kind of 'strong' theistic naturalism in which any such temporal interference is denied. This more consistent 'strong' naturalism has, however, been seen by some as evidence that my understanding is no more than a minor variation of the kind of deism developed in the eighteenth century, in which God was understood as the creator of the world but, since the moment of creation, as no more than a kind of 'absentee landlord' who observes the world from a distance. However, this perception of my model is far from accurate because – as we shall see in Chapter 10 – deism

<sup>2</sup> This notion of a particular kind of 'human' psychology coming into existence in other parts of the universe is discussed in Knight, 'Astrobiological and Theological: Uneasy Partners?'. I have there made the prediction that if an extra-terrestrial lifeform exhibiting a significant degree of intelligence is ever discovered, it will be found to have a psychology with a religious dimension.

<sup>3</sup> Knight, *The God of Nature*, 117–120.

<sup>4</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 202.

is by no means the only form of strong theistic naturalism that is possible.

Prior to examining this alternative kind of theistic naturalism in detail, however, it seems appropriate to examine the way in which evolutionary insights may, from a purely scientific perspective, be applied to the issues of human religiosity and to the role of that religiosity in what has traditionally been described as divine revelation. This application is of considerable importance in the context of our present investigation, not only because it provides a scientific basis for further exploration, but also because it constitutes an aspect of the neo-perennialism that I have advocated that separates it firmly from classic perennialism, which has often manifested a marked suspicion of modern science (and indeed of nature itself). One of the reasons for this suspicion of modern science among perennialists has been their failure to distinguish fully between science and what is often called *scientism*. (Even when they acknowledge this distinction in principle, in practice the two are often elided in the way in which they speak.) This distinction is a particularly important one, however, because scientism – the belief that *only* the methodology of the scientist can provide legitimate insight – is not the same as science itself. It represents, in fact, no more than an outmoded philosophical opinion.

A kind of scientism was, admittedly, popular in the community of philosophers around the middle of the twentieth century, in the form that was known as *logical positivism*. However, since the abandonment of that positivism by philosophers, scientism has usually been a position taken up only by certain atheistic scientists, who, because of their lack of philosophical insight, manifest little of the sophistication that philosophers of that school once did. As philosophers of the present time have often pointed out, these scientists find themselves, not just upholding a redundant philosophical position, but failing to do so in a coherent or well-informed way. (The biologist Richard Dawkins, for example, has been criticized in this respect by a fellow-atheist, the philosopher Michael Ruse, who

has famously said that Dawkins is the kind of atheist who makes him ashamed to be an atheist.)<sup>5</sup>

Scientism is, in fact, not intrinsic to the pursuit of scientific understanding, and many non-believing scientists, as well as religiously inclined ones, see it as deeply flawed. What distinguishes the believing scientists from those of their agnostic colleagues who share their criticism of scientism is simply that they believe that we can, at least in principle, legitimately offer a theological interpretation of scientific theories. This need not, they stress, involve denying those theories' validity as an account of the *mechanisms* through which the cosmos operates and has developed. Rather, they assume that it is possible to speak about the *purpose* of that development, and to see God as the one who lies behind that development and is at the heart of it.

Thus, for example, Arthur Peacocke – with his stress the way in which God has designed the universe in such a way that it can ‘make itself’ naturalistically – has written what he calls a *Genesis for the Third Millenium*, which goes as follows:

There was God, and God was All-That Was. God's love overflowed and God said, ‘Let Other be. And Let there be Laws for what it is and what it can be – and let it explore its possibilities and potentialities’. And there was Other, a field of energy, which exploded as the Universe.... Five billion years ago, one star in one galaxy – our Sun – attracted round it matter as planets. One of them was our Earth. There the assembly of atoms and the temperature became just right to allow some molecules to become large and complex enough to make copies of themselves – the first specks of life. Life multiplied and burst into many forms. Mammals appeared and began to develop complex brains, which enabled them to learn. Among these were creatures who lived in trees. From these our first ancestors

<sup>5</sup> [www.beliefnet.com/columnists/scienceandthesacred/2009/08/why-i-think-the-new-atheists-are-a-bloody-disaster.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/scienceandthesacred/2009/08/why-i-think-the-new-atheists-are-a-bloody-disaster.html). For Ruse's own more balanced and well-informed approach to atheism, see Ruse, *Atheism*.

derived and then ... the first men and women appeared. They began to know about themselves and what they were doing – they were not only conscious but also self-conscious. The first word, the first laugh were heard. The first paintings were made. The first sense of destiny beyond – with the first signs of hope, for they buried their dead with ritual. The first prayers were made to the One who made All-That-Is and All-That-Is-Becoming. The first experiences of goodness, beauty and truth – but also of their opposites – human beings had free will.<sup>6</sup>

This account was not, we should note, an attempt to replace the Judaeo-Christian scriptural creation accounts. It was written simply to supplement them, providing a kind of exegesis that accepts both our current scientific understanding and the religious truths that those accounts embody. It was presented, in fact, as part of a sermon, and it represents an attempt to do something that many see as highly important in our scientific age: to develop a theological interpretation of our current scientific understanding so as to incorporate all the resonances of the scriptural understanding of the dependence of the cosmos on its creator. As Peacocke has put it elsewhere, this task must be based on the way in which ‘it has become increasingly apparent that it is chance operating within a lawlike framework that is the basis of the inherent creativity of the natural order, its ability to generate new forms, patterns and organizations of matter and energy’.<sup>7</sup> As he puts it later in the same work, ‘God creates in the world through what we call “chance” operating within the created order, each stage of which constitutes the launching pad for the next’.<sup>8</sup>

Peacocke was one of three scholars – the others being Ian Barbour and John Polkinghorne – who dominated Western Christian studies of the relationship between science and theology in the late twentieth century. These three are sometimes described as the *scientist-theologians*

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Peacocke, sermon given in the chapel of King’s College, Cambridge, 2 March 1997, quoted with Peacocke’s permission in Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine*, 11f.

<sup>7</sup> Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age*, 65.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

because they all began their adult lives, not as theological scholars, but as trained scientists, so that they were able to bring to the theological task an informed knowledge of the sciences that was then rare in the theological community. As we shall see in Chapter 10, I have, in my own work on the science–theology dialogue, criticized the work of these three in relation to the topic of divine action. This criticism does not, however, take away from my conviction that their primary aim – to provide a coherent way of thinking that accepts both our current scientific understanding and the religious truths embodied in valid religious traditions – is one that is both laudable and necessary in our scientific age. The task of theology in that age is – in my judgement as in theirs – not to challenge well-established scientific theory but to interpret it in an adequate way.

This is particularly the case in relation to evolutionary theory, since it is this theory, above all other aspects of current scientific understanding, that generates problems for at least some religious believers. Here, I believe, we need to make a distinction between the scientific theory of evolution and what we might call *scientistic evolutionism*,<sup>9</sup> just as we do between science and scientism. In my judgement (and that of most people who understand the evidence) the theory of evolution, in its neo-Darwinian form, provides a robust scientific description of how certain physical characteristics aid survival to reproductive age and therefore will tend to become dominant in a given population on a multi-generational timescale, in some cases eventually giving rise to new species. The evidence for this understanding is extremely strong and there is, in my view, no good reason to challenge it. Scientistic evolutionism, however, goes beyond this purely scientific form of understanding. It assumes that once the evolutionary mechanism is well-understood at a scientific level, no further interpretation of that mechanism can be meaningful. It is this scientistic evolutionism that is challenged by

<sup>9</sup> We need the word *scientistic* here because evolutionism, on its own, is sometimes used to mean no more than belief in the scientific validity of the theory of evolution.

scholars like Peacocke, who – while acknowledging neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory as valid at the scientific level – argue that interpretation of that theory is needed at a theological level. Many participants in the science–theology dialogue have followed him in this, stressing not only that the attempt to deny the validity of neo-Darwinism through the quasi-scientific concept of ‘intelligent design’ has proved fruitless, but also that attempts of this kind have usually been based on the flawed theological assumption that God’s action is to be identified with *gaps* in scientific explanation.

This ‘God of the gaps’ assumption – which affects many of the proponents of the ‘new atheism’ as well as fundamentalist believers – has some of its roots in early modern scientific understanding. The reason for this is that, after the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century, the Western medieval notion of the supernatural – in which grace had been seen as ‘completing’ nature – was widely understood in a less subtle way than it had been in the earlier period. In particular, the separation of grace and nature, which had characterized this earlier approach in the Christian West, was now even more strongly emphasized. On supposedly scientific grounds, nature was now widely seen as a kind of clockwork mechanism, and consequently grace was simplistically identified with events that were not capable of explanation in terms of the *laws of nature* that were now seen as susceptible to investigation through the scientific methodology.<sup>10</sup> If there was a *gap* in scientific explanation, it was assumed that this was where God could be seen at work.

Before this period, unusual but spectacular events like earthquakes and lightning strikes had often been seen as ‘supernatural’ acts of God. By the early modern period, however, such events were coming to be seen as the outcome of the regularities of the world – the ‘laws of nature’ – and it seemed to many that most events that had hitherto been seen as examples of God’s ‘special’, direct action

<sup>10</sup> This Western belief in an essentially autonomous universe was not entirely new in this period, but was based in part on assumptions that went back to the scholasticism of the late medieval period and even, in some respects, to an Augustinian separation between grace and nature, which had affected Western theology in numerous ways.



would come to be understood in a naturalistic way. Indeed some, like the philosopher David Hume, went further. They argued that, even if there seemed to be strong anecdotal evidence for events that seemed at odds with the known laws of nature, we should see this evidence as less weighty than the evidence that all events do in fact obey natural laws. Thus, they argued, there is good reason to believe that events that seem to be miraculous don't occur.

What they failed to take into account in this argument was the way in which, in the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo had hinted that highly unusual events, of the kind usually deemed miraculous, are able to occur because, over and above the natural laws that we are able to understand, there is a 'higher' law-like framework that the cosmos also obeys, which is in practice beyond human understanding. If there are simple systems that are susceptible to our understanding in terms of the 'lower' laws, this is only, Augustine seems to suggest, because the threshold has not been reached at which the influences of this 'higher' component of the way the cosmos operates become operative.<sup>11</sup> This notion, I have argued, may now be expanded in terms of the scientific concept of 'regime change', so that events that seem miraculous are not simply to be denied on the grounds that the laws of nature cannot be broken. Physicists in particular, I have observed, are aware of historical examples of unpredicted phenomena that, at the time of their first observation, seemed impossible in terms of current understanding. The simplest example of this is perhaps the phenomenon of the complete disappearance of electrical resistance in certain materials when they are taken to below a certain threshold temperature, so that an electric current persists indefinitely in a circuit without any applied power source. Discovered in 1911, this *superconductivity* was soon accepted as a scientifically explorable phenomenon because of its repeatability, but it resisted adequate theoretical explanation for several decades. This unambiguously naturalistic phenomenon provides

<sup>11</sup> See Pannenberg 'The Concept of Miracle'.

an example of the regime change of which I have spoken, in which there is a discontinuity in physical properties when certain conditions are met – in this case, the properties of certain materials and very low temperature. It is not that the laws of nature have changed or been violated, but rather that, in certain circumstances, potential effects which are ‘normally’ inoperative become significant.<sup>12</sup>

Those who in the Enlightenment period denied the occurrence of miracles because of their focus on ‘laws of nature’ did not, of course, have this kind of insight. Nevertheless, they did not necessarily see their disbelief in miracles as leading ineluctably to atheism. It was, in fact, still widely assumed among them that a rational religious faith was possible because there seemed to be a good ‘natural theology’ argument for the existence of a divine Creator. This argument put great emphasis on a particular ‘gap’ in scientific explanation: the lack of explanation for the interconnectedness and intricacy of the components of the cosmos, which had been commented on in the early decades of the new science in books such as John Ray’s *The Wisdom of God in the Works of Creation* (1691). In studies like William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802), with its ‘watchmaker’ argument, this observation was now recast in a more clearly rationalist form to develop a ‘natural theology’ argument for God’s existence, based on the apparent ‘design’ of the world.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 197–207, where it is noted that Western Christian commentators have sometimes suggested that regime change of this kind provides a possible analogy for our thinking about miracles (see, for example, Polkinghorne, *One World*, 74–76). Indeed, one of them has gone as far as to see Christ’s resurrection as ‘the first instantiation of a new law of nature’ (Russell, ‘Bodily Resurrection, Eschatology, and Scientific Cosmology’).

<sup>13</sup> As we have already noted, Paley argued that if you found a watch and examined its elaborate mechanism, then – even if you didn’t know the watch’s purpose – the intricacy and the interconnectedness of the watch’s parts would lead you necessarily to conclude that it was the product of a purposeful and intelligent designer. In a comparable way, he argued, the intricacy of the natural world could also be seen as pointing clearly to its purposeful and intelligent design. As we have noted, however, this argument was definitively undermined by the Darwinian concept of evolution as the ‘blind watchmaker’.

This kind of design argument was eventually discredited because the perceived ‘gap’, on which it was based, was filled by evolutionary theory. It is, nevertheless, this kind of argument that the proponents of the current ‘intelligent design’ movement still try to defend. It is important to recognize, therefore, not only that the scientific validity of their argument is highly questionable, but also that much of the motivation for pursuing such argument is a ‘God of the gaps’ understanding. Not only have any gaps pointed out by proponents of ‘intelligent design’ proved, sooner or later, to be susceptible to being filled through scientific understanding. More importantly, as participants in the science–theology dialogue have often pointed out, there seems to be a basic theological flaw in any understanding based on supposed ‘gaps’ in scientific understanding. This flaw is a failure to recognize the traditional Christian emphasis on God’s immanence in creation, and the way in which God should be seen as present and active in all natural processes.

Even in the immediate aftermath of the Darwinian revolution in biology, this essential insight was pointed out by at least some religious scholars. The Anglican priest, Aubrey Moore, for example, in a book published in 1889, disparaged the theological implications of the (then common) ‘special creation’ interpretation of the Genesis accounts, in which the world was interpreted as the outcome of a series of ‘special’ divine creative acts. The Darwinian view, he argued, should be seen as ‘infinitely more Christian than the theory of “special creation”. For it implies the immanence of God in nature, and the omnipresence of His creative power’. Those, he went on, ‘who oppose the doctrine of evolution in defence of a “continued intervention” of God seem to have failed to notice that a theory of occasional intervention implies as its correlative a theory of ordinary absence’.<sup>14</sup>

Because of the way in which the thought of the Enlightenment period had exacerbated Western Christians’ tendency to separate

<sup>14</sup> Moore, *Science and Faith*, 184.

grace and nature,<sup>15</sup> the ‘ordinary absence’ of God that Moore challenged was something that many of them seem effectively to have assumed. And in several ways – as we shall see in Chapter 10 – it is against this ‘ordinary absence’ that many participants in the science–theology dialogue have reacted in recent decades, stressing the immanence of God in creation and the way in which divine action should be seen as occurring in, with and under the laws of nature. However, we should not underestimate the continuing effects of the kind of quasi-deistic thinking that tends to lead to God’s immanence in creation being underemphasized or even ignored, so that God is at least implicitly viewed as a kind of absentee landlord who may occasionally condescend to visit the tenants. This essentially deistic picture is a common and easily adopted assumption in a scientific age. If only unconsciously, many have been influenced by the sort of mental picture – supposedly ‘scientific’ – in which God is no more than the ‘God of the gaps’, the created world being seen as a kind of clockwork mechanism which, once ‘wound up’, runs on its own until God makes one of his occasional interventions.

This mental picture – essentially Paley’s notion of the world as analogous to a watch – is a dangerous one theologically, and not only because it is associated with ‘proof of God’s existence’ arguments that have now been rendered impotent by the notion of evolution as the ‘blind watchmaker’.<sup>16</sup> It is dangerous also because it can easily undermine something that participants in the

<sup>15</sup> This separation was at its most stark in the neo-scholasticism of the nineteenth century, which was challenged within the Roman Catholic church by the *Resourcement* movement of the twentieth century. (See Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology*.) However, within that church this separation can be found much earlier, and it was reflected in the protestant world by the particular stress on grace that was often to be found in that world. By contrast, Eastern Orthodoxy has never assumed a separation of this kind since ‘grace is implied in the Act of creation itself’ (Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 101).

<sup>16</sup> See Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, for an excellent (though occasionally explicitly atheistic) explanation of the biological understanding of why the ‘design’ argument for God is no longer tenable in the form set out by Paley.

science–theology dialogue have often stressed. This is that the cosmos is, for traditional Christian understanding, infused by God’s presence. Without this presence, it could not exist at all, since it is utterly, and in all its parts, upheld in being by God from moment to moment. This is particularly stressed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition because of its way of being panentheistic – that is, of seeing the world as being ‘in God’<sup>17</sup> – parallels to which may be found in other traditions, such as Islam as expounded by Ibn Al-‘Arabi.<sup>18</sup> (This pantheism does not, we should note, mean that God and the world are simply seen as synonymous – which is pantheism – since for any kind of panentheism there is more to God than the world that exists within the divine Reality.)

However, if the immanence of God in the world has often been stressed by participants in the science–theology dialogue – sometimes in a panentheistic way, sometimes not – it would seem that they have often failed to recognize fully the way in which their way of posing questions is still often influenced by the quasi-deistic view that they claim to have rejected. In particular, as we shall see in Chapter 10, they still tend to approach the issue of divine action by seeing it in terms of the ‘problem’ of how God can act in a world characterized by obedience to ‘laws of nature’. The problem, as they see it, is one of identification of the point of interaction – the ‘causal joint’ – that enables God to work in a created order characterized by essentially autonomous natural processes. Here, I shall argue, their way of speaking about the way in which the cosmos obeys ‘laws of nature’ has led them, at least implicitly, to make comparisons with other ‘lawlike’ mechanisms that are disastrously misleading. If they have (rightly) abandoned Paley’s watchmaker analogy in favour of the ‘blind watchmaker’ of evolution,

<sup>17</sup> This Orthodox panentheism is based on perspectives on the relationship between the divine *Logos* and the *logoi* of created things – which we shall examine presently in terms of the understanding developed by Maximus the Confessor – and through the notion of divine energies that is particularly associated with the work of Gregory Palamas. For a useful review of both approaches, see Ware, ‘God Immanent yet Transcendent’.

<sup>18</sup> See Sharifi-Funk and Dickson, ‘Traces of Panentheism in Islam’.

they have still, as we shall see, retained a sense of the universe's autonomous character, and a distinction between the universe and God that has in it something of Paley's sense of the relationship between the watchmaker and the watch.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to examining this issue, however, we need to note the way in which evolutionary insights have, in recent years, increasingly been applied not just to the way in which the physical characteristics of living things have changed over time, but also to human psychology. This application forms the basis of the recently developed discipline of *evolutionary psychology*. Despite the fact that many of the supposed insights offered by scholars within this discipline are highly speculative, and likely to undergo considerable modification in the future, the basic insight on which these speculations are based – that our psychological characteristics have, like our physical characteristics, emerged in the evolutionary process because they aided survival – is, in my judgement, fundamentally sound from a scientific perspective and may fruitfully be used provided that they are interpreted in a way that is not reductionistic. As this field of evolutionary psychology matures, it will, I anticipate, offer significant insights into some of the roots of human mental functioning, not only in relation to general aspects of this functioning but also to the psychology of religious belief.

In this sense, the relatively recent flowering of studies on what is sometimes called the *evolution of religion* is to be welcomed. However, such studies often, in practice, take place in the context, not of evolutionary theory as such, but of scientific evolutionism.

<sup>19</sup> This implicit gap is still present in the thinking of people who believe they have avoided any such gap by adopting some kind of *pantheism* (see footnote 16 in Chapter 10). As we shall see, theirs is in fact only what we might call *weak pantheism*. They still, in their belief in a 'causal joint' between God and the cosmos, implicitly suppose that there is a gap between the two that needs to be bridged if certain events are to be explained in terms of 'special' divine action. By contrast, Orthodoxy – despite its strong stress on making a proper distinction between the created and the uncreated – does not perceive any such gap because it presupposes, as we shall see, a more radical kind of pantheism than theirs.

This tendency is, as we have seen, highly questionable, as indeed is the use of the term *religion* in this context, since it is ambiguous and should be replaced by the term *religiosity*. The reason for this replacement is not only the general one outlined in Chapter 6, but also the fact that, when the ‘evolution of religion’ is discussed, the term *religion* is frequently misused in a very particular way.

Although many scholars in this field make formal obeisance to the fact that the term is not well defined, they all too often still tend to use it as though it were some sort of *natural kind* in the philosophical sense in which that term is sometimes used.<sup>20</sup> In particular, they often see its ‘fundamental characteristic’ as what the cognitive archaeologist, David Lewis-Williams, has called ‘some idea of a supernatural realm, dimension or influence that is immune to scientific investigation’.<sup>21</sup> The theologian’s criticism here will essentially be philosophical rather than theological: that this kind of definition simply moves the problem from one concept that is difficult to define – *religion* – to another that is equally problematic: *supernatural*.<sup>22</sup> Not only, as we shall see, does Lewis-Williams, like many others, implicitly project onto religious believers a distinction between natural and supernatural that is alien to the views of at least some of them, but he also uses a notion of what is *natural* that is philosophically simplistic.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, the critique of treating both science and religion as ‘natural kinds’ given in Harrison, *The Territories of Science and Religion*.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis-Williams, ‘Of People and Pictures’, 154.

<sup>22</sup> As George Knight pointed out many years ago, medieval usage of this term was rather different to modern usage, so that Aquinas, for example, uses the term ‘supernatural’ (and related terms) only rarely – 336 times in over eight and a half million words – and he never does so in the way which is now common (even within the Roman Catholic church) in which, for example, angels are often spoken of as ‘supernatural beings’ rather than as what the traditional Christian usage of both East and West would demand: as non-corporeal beings within the created order. Popular usage is, however, now such that ‘angels, demons, and discarnate human spirits [...] are usually classed as supernatural’ and this represents ‘the everyday usage among people of ordinary intelligence and generally among their superiors’ (Knight, ‘The Definition of the Supernatural’, 360.)

Another example of a common and questionable assumption is also to be found in Lewis-Williams's work. He and others plausibly argue that explicit religious beliefs could not have existed among humans before the cognitive and linguistic developments usually associated with the Upper Paleolithic period. However, what some theologians may tend to emphasize in this context is the notion – reinforced by the two-mode understanding of cognitive functioning that we have already noted – that experiences of a religious kind may well have historically preceded their interpretation in terms of particular beliefs. This emphasis relates in part to the insight – now common among anthropologists as well as theologians – that a narrow focus on religious concepts is uncomfortably reminiscent of the notion that religion is to be understood primarily as a kind of rudimentary (and mistaken) science.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of this insight will be especially evident to those theologians who stress the tradition of *apophaticism* that is to be found in a number of different faith communities, especially those who stress that the function of religious language is to be understood, not in terms of 'rational notions which we formulate' but as providing 'images or ideas intended to guide us and fit our faculties for the contemplation of that which passes all understanding'.<sup>24</sup> In evolutionary terms, this function might, as we shall see, be expressed in terms of the capacity of religious language to foster the retention of (or return to) a prelinguistic, 'paradisaical' stage of human evolution, perhaps expressible in terms of the distinction that has been made between early 'imagistic' and later 'doctrinal' developments in humanity's religious apprehension.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> This assumption was made in the 'armchair anthropology' of the early twentieth century, but has long since been abandoned in anthropological circles, and is related to the questionable assumption that religion is essentially an explanation of the world, which is itself related to the kind of simplistic 'natural theology' that I have questioned in Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>24</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 40.

<sup>25</sup> Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity*.



Such considerations suggest that Lewis-Williams and others, by focusing on explicit religious understandings of the kind that may be expressed verbally, may tend to treat simplistically something that is either explicitly or implicitly accepted by them: that such understandings have emerged through a predisposition to certain kinds of experience, which existed in anatomically modern humans (and perhaps other hominids) before the cognitive and linguistic developments that made possible explicit religious beliefs. Lewis-Williams may well be correct, for example, in his comment that Neanderthals were unable to ‘conceive of a spirit realm or an afterlife’. However, this does not necessarily mean – except in a trivial sense – that they were therefore (as he puts it) ‘congenital atheists’.<sup>26</sup> Worms are very probably congenital atheists in this sense, since it seems extremely unlikely that they can experience what the archaeological evidence of burial practices<sup>27</sup> suggests Neanderthals might have experienced: some kind of intuitive sense of a divine Reality. Here, Michael Polanyi’s famous philosophical observation that ‘we can know more than we can tell’<sup>28</sup> is surely relevant to a critique of the kind of approach in which explicit religious beliefs are seen as definitive for our understanding of ‘religion’.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Lewis-Williams, ‘Of Pictures and People’, 144.

<sup>27</sup> Archaeological evidence (from the Shanidar cave in particular) makes it clear that burial of Neanderthals after death was deliberate, even if earlier claims that flowers were scattered on the grave have proved unpersuasive. The use of shells and of body pigmentation in Neanderthal burial sites may, however, be significant.

<sup>28</sup> Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Another criticism of this approach, based partly on anthropological perspectives, relates to the focus on shamanism in the work of Lewis Williams and of others (see, for example, the comments in Rossano, ‘The Religious Mind and the Evolution of Religion’). What is significantly underestimated in such approaches is the cultural specificity of the various practices and understandings described as shamanistic or animistic. Moreover, this focus often seems to be linked to presumptions about these societies’ beliefs that are not only projections onto those beliefs of a particular kind of supernaturalism, but also fail to fully take into account ‘perspectivist’ approaches in anthropology. (See, for example, the comments in Bird-Davis, “‘Animism’ Revisited’.) These approaches, as Ernst Halbmayer has emphasized, challenge the metaphysical framework often assumed in discussions of animism (Halbmayer, ‘Debating Animism, Perspectivism and the Construction of Ontologies’).

These issues point to the need to question in a rigorous way the assumptions about 'religion' that are frequently made in studies of its evolutionary background. Nevertheless, as I have put it elsewhere, although the concept of *religion* is problematic, we must still recognize in humans 'a universal natural predisposition to the types of experience and to the patterns of behavior that have usually been studied under this heading'.<sup>30</sup> With this in mind, it seems that we can bypass many of the problems associated with the term 'religion' in this context by replacing it with the term 'religiosity', widely used by sociologists of religion.<sup>31</sup> This latter term, as we have already seen, is in many ways preferable because it does not assume some 'essence' that defines what the term *religion* means but, by contrast, may be used as a kind of convenient shorthand to cover a range of belief systems, types of experience, and patterns of behaviour, which will exhibit what some philosophers (following Wittgenstein) call 'family resemblances'.

Religiosity, understood in this sense, will be interpreted by those with insight into the psychology of religion at least partly in terms of its unconscious roots, and such an interpretation will undoubtedly provide essential insights for interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary<sup>32</sup> understanding. However, as we have already noted, while a previous generation of scholars often used Jungian psychology for this purpose, those of the current generation are more wary of this

<sup>30</sup> Knight, 'Homo Religiosus', 26.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Glock, 'On the Study of Religious Commitment'.

<sup>32</sup> The meaning of this term *transdisciplinary* has been explored in Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*. Its general meaning is, however, not tied to Nicolescu's particular approach. The term seems to have been first used by Jean Piaget in 1970 to advocate an approach to psychology that is not limited to recognizing the interactions or reciprocities between specialized fields of research. Rather, it locates these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between those fields. This understanding has now been expanded to incorporate the interaction of any two disciplines. Implicit in this approach is a more flexible attitude towards the accepted boundaries and methodology of each discipline than is usual in interdisciplinary work. (In many ways, the present book represents a transdisciplinary approach.)

approach, not least because they see it as linked to the simplistic biologicistic understanding assumed by Jung himself rather than to the more complex scenario that has, as we have seen, been explored by Harry Hunt. Whether or not Hunt's route to developing a kind of neo-Jungian understanding proves sustainable, however, there does seem to be a good reason for exploring evolutionary psychology as a factor in understanding the kind of visionary model of revelatory experience that I have outlined. The question that arises from this model is that of whether, if we adopt this model, the kind of scientific evolutionism that I have described – which entails an essentially reductionist understanding – is the only option open to us.

Many – whether religious believers or those sceptical of their beliefs – will suspect that it is indeed the only option. However, this suspicion is likely to be based, as Jung himself once noted, on a way of speaking about psychology 'as if it were "only" psychology and nothing else so that it smacks of blasphemy to think that a religious experience is a psychic process'. He then goes on, however, to pose a crucial question. 'How' he asks,

do we know so much about the psyche that we can say "only" psychic? For this is how Western man, whose soul is evidently "of little worth" speaks and thinks. If much were in his soul, he would speak of it with reverence. But since he does not do so, we can only conclude that there is nothing of value in it. Not that this is necessarily so always and everywhere, but only with people who put nothing into their souls and have "all God outside".<sup>33</sup>

Here, as so often, Jung – despite the questionable nature of at least some elements of his general understanding – puts his finger on a point of great importance. Much of the quasi-instinctive negative reaction to the kind of psychological–referential model of revelatory experience that I have outlined comes from an understanding in which the divine Reality is assumed to be entirely separate from,

<sup>33</sup> Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 12, paras. 9.10.

and outside of, the created order. However – whether or not we accept his own particular framework – what Jung’s question highlights is the way in which most theistic notions of divine revelation are based on the idea of divine action ‘from outside’. As we shall see in Chapter 10, recent changes in thinking about divine action challenge this framework in a radical way.