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The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

Abstract

In this article the phenomenon of religious imagination is taken as a test case for discussing the relevance of cognitive science to philosophy of religion and theology. With Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh*, it is argued that all human cognitive faculties are both propelled and constrained by metaphors originating from the movements of self-aware bodies in space; accordingly, religious concepts and images are to be treated on par with all other concepts and images. Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained* is then critically discussed. It is argued that Boyer's claim of having 'explained' religious imagination as counterintuitive blendings of evolutionarily inherited templates is highly problematic. Evolutionary psychology has not yet given any evidence of an evolutionary hard-wiring of religious concepts, and Boyer's reference to the mind-set of hunter-gatherers does not catch the complexity of later developments in religious thought. For all, the internal systematization of religious imageries, and the possibility of a religious self-criticism in terms of philosophy is not reflected in Boyer's theory. Religious imagination may indeed be natural; but its naturalness neither counts for nor against the truth-claims involved in religious images.

1 Introduction

Imagination is often seen as a faculty of free invention, bewildering in its content and arbitrary in its combinations. This received view assumes that imagination is a relatively isolated faculty of human rationality. However, if one cannot 'imagine' human reasoning apart from imaginative activities such as envisaging, associating, conjecturing, or hypothesizing, this view seems hard to maintain. Cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have thus made a strong case for seeing imagination as ubiquitous in all sorts of human reasoning. Moreover, they have convincingly shown that metaphors and imaginations are neither free inventions nor arbitrary, since they are rooted in bodily experiences with some universal features. A spatial orientation (up/down, here/there, too close/too far, etc.) is thus always combined with qualitative judgments arising from the natural senses (high/low, light/dark, warm/cold, and so on). Also higher-order rational judgments proceed by coordinating and pruning imaginative concepts, rather than replacing 'images' with 'concepts', 'metaphorical' meanings with 'literal' ones. The rational thrust towards ordering, combining and patterning is thus undergirded by networks of spatial images and bodily metaphors. The first part of this essay will be devoted to an analysis of imagination from the perspective of embodied cognitive science.

In the second part I want to argue that the same naturalness of imagination also applies to religious imagination, and that also religious imaginations are

governed by rules which, at least to a certain extent, constrain the wildness of religious imagination. This point is probably a bit more controversial, and from the outset I must concede a difficulty. I will thus not be able to provide a clear cut essentialist definition of what constitutes a 'religious' imagination as opposed to other sorts of imagination. Nonetheless I want to make the case that religious imagination is not something esoteric that can be added (and later subtracted) from other mental images. Rather, processes of imagination open themselves up to still more generalized images, some of which will be deemed 'religious' according to standard linguistic usage. It indeed requires a hard work of imagination to sing with John Lennon: 'Imagine, there is no heaven, it is easy if you try, there is only sky above'. For the gaze of the natural properties of the ever-receding horizon elicits an intuition of endlessness, just as the experience of swimming in the ocean may produce an 'oceanic' feeling of embeddedness. Without postulating a specific religious capacity for 'religious imagination', I take my point of departure in the mundane observation that religious imageries – as a matter of fact – are triggered by these (and many other) first-order experiences. The attempt to find a clear demarcation line between 'imagination in general' and 'religious imagination in particular' appears as artificial.

The question is how to explain this fact. I shall here discuss the (indeed reductionist) thesis of evolutionary psychology that religious imaginations are almost hard-wired into the cognitive structure of our evolved brains when triggered by the appropriate circumstances. Almost, I said, because the thesis of evolutionary psychology is not that our brains produce religious imaginations as a result of some built-in and ready-made concepts of God, in terms of a *cognitio innata dei*. Nor is the argument that the idea of a personal God emerges through a wholly rational inference from the empirical realities of skies and oceans in the sense of a *cognitio acquisita dei*. Rather the point of evolutionary psychologists such as Steven Mithen and Pascal Boyer is that the emergence of religious imagination is part and parcel of the general human development of cognitive systems. More precisely, religious imaginations and concepts emerge in the creative zones of interaction, and not least tension, between general concepts of human understanding (such as 'agents', 'animals', 'tools', 'effects') and the experiences that challenge our minds to produce new and often contra-intuitive imaginations. Religious imagination, in this perspective, comes about by blending and combining templates of understanding used for other purposes as well. God, for instance, is imagined as a person with rationality and will, but also as light, fire, rock, and sky. In this sense religious imaginations are natural phenomena, deep-seated in the brain's cognitive capacities. How far they are arbitrary or non-arbitrary remains to be discussed.

These findings of evolutionary psychology, tentative as they are, may be taken as a good message for those who wish to see religion as belonging to the human condition, not likely ever to die out. However, the same findings may also be taken to suggest that religion is substantially a pre-rational phenomenon which is fobbed upon us by our ancestors simply because religion has worked so well in the history of *homo sapiens*, and because it continues to enhance our personal

well-being, our social commitments and our cognitive orientation—even though religious imaginations, regarded in themselves, are nothing but useful fictions. My own position on this matter, however, is that evolutionary explanations of the historical emergence of religions, and of their seemingly eradicable persistence, are neutral to the normative question as to whether religious beliefs exist for reasons other than their unreasonable effectiveness. But, as I shall argue in part three in this essay, the constraint on religious imagination is not without relevance for a philosophical or theological understanding of religion. In fact, evolutionary psychology may even illuminate, from an external perspective, what Christians and other religious practitioners mean when they, from an internal perspective, refer to a divine revelation in particular persons and words.

2 Imagination from the perspective of Embodied Cognitive Science

In philosophical tradition imagination has usually been placed in an ambiguous twilight between sensation and thinking. According to Aristotle, *phantasia* always emerges with sensation (*aisthēsis*), but imagination also transcends direct perception. Unlike sensation, imagination is the ‘placing before our eyes’ of *absent* phenomena; thus imagination can err, since we imagine things not given by perception, as when we form images with our eyes shut. Accordingly, ‘all sensations are true, but most imaginations are false’. Like thinking, (*diánoia*) imagination forms judgments, but unlike thinking the *phantasmata* are free elaborations of the human cognitive faculties, unconstrained by logic and examination. According to Aristotle, imagination is therefore to be treated with care, if not suspicion.¹ And yet, at the end of his analysis Aristotle casually remarks that ‘the soul never thinks without a mental image (*anēu phantásmatos*)’. Since images inevitably take the place of direct perception in the process of thinking, Aristotle is compelled to state that no thinking can proceed without images.²

This view is maintained also in theological tradition. At a prominent place Thomas Aquinas quotes Aristotle approvingly: *nihil sine phantasmata intelligit anima*. But whereas Aristotle was concerned about the overflow of imagination in relation to sensation, Aquinas wrestles with the fact that corporeal imaginations flow into religious concepts in uncontrolled ways. Imagination, says Aquinas, should be used with utmost care in spiritual matters, since imaginations are derived from the sensual realm and are only transferred analogically from here to the spiritual realm. The danger of idolatry is impinging. While concepts such as unity and simplicity adequately reflect divine nature, corporeal imaginations do not. Angels don’t have them, angels don’t need them, and neither will human persons need imagination in the state of blessedness, when faith is transformed into vision.³

1. Aristotle, *De anima* III 3, 427a–428b, quotation 428a 12–13.

2. *De anima* III.7, 431a, 17–18. See further G. Camassa, ‘Phantasia’, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* Bd. 7, Basel: Schwabe & Co 1989, 515–521.

3. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia 84 a 7

A similar ambivalence of distrust and yet acknowledgment of the irreplaceability of imagination is found also in Kant's rehabilitation of the *Einbildungskraft* in *Critique of Pure Reason*. Imagination is here called a 'blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we should have no knowledge whatsoever, but of which we are scarcely ever conscious'. More precisely Kant distinguished between reproductive and productive imagination. Reproductive imagination supplements the fragmentary sense inputs, so that when we see a rounded green apple, we assume that it has some continuous features that we don't see, and that its identity persists in a continuous temporal series. Whereas the reproductive or associative imagination (*empirische Einbildungskraft*) is operative in the apprehension of particular empirical phenomena such as apples, the productive imagination (*die produktive Synthesis der Einbildungskraft*) provides a global orientation by placing any perception in the *a priori* context of one single, unified experience of all possible states of consciousness. Thus without the productive imagination the reproductive imagination could not work at all.⁴ In this manner, Kant actually accords imagination a far more constitutive role for human cognition than Aristotle did; but it is a formal role, and the analysis of the *Einbildungskraft* is not coupled with reflections on the role of particular imaginations. When Kant later in the *Critique* refers to the drive towards thinking the unthinkable 'something' beyond the empirical phenomena, he refers to the unavoidable role of using analogies. But once again, he does this in a condescending manner that does not suggest that we thereby attain a real conceivability.⁵

Both Aristotle and Kant construe the role of imagination in terms of a faculty psychology. The faculty of imagination is one ingredient, as it were, in cognitive processes, while the thinking in categories and concepts retains a realm of its own, untouched by imaginations. Compare this classic view of human knowledge with the understanding of knowledge in the empirically oriented cognitive science. In *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, the cognitive scientists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that ordinary language as well as highly theoretical concepts build on primary metaphors, which are learned through sensorimotor practices from childhood and onwards: 'up/down', 'cold/warm', 'close/distant'.⁶ Concepts and metaphors thus grow out of bodily experiences, which, in turn, are always accompanied by feelings and sensations. Far below the threshold of consciousness, metaphors from one source of

4. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 100–103 and A 115–119.

5. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 566: '... so bleibt uns nichts anders möglichlich, als die Analogie, nach der wir die Erfahrungsbegriffe nutzen, um uns von intelligibelen Dingen, von denen wir an sich nicht die mindeste Kenntnis haben, doch irgend einigen Begriff zu machen'. Cf. A 674–5 on the conception of God which we cannot but think of 'nach der Analogie einer wirklichen Substanz' (A 675), a metaphysical move, however, which in no sense gives evidence of a reality of the divine. In a similar vein in the *Prolegomena*, Kant says that although we have to avoid the dogmatic anthropomorphism, '(wir) erlauben uns einen symbolischen Anthropomorphismus, der in der Tat nur die Sprache und nicht das Objekt selbst angeht' (A 175).

6. See already George Lakoff, 'The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor', in *Metaphor and Thought*, edited by Andrew Ortony, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1979] 2nd edition 1993, 202–251.

experience (e.g. bodily location) are blended and conflated with metaphors from another source (e.g. visual sensation), and they end up forming complex networks of imageries. We can, for instance, be summoned to search for our ‘inner light’. In addition, there is a constant flow back and forth between these spatial-bodily ‘source areas’ and the ‘target areas’ that one wants to address. As time goes on, metaphors and images, on the one hand, and the subject-matters we want to talk about, on the other hand, are blended and combined in ever-new configurations. Consequently, we may end up understanding our inner life as a ‘journey’, and talk about ‘reaching our goals’ or ‘losing ourselves’.⁷ We are here already approaching the level of a religious language. For networks of metaphors and images function as fundamental thought schemes that guide our very pedestrian activities (usually taken to be the ‘literal’ ones), as well as our most intimate self-reflections (often taken to build on ‘metaphorical imagination’) and our theoretical concepts (often assumed to ‘transcend’ imagination).

Think, for example, of the theological idea of ‘panentheism’ which has received a renewed attention in the last 30–40 years of philosophy of religion. There are several panentheisms,⁸ but they all rely on a set of first order imaginations: ‘pan’ reflects the intuition of spaciousness and horizontal infinity, ‘en’ makes use of what Lakoff and Johnson call the ‘container scheme’ (Lakoff/Johnson 1999), and ‘theism’ is in itself a second-order metaphor which, as I’m going to argue in a while, build on a generalized synthesis between templates of personal knowledge (‘knowing’, ‘willing’, ‘revealing’, ‘acting’, and so on) with the cognitive templates of nature and technical knowledge (‘causing’ ‘effecting’ ‘producing’, and so on).

Not only are concepts nourished from metaphors, but because metaphors are rooted in sensorimotor experiences, they are cross-culturally associated with certain evaluative schemes: ‘Up’ is good, ‘down’ is bad, a ‘warm’ smile is better than ‘cold’ one, and a ‘close’ friend is more important than a ‘distant’ relative. As Lakoff and Johnson put it, ‘*Reason is imaginative* in that bodily inference forms are mapped onto abstract modes of inference by metaphor’ (1999, 77, my emphasis).⁹

The second-generation cognitive science that Lakoff and Johnson exemplify no longer assumes a body-free intelligence (in the mode of earlier programs of Artificial Intelligence) but an embodied mind. Accordingly the task of cognitive science is to reconstruct the emergence of mind from the natural history of evolving sensory systems. Embodied cognitive science seems to me to have at least two interesting perspectives for our theme, one more general and one more specific.

The first point is that metaphors and concepts should not be taken as rep-

7. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: BasicBooks 1999, 45–73.

8. See Niels Henrik Gregersen, ‘Three Varieties of Panentheism’, in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Reflections on Panentheism in a Scientific Age*, edited by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003 (forthcoming).

9. Interestingly, also the anthropologist Mary Douglas has pointed to the universality of body metaphors for social life, even though the body metaphors are handled differently in different societies, *Natural Symbols* (1970) 1973 2nd edition, chapter 5.

resenting objective realities (or phenomena) ‘out there’; but neither should our cognitive capacities be seen as producing wildly ‘subjective’ imaginations. Rather, imaginative concepts reflect ways of coping with the world, a world with which we are already interacting as cognitive participants, who are *bound to* understand the world from the perspective of bodily-mental metaphors and concepts. Aristotle’s fear that imaginations are polluting the unspoiled direct sensations presupposes an ill-founded dichotomy between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ as well as a dubious assumption of the immaculate reliability of the senses. But note that embodied cognitive science does not commend relativism either. We could thus put the thesis of Lakoff and Johnson as follows: What imagination does ‘mirror’ are the continuous and creative interactions between embodied minds and their environments. Information is not to be transported from the ‘external, objective’ world into an ‘internal subjective world’, but *information emerges out of the way in which we take up the world* in the process of learning how to receive and respond to our environments. Lakoff and Johnson call this an ‘embodied scientific realism’,¹⁰ and they argue that this understanding of embodied knowledge is congenial both with the pragmatism of John Dewey and the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Cognition is rooted in bodily experiences, but bodies are themselves embedded in more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural contexts. Bodies are never ‘pure’ bodies, but always interpreting bodies, situated in particular contexts.

The other point to be learnt from Lakoff and Johnson is that imagination should not be seen as a separate mental faculty isolated from (and perhaps overruled by) other mental capacities. The common sense ‘faculty psychology’ that separates the capacities of perception, imagination, reason, memory, will, and so on, is hardly tenable. What is characteristic for the operation of the human mind, rather, is the constant conflation of metaphors and cognitive processes, from one end of the spectrum, say the bodily experience of ‘sun light’, to the other end of the spectrum, say the experience of ‘bright intelligence’ or ‘divine light’. In this sense, also what Kant called the *a priori* productive power of imagination is something which has been learned *a posteriori*. The distinction between the empirical and the transcendental evaporates, for the ‘transcendentals’ are themselves the accumulated results of childhood sensorimotor learning and the subsequent learning of linguistic skills.

3 Evolutionary Psychology and the Naturalness of Religious Imaginations

Let us now place this view of embodied knowledge in a wider evolutionary perspective. No child develops as a separate individual, but is raised in human

10. *Philosophy in The Flesh*, 74–117, esp. 89–91 and 97. A similar notion of a ‘transactional realism’ can also be found in the more recent work of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen when he points to a postfoundationalist version of critical realism: ‘The form of modest critical realism I am arguing for sees exactly our experience as a transaction or relation between the rational agent and the world’, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999, 213. See further Niels Henrik Gregersen, ‘Critical Realism and Other Realisms’, in FS Ian Barbour (forthcoming 2003).

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

societies with specific needs and imaginations. Paleoanthropology informs us about the fact that the anatomically modern humans (*homo sapiens sapiens*) have existed in around 100.000 years (kyr), but only in the ‘cultural explosion’ between 60 and 30 kyr ago do we begin to find evidence of technological innovation, art, religion and rituals. Among the Cro-Magnons (ca. 30 kyr) we find elaborate burials with ochre and extensive grave goods, both of which indicate a belief in an afterlife.¹¹

Evolutionary psychology now assumes that beneath the surface of cultural variability, human minds have developed some well-winnowed cognitive strategies that are likely to be relatively constant cross-culturally. Just as there is no dichotomy between external objective reality and inner subjective consciousness, there is no absolute distinction between nature and culture. Also cultures have to adapt to the particular problems of survival, reproduction, group cooperation, and world-orientation. Natural selection therefore applies no less to human cultures than to animal behaviors, though the means and forms of selection may be different. However, unlike sociobiology evolutionary psychologists do not need to assume that particular behaviors are linked to particular sets of genes; what is genetically predisposed and what is acquired through cultural learning processes.¹² Neither are evolutionary psychologists concerned about behavior apart from the cognitive mechanisms implied in such behavior. Reproductive fitness as well as cultural fitness are taken to be conditioned by the operation of specialized ‘mental modules’, which have proven themselves to be efficient in the past of our hunter-gatherer ancestors, and which, due to their hard-wired neural correlates, persist in ancient agricultures up to modern cultures.

Evolutionary psychologists tend to follow Jerry Fodor’s modular view of human cognition, the so-called Swiss-Army model, rather than Noam Chomsky’s idea of a rule-based, but content-free general-purpose brain. The mind is thus constituted by multiple, specialized and content-rich mental modules that have developed in our ancestors, but are still with us (figure 1).¹³

11. Ian Tattersal, *Becoming Human: Evolution and Human Uniqueness*, San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company 1998, 5–29.

12. On the fundamental differences between genetic and cultural transmission, see already W.H. Durham, *Coevolution: Genes, Culture, and Human Diversity*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 1991, who points out that cultural selection can both enhance, oppose, or be neutral vis-a-vis natural selection. Thus there may not be direct or ‘predispositional’ links (‘epigenetic rules’) between genes and behavior, as hypothesized by the sociobiologists E.O. Wilson and C.J. Lumsden (*Genes, Minds, and Culture*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981). An even more radical dissociation between natural selection, working on ‘genes’, and cognitive selection concerning ‘memes’ and biology is expressed by Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, ch. 9. Boyer challenges the idea that preformatted genes ‘express themselves’ in phenocopies (278–283) as well as the assumption that memes are ‘copied’ and transmitted as ‘cultural inputs’ (283–288). There are no easy causal links, nor any structural similarity between genes and memes. The recurrence of cultural ideas, including religious ideas, is provided by the rich intuitive psychology and inference systems, developed in human prehistory (e.g. 290). Below I will discuss Boyer’s work in some detail.

13. See the paradigmatic study by Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, ‘Cognitive Adaptations

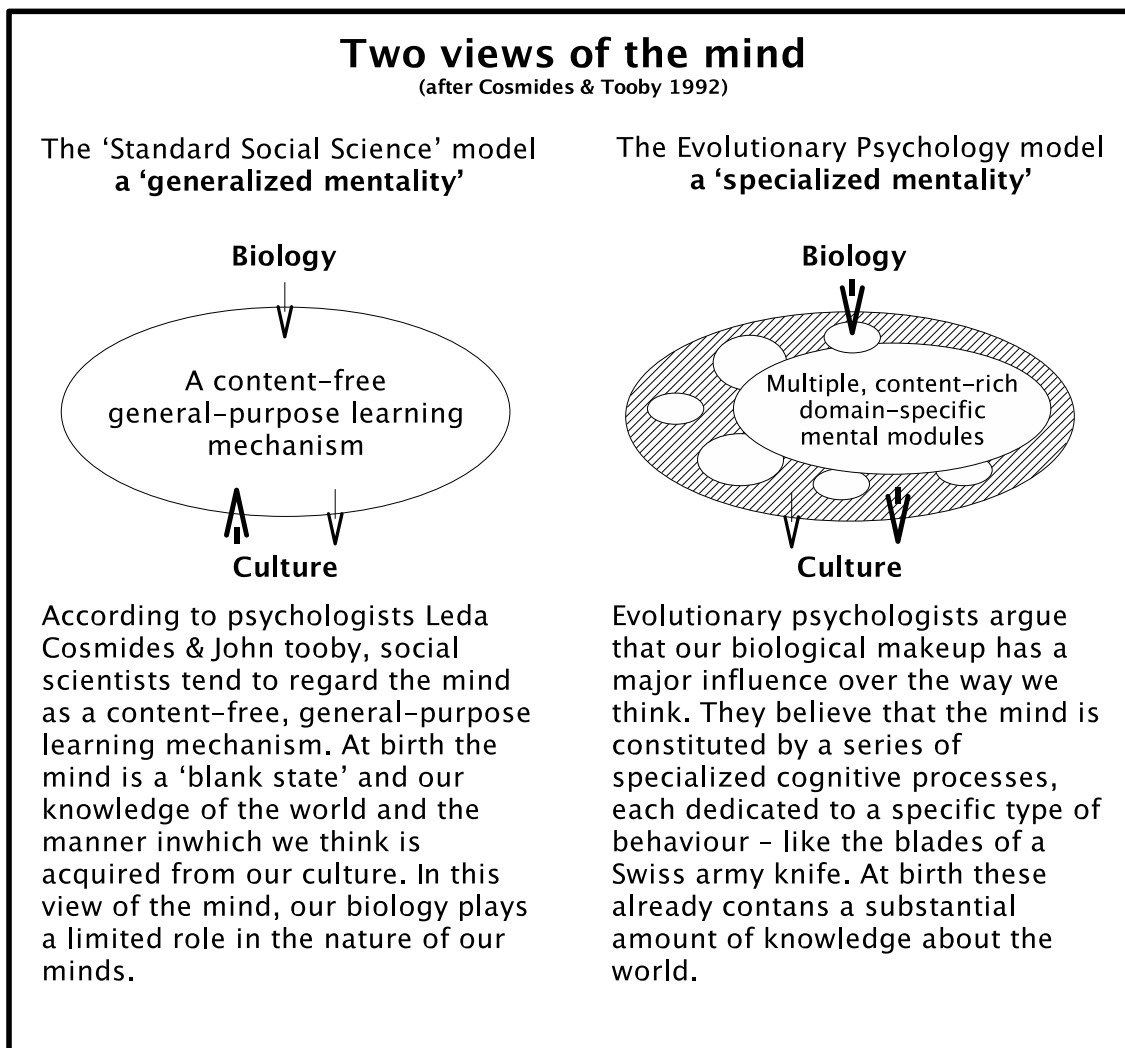


Figure 1: Two Views of the Human Mind: The content-free, general-purpose 'Standard Social Science' model of the human mind, and the content-rich, modular view of Evolutionary Psychology.

Mental modules are operative in face recognition, spatial relations, tool-use, social exchange, perception and emotion, child care, friendship, face-to-face communication, and so on; learnt from childhood experiences, they are later enhanced, restrained, or refined by social learning. Accordingly, mental schemes function to a wide extent beneath the level of conscious reflection.¹⁴ During childhood, cognitive schemes then become hard-wired in our neural circuits.¹⁵

for Social Exchange', in *The Adapted Mind*, edited by J.H. Barkow, L. Cosmides and J. Tooby, New York: Oxford University Press 1992, 163-228. See also the discussion volume, Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain eds, *Evolution and the Human Mind: Modularity, Language and Meta-Cognition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000.

14. Cosmides and Tooby, 'Cognitive Adaptations for Social Exchange', 113.

15. This of course presupposes a suitable information processing in the brain. If, for in-

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

What is characteristic for the human mind, however, is that this automaticity is always mediated by an interaction between the different capacities, so that human beings are not simply determined by stimulus-response behaviors. The question is, then, how to account both for the immediacy of human cognition-and-action, and for the relatively autonomous response acquired through social learning, and facilitated by the access to symbolic networks. There is, as far as I am aware, no really convincing answer to this question; nor does there exist any consensus on the origin of human language. In *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, the evolutionary anthropologist Terrence Deacon has argued there is a difference in kind between human communication and animal communication (as evidenced in, say, the waggle dance of honeybees, whale songs, or monkey alarm calls). In animal communication, we have a token-token relation between the sign and the reference, whereas the human languages have transcended what Deacon calls 'the symbolic threshold' by not only associating signs with 'realities' but also forming higher-order symbol systems by which we can establish logical relationships between the symbolic elements (words, signs, etc). This allows us to refer not only to external objects but to communicate *about these referents* as well as *about our own possible interactions* with these referents. By way of symbolic reference we interpret something *as something* in different contexts, and can thus evaluate different possibilities. For example, we learn discern whether a strained face means 'aggression' or 'pain', whether a story is to be taken up as a joke or an offense, and in addition we learn to imagine how we could possibly react to future contingencies. Most importantly, Deacon emphasizes that humans are able to *unlearn* dispositions by re-interpreting what we see in the wider horizon of possibilities. The ability to say 'No' is thus constitutive for humanity, as is the ability to live in a world of imagined counterfactuals. In both cases combinatorial capacities are crucial: 'Symbolic reference derives from combinatorial possibilities and impossibilities, and we therefore depend on combinations both to discover it (during learning) and to make use of it (during communication)'.¹⁶ According to Deacon, no human communication exists that does not possess this open-ended structure of second-order, symbolic reflection.

Other evolutionary psychologists tend to think that human intelligence has eventually evolved through combining a general intelligence with modular intelligences which again can be blended in higher-order cognitive processes such as artistic creativity and religious thought. In *The Prehistory of the Mind*, archaeologist Steven Mithen argues that apart from the general intelligence characteristic for infants (phase 1), children early on develop specialized cognitive domains (phase 2). Children learn to behave differently to human persons, to animals, and

stance, the *corpus callosum*, which connects the left and right hemisphere of the brain, is either not developed (agenetic *corpus callosum*) or injured by accidents (well-known from the so-called 'split-brain' research), the patient will not be able to form associations or have imaginations. I owe this observation to a conversation with the neuroscientist Warren Brown (Granada, Spain, August 23, 2002).

16. Terrence W. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, New York: W.W. Norton 1997, 51–59 and 79–92, quotation 83.

to tools, and they thus acquire a set of distinct ‘intuitive intelligences’. Mithen mentions four such areas of intelligence: (1) social and psychological, (2) biological, (3) technical, and (4) linguistic. What is characteristic for the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens*, however, is the extent to which ‘the combining of thoughts and knowledge of the different specialized intelligences is possible’ (phase 3). As soon as the specialized cognitive domains began to engage one another—and this is what happened in the cultural explosion in the Cro Magnon Age, ‘the result is an almost limitless capacity for imagination’. Mithen refers to this phase 3 of the typically modern human mind as having a ‘cognitive fluidity’.¹⁷ In a schematic form, Mithen presents his view in the form of a gothic cathedral (figure 2).

In this perspective religious imagination is a result of the cognitive fluidity attained at phase 3, when intelligences related to social persons and to natural history are combined into the idea of a non-physical after-life (having the persistence of mountains but the features of a personal mental life). These complex notions can be further combined into the generalized notion of non-physical spirits and gods. These non-physical beings are thought to be as causally effective as natural events, in so far as they can cause harm or well-being, and yet they are as communicative as human persons are.¹⁸ In this sense, religious imagination uses the same mental modules as have developed in other human activities, such as hunting, cooking, reproducing, nurturing, and so on. Accordingly, *there exists no specialized religious module, and no distinct borderline between religious and non-religious imagination*. Rather the emergence of religion is part and parcel of the liberation of human rationality from the constrained navel structure of the Roman chapels to the open and fluid structures of the Gothic cathedral.

Apart from the speculative assumptions inherent in this simplistic scheme, the simplicity of which Mithen fully acknowledges, the approach of Mithen does not seem quite satisfying to me for other reasons. What he says about religion is after all very meager, even though religion is part of the book title. Secondly, and more importantly, Mithen does not discuss the inner constraints on religious (or any other) imagination. If cognitive fluidity was the one and only explanation of religion, religious imagination would just teem in all sorts of directions. But, as argued by Pascal Boyer, a cognitive scientist specializing on the emergence of religious concepts, this is not quite the case. Religious imaginations are, after all, highly limited.¹⁹

In his book bearing the over-ambitious title, *Religion Explained: The Evo-*

17. Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art, Religion and Science*, London: Thames and Hudson 1999, 70 and 71. In my view it is problematic that Mithen takes language to be a separate fourth domain of intuitive knowledge. Language is, after all, acquired through the exchange with other persons, natural beings, and tools; secondly, if human languages transcend the symbolic threshold, as argued by Deacon, they never existed apart from the cognitive fluidity characteristic of phase 3.

18. Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, 174–178.

19. See Pascal Boyer’s critique of Mithen in ‘Evolution of the Modern Mind and the Origins of Culture: Religious Concepts as a Limiting-Case’, in Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain eds, *Evolution and the Modern Mind*, 93–112, esp. 97: ‘cultures are not that diverse: we find recurrent templates for religious concepts, not unbounded variation’.

The mind as a cathedral

N.B. These are schematic, metaphorical illustrations. They carry no implications for the spatial locations of cognitive processes within the brain

Phase 3: Two possible architectural plans for Phase 3 minds.

These represent minds of people living by hunting and gathering. For those with other lifestyles it is likely that other types of specialized intelligences will develop, although social and linguistic intelligence are likely to be universal.

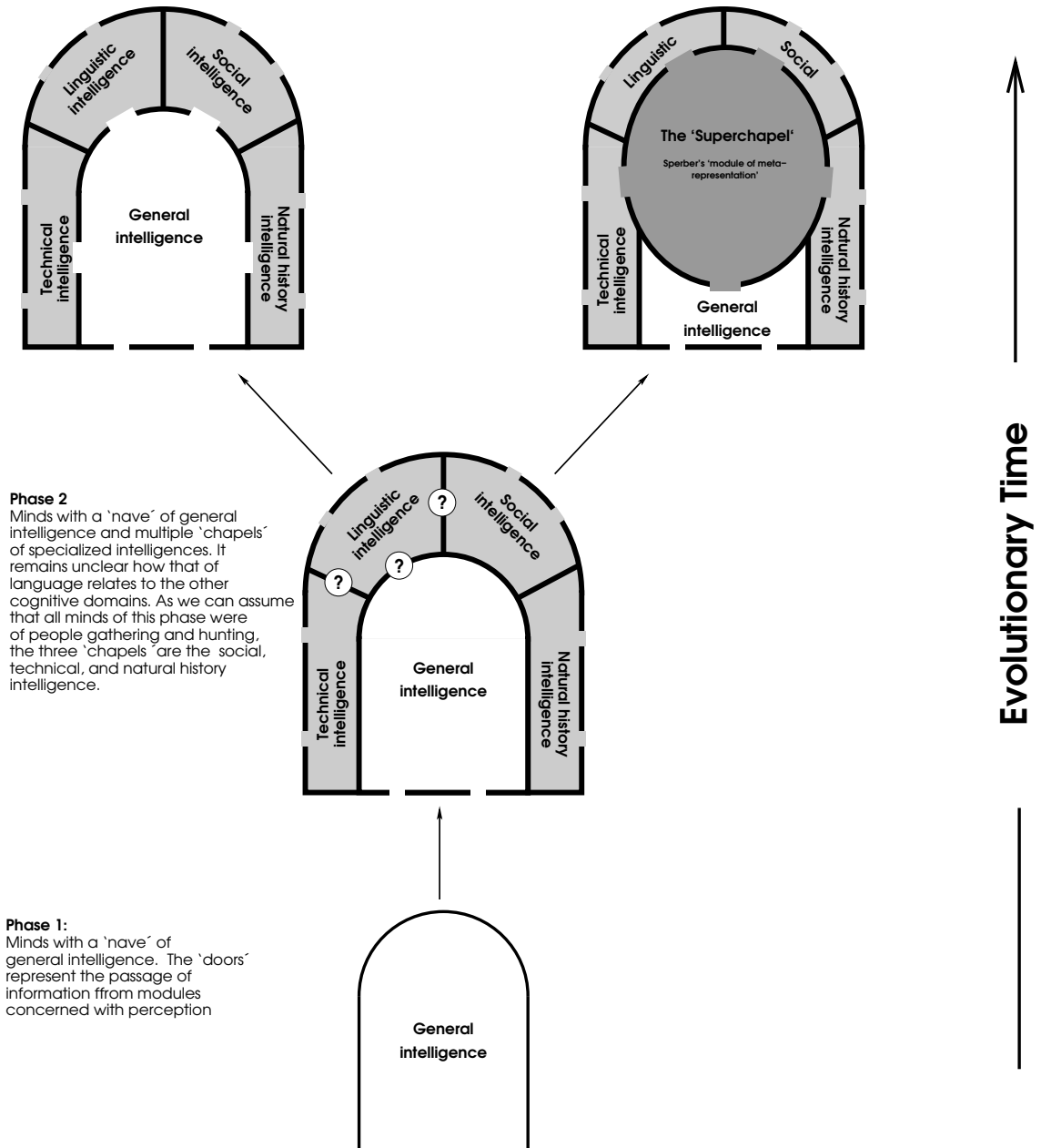


Figure 2: Steven Mithen's Gothic Cathedral view of the origins of human cognitive systems.

lutionary Origins of Religious Thought (2001), Boyer offers a model for understanding how religious concepts, often amazingly counterintuitive and sometimes even baroquely exotic, have their natural place in the context of the ordinary workings of human brain. Religious concepts are natural both in the phenomenological sense that they emerge and develop effortlessly as a result of the workings of the human mind, and in the naturalistic sense that also religious imagination depends on non-cultural constraints, such as genes, central nervous systems and brains.²⁰

Fundamental to Boyer's explanatory model is the distinction between concepts and templates.²¹ 'Concepts' are general ideas referring to particular beings such as a walrus or a giraffe, whereas 'templates' are more general schemes. The point is that children as well as adults learn by subconsciously inferring that giraffes, even though they look very different from walruses, blackbirds and mosquitos have a variety of common characteristics, because they are part of the same ontological category, the ANIMAL template. Animals have a body-plan, a living place, eat food, reproduce, and so on. Of course a giraffe and the walrus look differently (long legs and neck versus a trunk), have different habitats (the savannah versus the sea), eat different things (leaves versus fish), and copulate in different ways. The information about these differences will have to be provided by the concepts, derived from particular sets of experience. But the template ANIMAL adds the information that all animals – from mosquitos to elephants – live, eat and reproduce. Templates can thus be perceived as aggregates of memory. By subconsciously using templates we tacitly infer many things that we don't observe but simply take for granted. Once again, the result is a kind of inverted Kantianism, in which the quasi *a priori* templates have accumulated through the *a posteriori* evolution of cognitive systems (figure 3).

Now Boyer furthermore contends that there are not many templates of understanding. How many one wants to enumerate is of course a question of definition, but the following may suffice: PERSON, ANIMAL, PLANT, TOOL, ARTEFACT, NATURAL OBJECT. For each of these templates all human beings will have a long-term acquaintance. Tools and natural objects don't talk and don't eat; persons do. Persons have memory and act according their past experiences, plants don't. And yet, since the categories can be blended, new combinations can take place, and the world of religion is full of such cases. Boyer mentions the examples of praying to statues, of feeding mountains for an exchange of prey, and of special (potentially dangerous) ebony trees who are able to recall the conversations of past generations. In effect, Boyer thinks that religious concepts came about by blending information coming from separate ontological categories, such as the templates of PLANT and PERSON (figure 4).

The point is here that the information contained by the new information tags contradicts the information presupposed by the ontological categories. The hard core of Boyer's theory is now that *religious concepts and imaginations are*

20. Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 3–4.

21. Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: BasicBooks 2001, 40–45. The following references are to this work.

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

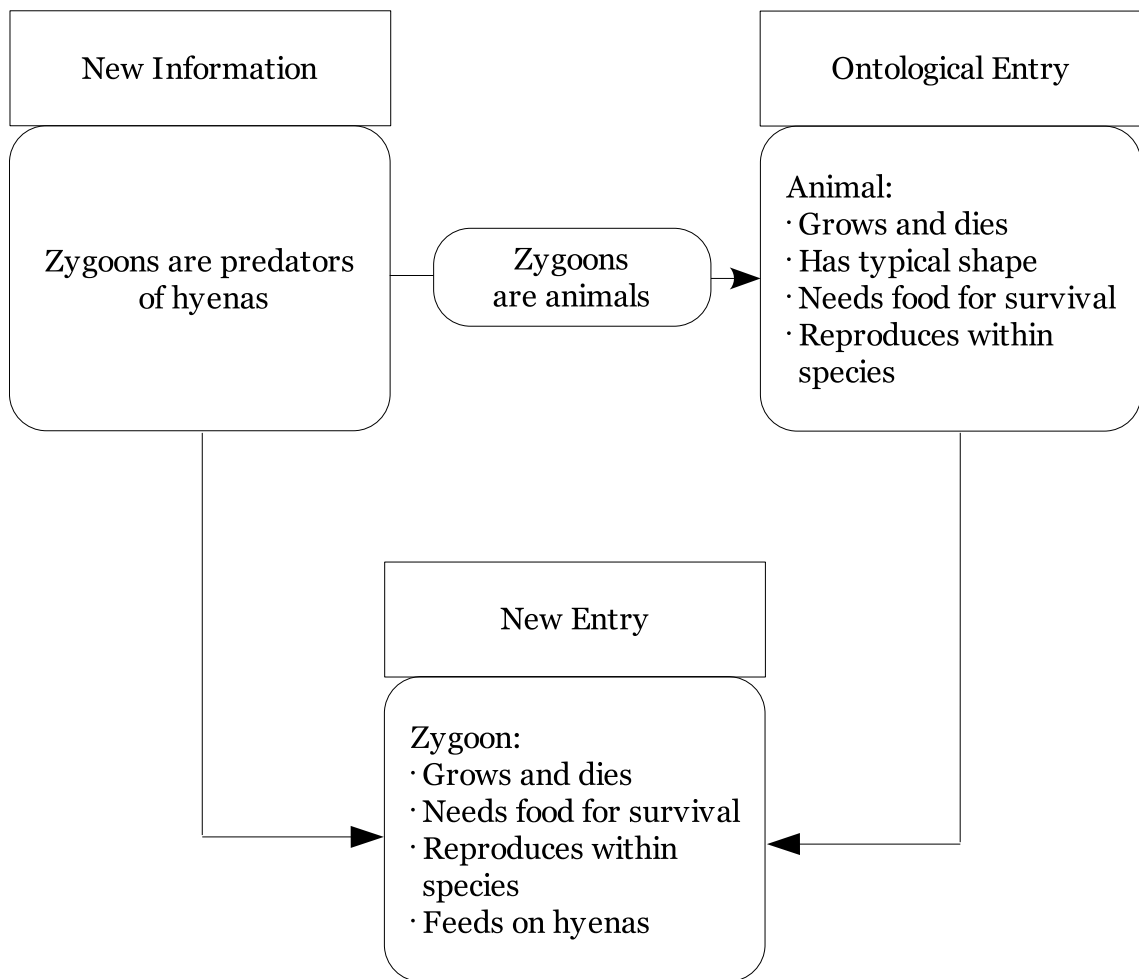


Figure 3: Chart on the imaginative animal race ‘Zygoons’ which are told to feed on hyenas. Observe the combination between the ontological entry, provided by the templates, and the novel information offered by the empirical concepts.

always marked by being counterintuitive in the precise sense of counteracting expectations raised by our template categories: ‘[R]eligious concepts invariably include information that is counterintuitive relative to the category activated’ (Boyer 2001, 65). Observe that even though the world of religions involves oddities of many sorts (at least to outsiders), the mere fact that something is unexpected is not counterintuitive in Boyer’s technical sense. For example, to imagine ‘a table made out of chocolate’ or ‘giraffe with six legs’ destroys our ordinary expectations, but these imaginations do not violate an ontological category. The breach of expectations is here still at the level of concepts and natural-kinds. However, to say that ‘the table felt sad, when the people left the room’ breaks with our assumed information about what ARTEFACTS can do (Boyer 2001, 80–82).

This example also shows that religions are hardly defined insatisfactorily by being counterintuitive (or ‘counter-ontological’, to be more precise). For so are also fairytales and science fiction stories. Boyer does not, it seems to me, pro-

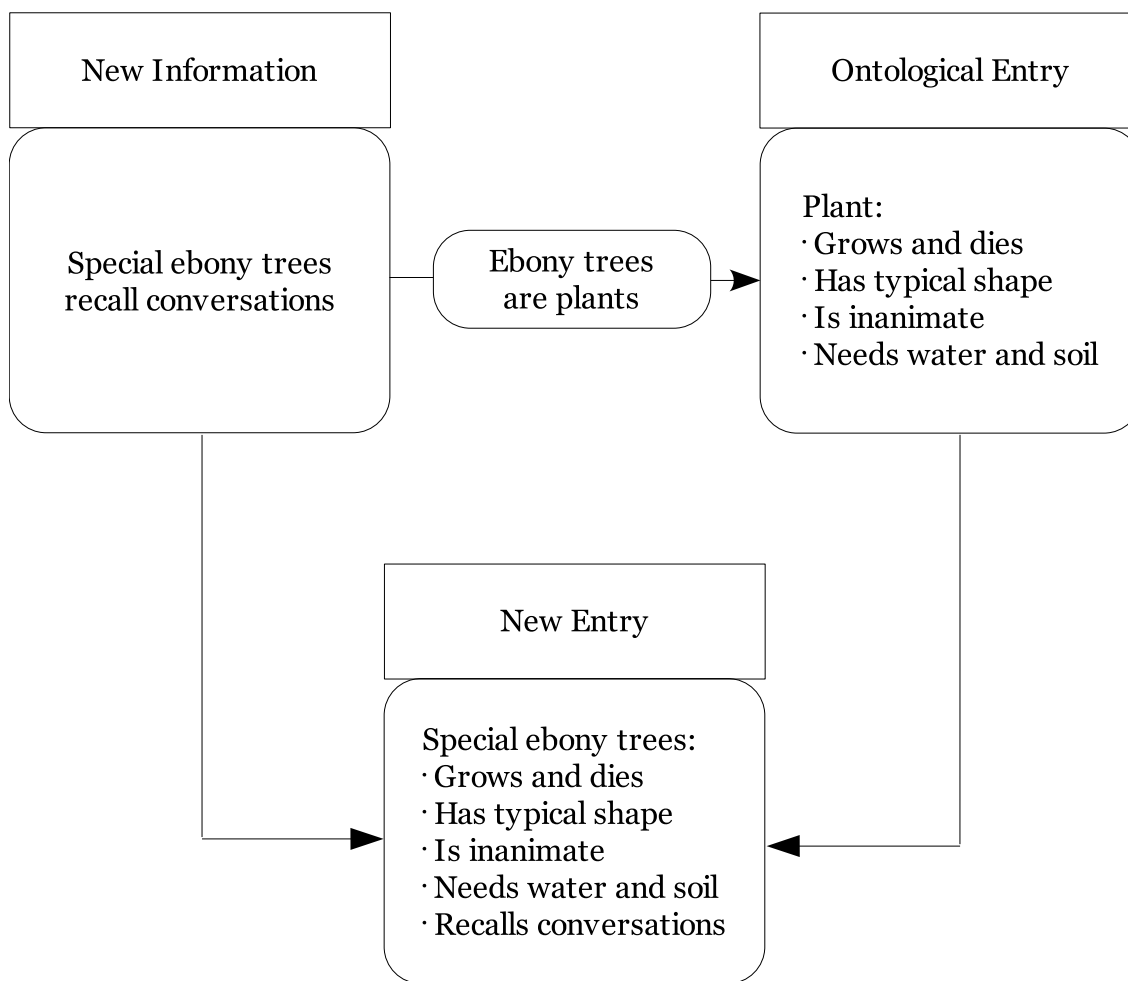


Figure 4: Chart on the idea of special ebony trees able to recall conversations.

vide the reader with a very distinctive understanding of the religious ideas that he claims to have explained. My point here is not that Boyer does not offer us a satisfying definition of what religion essentially is. Nobody can. And Boyer rightly sees religion as a matter of family resemblance rather than identifiable essences. My question is, rather, whether he has construed the family of religious ideas in a satisfying manner. Boyer’s defining characteristic – the breaking and blending of ontological categories – is evidently too broad. Boyer is aware that religious concepts, in addition, have an existential importance, but once again, so have also fairytales and science fiction stories. By religious concepts he mostly seems to understand simply the idea of supernatural beings such as gods, ghosts and zombies, or supernatural events such as miracles, ‘a set of ideas concerning nonobservable, extra-natural agencies and processes’.²² However, the distinction between ‘natural’ and supernatural’ is hardly relevant to all sorts of religious understanding.²³ Religion is not confined to non-observable, supernatural entities,

22. *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 5.

23. As argued by the great French theologian Henri de Lubac (*Surnatural: Etudes his-*

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

but also re-describes the observable natural world as well. Religion is not only about finding traces of an absent deity in salient experiences, but also about seeing the presence of the divine ‘in, with, and under’ the traces themselves (to use the sacramental language of Lutherans and Anglicans).

However, I must leave this objection aside for now and instead focus on the implications of Boyer’s cognitive approach for the concept of God. His first point is the empirical observation that there are many conceivable, yet non-viable ways of thinking about God. Not all religious concepts can be equally successfully transmitted. Boyer mentions the example of a god watching us in every detail—but instantaneously forgetting about us. This is a notion nowhere found in the history of religion. Or think an omnipotent God existing only on Wednesdays (2001, 51 and 56). There are barriers to the wildness of religious imagination, and cognitive fluidity does not flow in all directions. The reason is that any violation of templates will need to be specific, while at the same time preserving other features of the template (2001, 62).

So, when one imagines God as a PERSON, most believers would violate this category by qualifying the template so that God is a person who is *not limited* to space and time, because God has *no body*. By contrast, it would be hard to come through with a religious message saying that God is an infinite person who has a body but *no thoughts*. The ontological category of personhood would here not only be breached, but simply eradicated. On the other hand, one can also enrich the concept of God by transferring specific knowledge claims gained from other source areas and applying them to God. One can, for example, use the TOOL template and praise God by saying, ‘You are the lamp that shines for my feet’, or the NATURAL OBJECT template and say, ‘God is my rock’.

Boyer is particularly interested in the pervasive role of PERSONHOOD templates in religious thought. Throughout evolution, humans have survived by paying attention to differences, especially to salient features that can be treated as signs standing for something, or having some hidden meaning. To put it a bit robustly, *we are evolutionarily designed to look for signs*; we are bound to read events as signs indicating the activity of somebody else. Boyer here refers to the evolutionary psychologist Justin Barrett, who has argued that human cognitive systems are marked by a ‘hyperactive agent detection’: ‘Our evolutionary heritage is that of organisms that must deal with both predators and prey. In either situation, it is far more advantageous to overdetect agency than to underdetect it. The expense of false positives (seeing agents where there are none) is minimal, if we can abandon these misguided intuitions quickly. In contrast, the cost of not detecting agents when they are actually around (either predator or prey), could be

toriques, Paris: Aubier 1946), the term *supernaturalis* only entered theology in the 9th century, with Carolingian translations of Pseudo-Dionysius and Scotus Eriugena, see Graham Ward, ‘Supernaturalism’, *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, New York: MacMillan 2003. One could well argue that the construal of religion as supernatural is a result of a specific rationalizing theology, which was later adopted and inverted by rationalists who wanted to confine religion to the area of the extra-ordinary, while leaving the ordinary world to human reasoning. Boyer’s background in French rationalism may exemplify this historical trajectory.

very high' (2001, 144).

In this sense, gods and spirits can be (and certainly have been) perceived as predators that provoke fear and anxiety. But gods and spirits can also be seen as invisible partners with whom one can seek refuge, communicate, but also possibly exchange goods (2001, 146–150). What is distinctive for religious communication is the fact that the communication with invisible partners is *decoupled* from the ordinary social exchange, and thus offers a space for learning both social and self-reflective skills against a stable background, constituted by the relation to the Invisible Other (2001, 149). In other words, the pervasiveness and persistence of notions of a personal God, despite the criticisms coming from philosophers such as Spinoza or Fichte, can partly be explained by the naturalness of the mental module of agency detection, which is operative far below the threshold of reflection. And yet, as we shall see, the agency detection also elicits religious reflection.

In the same vein, Boyer argues that religious imagination (however we want to define 'religious') uses the same inference systems as the human brain and mind in general. Boyer refers to empirical investigations showing that people tend better to memorize violations of expectations than no violations, and that people tend to better recall a few violations than too many. At the level of concepts, one better remembers a 'one-armed man' than a 'two-armed man'; however, if we began to violate a human being much further (say, 'a man without perceptible face') imagination gets too strained. Similarly in the world of religious imagination. We are evolutionarily bound to pay attention to salient features, and to see signs as traces of personal activity. However, as Boyer also points out, not least the elite representations of religion risk the danger of making too many violations of expectations. He mentions the Christian doctrine of Trinity which is notable for being difficult to transmit culturally, or literate Buddhists who endorse a wholly non-anthropomorphic universe. In both cases, we find that the theological correctness maintained by scholars, priests, or monks is counteracted in popular piety by giving priority to one of the three Trinitarian persons (usually Christ), or by supplementing the Trinity with more approachable figures (such as Mary, the mother of Christ). Similarly, the non-anthropomorphic universe of Buddhism is easily supplemented in public piety by a world of very anthropomorphic ghosts and spirits.

So far an outline of Boyer's theory. Before I engage with his theory from a more philosophical and theological perspective, it should be remembered that the scientific status of evolutionary psychology is still controversial. Evolutionary psychology bases itself on fairly general reconstructions of the prehistoric human mind, an area in which archaeological scholarship is still guided by hunches and hypotheses, as we saw in the case of Steven Mithen.²⁴ In particular, Boyer's theory on religious thinking presupposes that the richness of religious semantics and communication is based on habits of inference acquired in pre-agricultural societies of gatherers and hunters. However, more reflected religious systems came

24. See Ian Tattersal's vehement critique, 'Evolution, genes, and behavior', *Zygon: A Journal of Religion & Science* 36:4 (December 2001), 657–666.

about in the period of agriculture (about 20.–10.000 years ago), followed by the formation of states, cities, and alphabets (about 4–2.500 years ago), which made possible that the logic of monotheism emerged. These vastly important shifts in religious perception within cultural evolution are not adequately reflected in Boyer's theory. In addition, even though Boyer's case is strengthened by empirical work done on the learning of language in cognitive science and on the psychology of memory among present-day human beings (Julian Barrett), evolutionary psychology has yet to show how a theoretical deduction of religious thinking from the interplay between cognitive templates and empirically based concepts can be evidenced. As already mentioned, evolutionary psychology has largely given up the claims of sociobiology that one would be able to specify the genetic basis of cognitive behaviors. Boyer's work does not (or only in passing) refer to the genes which are the only possible carriers of the hard-wiring of the brains, if any such hard-wiring exists. Neither does Boyer point to any established causal theory about how cognitive systems and their mental modules relate to brain modules. But the proximate cause of cognitive behavior will eventually have to be found in the neuronal structure of the brain, if any causal reduction of cognitive processes could be evidenced. In favor of evolutionary psychology, however, it should be said that linkages between cognitive functions and brain processes are currently investigated by the neurosciences, and by virtue of neuroscanners such as PET, it is possible to identify the brain modules activated under religious experience, and even to follow the trajectories of individual electrons. Current studies within neuroscience are thus highly consonant with the assumptions of evolutionary psychology, and may be regarded as supplementary evidence of the evolutionary approach.²⁵ I therefore believe that cognitive science, including the cognitive science of religious development, has to be taken theoretically seriously, also by philosophers of religion, even though Boyer and colleagues have not, as yet, offered what they claim to have offered: an explanation of religious thinking. Boyer himself admits that his approach does not explain the particulars of religions or the beliefs of individual persons. He states that evolutionary psychology can explain 'the likelihood of religious 'belief' as well as the 'vast trends in human groups' (2001, 319), but he concedes that his theory is placed at a general level and does not explain the particular shape of particular religions, nor the beliefs of individuals.

But not only is the actual explanatory power of Boyer's theory limited. There are also intrinsic limits to the explanatory enterprise itself, which are worth noticing. In his own words, Boyer concerns himself with cultural adaptation, with 'cultural fitness', and not with the conceivability or rationality of particular religious imaginations (Boyer 2000, 104). Boyer is thus well aware that he cannot *qua* evolutionary psychologist discuss the internal rationality of religious belief. The self-affirmative rhetoric of 'explaining religion' disguises this fact, as do Boyer's

25. See, for instance, Robert A. Hinde, *Why God's Persist*, New York: Routledge 1999; Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Aquili and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away*, New York: Ballantine Publishing Group 2001.

many Feuerbachian side-remarks. As a matter of fact, however, a theory about the emergence of religious concepts and imaginations does not at all answer the philosophical question about the validity of religion, nor the issue about whether, and in which form, religious imagination refers to realities, or not. As a matter of principle, the *reasons* that may undergird *the unreasonable effectiveness of religious thought* transcend the scope of evolutionary psychology. A concession of this fact by Boyer would have been fitting. Anyway, to these philosophical and indeed theological questions we now turn.

4 Religious Imagination and the Idea of Divine Revelation

From what follows it will appear that taking evolutionary psychology seriously does not mean simply to take for granted its accounts and explanations of religious imagination. Rather, the task is to engage with its methods and findings in a critical and open inquiry. Let me here, for the sake of brevity, summarize some of the more philosophical points I have made above:

1. Evolutionary psychology has not (yet) provided any evidence of an evolutionary hard-wiring of religious thinking and imagination in the human brain. Evolutionary psychology could only do so, if the prevalence of particular cognitive systems were linked with specified gene functions (at the ultimate level of evolutionary explanation) *or* could be shown to be caused by particular brain modules (at the proximate level of explanation). However one wants to elucidate the brain-mind-culture interactions, the naturalistic approach requires rather robust causal links between brain modules and mental modules. By implication, religion has in fact not been explained by Boyer's theory, neither at a theoretical level, nor in an empirical sense. However, if evolutionary psychology, genetics and neuroscience were to be theoretically linked, an explanation would in principle be possible.
2. Cognitive evolutionary psychology has made a case for claiming that religious thought models, including religious imagination, use the same cognitive inference systems employed elsewhere in human thinking, including human imagination. Even though they have not (yet) evidenced that non-religious cognitive systems are prior to religious language-use, and explain these, this is a reasonable hypothesis on the general background of the evolutionary hypothesis of common descent. It is also supported by archaeological findings which may point to a relatively late emergence of religion in the 'cultural explosion' some 30–60 kyr ago.
3. An explanation in terms of cognitive evolutionary science is (despite the occasional rhetoric of its practitioners) methodologically modest, in so far as it does not pretend to explain the particulars of religious development, say geographically or historically. Evolutionary psychology does not concern itself with questions such as, why Buddhism?, why Zen?, why Christianity?, why Anglocatholicism?, why Mohammed Ali?, why Bertrand Russell?

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

4. The evolutionary explanation of the emergence of religious thought in terms of cognitive psychology has made a case for explaining the psychological plausibility of religious belief as well as the ease by which religious ideas are spread. However, evolutionary explanations are not concerned about the rationality or irrationality of religion, nor with the reality claims intrinsic to most lived religions.
5. Accordingly, evolutionary psychology should be seen as neutral as to the validity and reality claims of religious belief. The possible reasons behind the unreasonable effectiveness of religious beliefs simply lie beyond the scope of evolutionary theory, and need another discourse, not least provided by philosophy and religious reflection.

The question is now, what a philosopher-theologian might learn from cognitive science and from evolutionary psychology in particular? And how could one, from the perspective of philosophy and theology, re-describe the findings of evolutionary accounts of religious imagination? Let me begin by a methodological point on the relation between the scientific study of religion, philosophy of religion, and theology.

Both philosophers of religion and theologians tend to take their point of departure in classics (as I have done myself in this essay). So if we want to know what religion is about, we recommend our students to read Schleiermacher's *On Religion*, Rudolf Otto's *The Holy*, or William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This procedure has proven helpful, but has also served to dissociate philosophers of religion from those who actually study the world of the religions in all their varieties, not only 'experiences' and 'thoughts', but also rituals and practices; religions tend to operate in the fuzzy zones concepts and images, between the secular and the holy, and without knowing exactly what is what. While theology has to find a method for accommodating, within its own internal hermeneutical perspective, the external analysis of religious life offered by the scholars of religion, the philosopher of religion, it seems to me, has an even harder problem. In a sense, the philosophers of religion are bound to be late-comers into the study of religion. Philosophers will have to listen attentively, first, to those religious informants who can explain and explicate the internal meaning of a given religion, for without this knowledge philosophers of religion would hardly have a clue to understand what is at stake in religious life. On the other hand, philosophers should also be able to reflect on religious life from an external perspective which may well challenge religious ideas, as these are understood by religious practitioners. In a sense a philosopher of religion must be able to encompass both the external perspectives *on* religion, provided by religious studies, and the internal perspectives *of* religion, provided by theology. Only when we know, 'What are the functions of religious concepts, how do they operate, and why do they persist?', and only when we have answered the question, 'What do we mean when we speak of God as a person?', can we begin to ask the philosopher's beloved questions, 'What is the epistemological and metaphysical status of religious imagination' and, 'Can

these particular religious images and metaphors still be sensibly used by rational and responsible persons in the context of today's knowledge?'

And now to the more specific issue of religious imagination, seen from the perspective of philosophy and theology. In my view, a philosophy of religion (at least one pursued within the context of a Judeo-Christian tradition) can fully acknowledge the *naturalness of religious imagination* in the two-fold sense indicated by Pascal Boyer. There is, first, a spontaneity and effortlessness about religious imaginations; this external observation is fully in accordance with the Judeo-Christian assumption that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, and thus designated to engage in communication with God in the 'infinite medium' (Kierkegaard) of imagination. Second, religious imaginations are natural phenomena, simply because they belong to the human nature which in turn belongs to the natural order of creation.²⁶ There is, in this sense, nothing strange about religion. Religions are as real and as natural as atoms are. Only different!

I thus believe that the philosopher-theologian can and should unreservedly subscribe to the metaphysical idea of the *continuum of reality*. However, one can do so without pre-defining this continuum of reality as 'natural' in terms of a 'scientific naturalism', or any other particular world-view. There is a richness to reality that may not be captured by scientific approaches, as known from, say, standard physics and evolutionary theory with all its ramifications. Therefore, committing oneself to the idea of a continuum of reality does not imply subscribing to the idea of a *continuum of rationality*, that is, the view that nature – in our case the phenomenon of religious imagination – can be adequately represented and explained from the perspective of any particular scientific theory (including cognitive science and evolutionary psychology). Neither does one need to assume that scientific explanations, taken together – from fundamental physics to macro-evolutionary theory – can be seen as one unbroken series of theories, in which one theory is deducible from the other, thus forming one overarching 'scientific worldview'. I do not believe that such uniform world-view exists. Rather science is, as put by the Princeton physicist Freeman Dyson, 'a mosaic of partial and conflicting visions'.²⁷ The natural and social sciences build up a pluralistic patchwork of explanatory models that are not theoretically reducible to one another; instead, they are partially overlapping, partially conflicting explanations of a 'dappled world', which to this day (and probably forever) remains beyond grasp.²⁸

26. See 'Mensch I: Naturwissenschaftlich und Psychologisch', *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th edition, vol. 5 (forthcoming).

27. Freeman Dyson, 'The Scientist as Rebel', *The New York Review*, May 25, 1995. Cf. the case made for cognitive pluralism by the wide majority of writers in Niels Henrik Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998.

28. Nancy Cartwright, *The Dappled World: A Study of the Boundaries of Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999, 23–34. Not even a Theory of Everything (TOE), as hoped for by the physicists (or by John Paul II), can explain everything, for instance not the existence of kangaroos, of Clare Hall, or of the particular sentences I'm constructing here. On the

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

Accordingly, explaining religion does not mean explaining it away, and even a successful explanation of the emergence of religious concepts would not answer the question of the possible value and validity of particular religious truth-claims.

Religions consistently produce mental representations with similar (though never identical) contents as a result of the ordinary workings of the human mind (including its imaginative capacities). This fact may indicate that *religious imaginations and concepts are to be treated on par with all other sorts of human thinking*. Just as there are origins of science, there are origins of religions; just as religious concepts are constructed by human minds, so are mathematical systems and scientific theories; and yet, in both cases we are dealing with cognitive systems that make truth-claims about realities, which are taken to exist prior to human beings, though perhaps never fully graspable.

Now, if religious imaginations and concepts are cross-culturally transmitted and if, moreover, religious imaginations constitute persisting features of the mental life of most human beings, a philosophy of religion should not concern itself with ‘the existence of religious imagination’ in general. The human ability to form pictures and create metaphors is simply a fact of life, which is in no need of justification. Accordingly, a philosophy of religion should not give any *a priori* preference to sensations over against imaginations (à la Aristotle or Hume), nor to concepts over against imagination (à la Hegel), nor should the philosopher celebrate imagination as a special divine intuition (as in Romanticism). Rather, imagination is to be treated as an integral part of human cognition, not separable from other cognitive endeavors. Neither should religious imagination be treated as something special, but as naturally given. A philosophy of religion is also relieved from the burden of giving evidence of ‘the rationality’ of religious imaginations in general. As a matter of fact, religious imaginations flow in many directions, and combine and conflate in many ways, and cannot be treated as a generic unity.

Where, then, is the question about the rationality of religious imagination at place? I would argue that this question should always be posed in the context of particular religions, and should first be asked to self-reflective members of historically contingent religious groups who want to pass on their communal wisdom to coming generations as well as to strangers.²⁹

Again the question of validity is preceded by the question of meaning. We need to have a clarification of the truth candidates of a given religion before we begin to discuss the question of their validity. Strangers and new generations, who encounter particular sets of religious imaginations will ask, first, ‘What are their meaning and significance?’. Only then can one begin to grapple with the standard philosophy of religion type of question, ‘what are the reasons for believing this

explanatory limits of even all-encompassing laws, see John D. Barrow, *Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation*, New York: Ballantine Books 1991, 164–166.

29. This issue is rightly highlighted by Roger Poivet, ‘Religious Imagination and Virtue Epistemology,’ *Ars Disputandi* 2 (2002) [ESPR Proceedings Cambridge, 2002] <http://www.arstdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000054/index.html>.

or that to be the case?'. The internal elucidation of the truth-candidate logically precedes the search for truth in a trans-communal setting.

What, then, are the truth candidates of religious imagination? Let me start by observing that imaginations (understood as the products of the human capacity for imagination) do not flow unsupported, but are part of wider cognitive networks of other imaginations, assumptions, inferences, arguments, and so on. Images are always part of particular semantic systems, without which we cannot identify the meaning of any particular image. What can be learned from cognitive science is the way in which a particular imagination (say, God as a person) cannot be treated in isolation from the more general inference systems of agency detection. However, what is not made sufficiently clear among the cognitive scientists discussed above, is the extent to which the constituent concepts and imaginations cannot be treated apart from the holistic network of cognitive assumptions. Words are determined in the context of sentences, sentences in the context of utterances, utterances in the context of situations, situations in the context of lifeworlds, lifeworlds in the context of linguistic worldviews, etc. What it means for 'God' to be a person, for example, is different from the perspective of a Mormon (who believes in the finite corporeality of God), a Christian (who believes in incarnation), and a Muslim (who abhors any connection between Godself and bodiliness). Thus the truth-candidates of religious imaginations have always to be specified in relation to the cognitive networks of particular religious communities. It does not seem to me that this holistic dimension of religious is appropriately reflected in Boyer's cognitive theory of religious concepts.³⁰

But more than that. If one takes seriously the truth-claims of living religions, one will almost universally find an *apophatic awareness* of the impenetrability of the divine. Accordingly, many truth-claims are not so much about depicting the reality of God as about the right manners of approaching divine reality. The truth-claims of Judaism, admittedly are based on quite some realist assumptions about God (though G-d is beyond imagination), but the more prevalent truth candidate is that the Torah of G-d offer the right ways of approaching God. *Therefore* the Torah is as old as creation. In a similar vein, Christians do not believe that there exists one God Father, one God Son and one God Spirit, but Christian Trinitarianism is realist in assuming that God is a living community of Love. However, this been said, the images of family life are at once qualified: God is a 'Father' who gives birth; a 'heavenly Father', not an earthly one. Furthermore, the 'Father' is defined as the source of the particular Logos, that came forth in the human being Jesus; the 'Father' is also assumed to inhabit the world in the mode of the Spirit, in a way

30. Neither is this the case in Jerry Fodor's atomistic thesis of 'mental modules', see his critique of meaning holism in Jerry Fodor and Ernest Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, Oxford: Blackwell [1992] 1993, 1–36. The critique (borrowed from Michael Dummett) that 'if holism is true, then I can't understand any of your language unless I can understand practically all of it' (9) only holds, if a holist pretends to gain a fully specified knowledge of any particular. What happens, however, is that we tacitly make reality-assumptions of a more fuzzy nature, as argued by Wilhelm Dilthey and others.

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

that is conformal (but not identical) with the way in which the Father was present in the Son. And so on. Thus, Trinitarian faith involves guidelines for how one should approach God in order to participate in the divine life.³¹ Trinitarian belief does not in fact offer any theory about what God looks like, but it offers a grammar for how to approach God in doxology and prayer, and how to be found by God. It seems to me that this pragmatic dimension of religious faith largely falls under the table in Boyer's approach. Boyer focuses programmatically on religious concepts and mental representations rather than on the pragmatic dimensions of religious communal life.³²

Now, finally, *how* can the rationality of the imaginative networks of particular religions be investigated? Because of the intricacies of this question, I have to state my points of view very briefly in the present context.³³ It seems to me that it is possible (a) to discuss publicly the internal rationality of a given religious network of images, and (b) to evaluate rationally its cognitive fit with other relevant truth candidates.

The *internal logic* of a religious position can be evaluated by its internal consistency as well as by its ability to address relevant features of reality. The monotheistic religions (which arose much later than the hunter-gatherer societies on which Boyer builds his thesis) tend to show a high degree of self-consistency and rational unification. The idea of an omniscient God, who immediately forgets, or of an all-powerful god who only exists on Wednesdays (to use Boyer's examples) are religious non-starters not only with regard to cultural fitness, but also from a rational perspective. There is an internal logic in the belief in one universal God, a logic which cannot be fully derived from the traits of empirical agency detection of pre-historic hunters and gatherers. One can even point to cases, in which the internal logic of God has pushed forward religious reflection late in history. In the days of the Reformation, the Christian position that the infinite God enters into finitude and becomes flesh was seen as a philosophical absurdity that had to be assumed by theologians as a *crux* for human reasoning.³⁴ At

31. Recently, this point has been strongly articulated by Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2000, esp. ch. 2.

32. See Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas*, 276, where he defends the position that 'mental representations are the replicators, and behaviors are among the objects that make their replication possible, in other words, among their vehicles'. I would argue that the behavioral patterns (say, ritual, confession, prayer, meditation) constitute the social context within which the mental ideas of individuals are transmitted. I would add, however, that the internal logic of mental representation, facilitated by cultural systems including scriptures, can have a feedback influence on religious behaviors. The Reformation movement may count as an example.

33. In what follows I am influenced by the pragmatist version of a coherence theory of truth worked out by Nicholas Rescher, see my essay 'A Contextual Coherence Theory for the Science-Religion Dialogue', in *Rethinking Theology and Science*, 1998, 181–2302.

34. See, e.g., Martin Luther, "The Disputation concerning the Passage: 'The Word Was Made Flesh'" (1539), *Luther's Works vol 38*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 239–277, here 245: 'It is true that philosophy acknowledges that God exists and that he is omnipotent; nevertheless, it is in no way possible to acknowledge on the basis of philosophy that he can become man, because God himself is infinite: For if he is of infinite power, he cannot become finite man because man is

least since Hegel, however, the idea of a true infinity that comprises both divine transcendence and the finitude of immanence has pushed religious reflection to a new level of consistency while also complexified the concept of divine infinity and perfection.³⁵ Today it would be very difficult to defend the position philosophically that the divine begins where the world stops. The question about how God, the creator of all-that-is, is related to the world does not allow for bifurcations of separate domains.

The other internal test of religious truth-candidates is more pragmatic in nature, but not less interesting. The question is, Which kind of practices do particular religious imageries allow for? The practices that are recommended by religions may thus be open for rational inquiries and ethical considerations. It could thus be argued, though it is contested, that a religious imagery that favors a praxis of expulsion or persecution of other groups (cf. the presence of apocalyptic motives in all three traditions of the book) is morally inferior in comparison with a stance that allows otherness to co-exist, or which even is able to embrace otherness. The logic of monotheism does not seem to allow for practices that imply, say, that American lives are of higher value than Afghan lives, or that God cares only for the well-being of Muslims, and not people living in Manhattan. I am not hereby implying that these criteria are not debatable, but it seems obvious that religious imaginations are open for ethical as well as theoretical evaluations. As a matter of fact, when addressing the internal logic of religious networks of imagination we are often, in one and the same inquiry, evaluating both doctrines and values. The theoretical cycle of internal systematicity of a given religious position *and* the pragmatic cycle of its applicative power and ethical consequences are strongly interlinked.³⁶

Also the *trans-communal rationality* of a given religious imagery can be evaluated according to the two-fold cycle of theoretical self-substantiation and of pragmatic power. A religious position may thus be judged by its capacity to stand a meaningful communication with other candidates of truth worth taking seriously. The coherence test of a religion thus transcends its mere internal self-consistency. The degree of rationality is also provided by its illuminating force in terms of approaching reality in an open-minded way, and by its capacity to connect the truth-claims of religious images with other relevant candidates for truth. A religion which is only able to relate to non-human nature, but not to human culture (or the other way around) has only a limited degree of rationality. Observe here that rationality is not the same as 'getting it right', or being in possession of the one and only truth, but is marked by the search for further knowledge, by a

a part of the finite' (from Argument 2).

35. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysik und Gottesgedanke*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht 1988, 29–33. Compare Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000, ch. 3.

36. See Nicholas Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism vol 1: Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992, 174–180, and *A System of Pragmatic Idealism, vol 2: The Validity of Values*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993, ch. 4.

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

pursuit of truth in all affairs of life. Religions can be evaluated by the narrowness or width of their respective scope. The stance of today's religions vis-à-vis the very strong truth candidates of modern science may be seen as one such crucial litmus test. But also a religion's capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism is a test of the sincerity of the believers, regardless of the fact that veracity and openness to trans-communal candidates for truth do not guarantee that one is actually in accordance with reality. One can thus be fatally wrong, even while pursuing truth on a rational basis, that is, in an open interaction with the best possible truth candidates in one's cognitive environment. Here as elsewhere, being rational is not the same as having the truth, or being able to give conclusive evidence of the reality-bearings of a given network of images. However, against the background of a monotheistic faith, a double truth (one in philosophy and another in theology) or a total separation between domains of truth is not possible. In this sense, the belief in a God who is the source of all and the principle of all truths, inevitably puts rational constraints on the viability of truth candidates in religion.

Even though the rational pursuit of truth puts some constraints on the wildness of religious imagination, the array of religious imagination is still widely open. It is here that the *religious notion of revelation* enters the picture. The rational presupposition of the idea of revelation is that the nature of God is far from obvious. Even if God is omnipresent in all creation, God is not manifest everywhere in the cosmos, but remains largely hidden. The religious question is in this context, Where in the world has God become manifest and identifiable? Where can God be found? What is, in other words, the criterion for distinguishing between the divine presence (which is everywhere), and the special *loci* of divine self-revelation?

The easy answer to this question is to argue that religious *imagination* is what we as human beings make up ourselves, whereas *revelation* is what God Godself has given us to know. This solution, however, only begs the question. For how could we possibly know, when God's voice, and not our voice, is heard? Moreover, this solution presupposes an unviable dichotomy between human and divine creativity: When humanity comes in, God is supposed to go out, and when God enters the picture, human beings are supposed to be purely passive. However, if the one and only God is creatively present at each moment, there is, from the internal religious perspective, not one single moment in which God is inactive, while human beings take operate on their own. Also, there is no way in which a divine revelation could possibly happen *unmediated* by human or natural agencies. If God is revealed in a burning bush, the bush is the medium; if God is revealed in the words of a prophet, the prophet is the medium; if God is revealed in words, the words are the media. The idea of an unnatural revelation is an oxymoron.

But so is also the idea of a self-revelation of God which passes beyond human understanding. For there is no revelation, if there is nobody *to whom* something is revealed. It may well be that the full implications of a revelation are not yet clear, or maybe forever be beyond grasp. Anyway, revelation is an intrinsically relational phenomenon, in which the objectivity of the phenomenon depends on

the recipient as well as on the one who reveals him- or herself.³⁷ Thus, also the idea of an unhuman revelation is unviable.

What theologians in my view could learn from evolutionary psychology is that a convincing theological notion of divine revelation should not present an event of revelation as a ‘supernatural event’ or an unhuman divine activity which runs contrary to human cognition. Evolutionary psychology here offers an external perspective on religion, which can also be fully acknowledged from the perspective of a scientifically informed theology. Theology can in fact concede that *every* religion is a human construction (also one’s own), in so far as we as human beings are fully active, either as the media grasped by (putatively) divine inspirations, or as the recipients of a revelation. The religious claim is nonetheless that human beings may sometimes make discoveries in the midst of their social learning and their search for religious meaning. Sometimes something new emerges in and through purely human activities, be they ordinary or extra-ordinary.

It is interesting to see how this insight in the fully human nature of divine revelation is maintained in the Biblical stories of Jesus. In the Christian view, Jesus is not just one revelation among others, but the final revelation, that is, a radical self-disclosure of God: The divine source of revelation, ‘the heavenly Father’, and the human medium of revelation, is one and the same. And yet, Jesus is at the same time described as fully human. In fact, Jesus is depicted as a child of the Jewish religion; as a boy his parents found him ‘in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions’ (Luke 2:46). The Son of God tried hard to understand. There is here no sign of a dichotomy between the fully divine medium and a pupil of religious wisdom who is actively trying to reap the fruits of the religious wisdom from old days.

Christianity is probably unique in the history of religions by affirming that one person, Jesus Christ, was fully human and fully divine, without separation and self-contradiction, and yet also without a conflation between the divine and the human. So the famous formula of the synod in Chalcedon from 451. What is unique in the Christian conception of revelation, if I am right, is the radical way in which God enters into humanity in the history of Jesus (the doctrine of incarnation), and the manner in which humanity subsequently re-enters into God (the doctrine of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus). What seems unique here is that the ontological qualities, which have traditionally been excluded from God (God has *no body* and is beyond *finitude*), are now reintroduced into God. It can now be said that *deus homo est*. And: *verbum caro factum est*. But observe that this is only said about the particular humanity of Jesus. For only in him was God (the source of revelation) and human life (the medium of revelation) fully one event. Only here – in this particular life-story – has God radically disclosed Godself and thus made God identifiable for human beings. What according to classic doctrine, however, cannot be allowed is the generalized sentence: *divinitas*

37. Karl Barth could not and present-day Barthians will not accept this phenomenology of revelation, which was rightly emphasized by Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann in 20th century theology.

The Naturalness of Religious Imagination and the Idea of Revelation

est humanitas. For God is in fact not identifiable in a Joseph Stalin or Robert Mugabe, or in the lives of other historic men and women. The distinctiveness of the revelation in Jesus is acutely expressed in the Christological idea of the *communicatio idiomatum*. There is a real communication of attributes – again without separation and without conflation – going on between the divine and human attributes in Jesus Christ, but only *concrete*, that is, in the personal history of Jesus, not *abstracte*, that is, generally.³⁸ Why, we may ask? The answer is once again that even though God is omnipresent and shows concern for any human being, God is not revealing in the history of humanity in general.

Seen through the very distinctive lens of Christology, it might be possible for theologians to describe, in the new language of theology, the finding of evolutionary psychology that talk about God is perhaps all too ubiquitous in the history of religions. Due to the hyperdetection of spiritual agencies, human beings tend to find God and spirits revealed in all sorts of salient or extraordinary events. Accordingly, the theological problem with religion is not that it is now decreasing as a result of secularization. Rather, the problem is that there is too much religion around. Accordingly the theological idea of revelation should perhaps not only be conceived as a new, additional information about God. More importantly, revelation may come about by selection, by cutting off distorted imaginations of the supernatural. Revelation is also about ex-formation, as it were, about getting rid of the ubiquitous tendency to look for all too many traces of gods, spirits, ghosts, talking ebony trees, or imaginative zygoon-monsters.

Revelation, in this perspective, is a sort of pruning principle which is able to sort out what are helpful and what are distorting approaches to the divine. In the case of Christianity the revelation is a person who in himself instantiates the rules to be followed by future recipients of the revelation. Thus revelation is a person, not a rule. Nonetheless Christ is the icon of God that elicits rules for how to proceed in the traces of Christ. However, Christians are baptized not to be imitators, but to be the creative followers of the icon who is always on the road somewhere ahead. In this sense the revelation in Christ offers the ultimate criterion for pruning religious imagination, and yet calls for new images to emergence. Religious imagination is here an art to be learned, not a fixed rule.³⁹

38. See, for instance, the exposition of this classic doctrine (which via John Chrysostomus dates back to the Neo-chalcedonians of the late 5th century) in Martin Luther, 'Die Disputation de divinitate et humanitate Christi' (1540), *Weimarer Ausgabe*, Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger 1931, vol 39/II, 92–121.

39. Revised version of a paper given at the 14th Conference for the European Society for Philosophy and Religion, Clare Hall, Cambridge September 6–9, 2002. The conference version of the paper appeared in *Ars Disputandi* 2(2002) [ESPR Proceedings Cambridge, 2002] <http://www.arsdisputandi.org/publish/articles/000065/index.html>.