BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION AND THE UNIVERSALITY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE: PLURALISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF A NEW APPROACH TO THE THOUGHT OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN*

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PRECIS

Except in a reductionist framework, the phenomenon of revelatory spiritual experience is rarely examined in terms of human characteristics that have an evolutionary history. However, a non-reductionist perspective on this relationship is possible, which has radical implications for a pluralistic assessment of the world's faith traditions. This paper outlines this perspective, previously examined from a Christian viewpoint in the author's books, *Wrestling with the Divine* and *The God of Nature*. Here, however, it is expressed not in terms of the arguments of those books, but in terms of five short theses, which may be adopted from the perspective of any of the world's faiths. These, it is argued, provide an expansion of the intellectual legacy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and provide an understanding of the world's faith traditions that is consonant with the scientific and pluralistic assumptions of the age in which we live.

There are two strands of thinking in theology and in the philosophy of religion that seem to interact only comparatively rarely. One of these is that which arises from the recognition that spiritual experience seems to be a natural part of what it is to be human, and is not limited to people of any particular religious tradition or even to people who have a religious faith in the ordinary sense of that term. The other strand is that which attempts to deal with the spiritual implications of naturalistic thinking about biological complexity, and especially about evolution in its neo-Darwinian form.

The name most commonly associated with the first of these strands of thinking is that of Alister Hardy.[1] Largely as a result of his and his successors' work, it is now widely recognized that spiritual experience is remarkably common, not only in cultures still strongly influenced by traditional religious frameworks, but even in the most secularized of cultures. The name most commonly associated with the second of these strands of thinking is that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.[2] His legacy is, however, rather more controversial than that of Hardy. While there are still ardent Teilhardians to be found, the majority of theologians who accept the broad thrust of his positive attitude towards evolutionary theory often, in practice, tend to distance themselves from his actual work.

For some, this tendency to distance themselves from Teilhard has less to do with substance than with style. What they see as valid in his perception seems to them often to be hidden rather than illuminated by what Peter Medawar – in a famous and devastating review – once referred to as Teilhard's use of a kind of "tipsy, euphoric prose."[3] For others, however, the problem is not only one of style. They are suspicious both of the teleological character of his interpretation of evolution and of the way in which he sometimes tries to move logically from the character of the empirical world to what is essentially a theological understanding. This approach - reminiscent of other forms of the kind of natural theology to which Teilhard's Roman Catholic tradition remains attached – stands in contrast to the approach that tends to dominate the current dialogue between science and theology, in which this type of natural theology is often looked at with distrust. It would have been better, many think, if Teilhard had not aimed for some kind of logical proof, but had simply argued that his theological vision was consonant with his scientific understanding.

We shall return to the issue of theological responses to evolutionary understanding presently, but not simply in terms of the assumptions that are prevalent within the current dialogue between science and theology. For, as I shall argue in what follows, not only are aspects of that dialogue significantly illuminated when approached in terms of questions that arise from Hardy's legacy. In addition, as I shall note, when approached in this way, the teleological aspects of Teilhard's understanding – at present eclipsed within that dialogue - in practice come back into view.

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[1] Hardy's work has been summarized in David Hay, *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006)

[2] A good starting point for studying Teilhard, apart from his own works, is Henri de Lubac, *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin* (London, Burns and Oates, 1965)

[3] Peter Medawar, *Pluto's Republic* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984) p.243

The first thing to note, in this context, is that the status of revelatory spiritual experience is understood rather differently in different faith traditions. For the Buddhist, for example, enlightenment does not involve a personal God, but comes from within each person by processes that can be cultivated by the right kind of meditative technique. In contrast, for most followers of the Abrahamic traditions, it is possible to know the divine reality fully only through response to the way in which a personal God has revealed the divine nature through prophetic inspiration or through historical acts. Within the Christian tradition, for example, many are ambiguous about the fourth gospel's notion that the divine *Logos* [Word] "enlightens everyone" (John 1:9). The universalist implications of this phrase are only rarely emphasized within the Christian community, and religious experience or knowledge that arises through intrinsic human qualities is, in general, seen either as a dangerous diversion (the Barthian protestant view in its earlier forms) or at most (as in the Thomist tradition of natural theology) as a sort of useful preamble to the truth revealed by God through prophetic inspiration and historical acts. Divine revelation is not, for most Christians, to be understood simply as the activation of an inbuilt predisposition to religious understanding. Rather, it is to be understood – at least in its most important components - as the initiative of a personal God who has, at different times, responded to the opportunities to take forward a plan of salvation history.

For much of the last few centuries, this Christian perspective has taken a very particular form because of an implicit equation of divine revelation and propositional, doctrinal knowledge. As a result of this equation, if different versions of the "revealed truth" seem incompatible as propositions, it is often assumed that all but one of them must be either incomplete or inauthentic. Over the last half-century or more there has, however, been a significant modification to this view. Among many protestants, the perspectives of the so-called "biblical theology" movement of the mid-twentieth century have moved the focus, when speaking of revelation, away from the notion of propositional truth and towards the contingency of historical acts, while among Roman Catholics, this perspective has been taken up in a modified way by theologians like Yves Congar. As a result, divine revelation is increasingly seen by Christians as being, not about theological propositions, but as oriented primarily towards salvation, with its expression (as Congar puts it) being "proportionate to our human condition, and couched in the language of men, in images, concepts and judgments like our own."[4] As a result, the possibility that revelation is to be understood less in terms of a simplistic notion of revealed "truth" than of the soteriological needs of the cultures within which it has been received is now a significant factor in mainstream Christian thinking.

Moreover, an expansion of this understanding - beyond the Judaeo-Christian tradition to which it was originally applied – has, for some, become at least thinkable. Keith Ward, for example, has focused on prophetic utterance to develop a pluralistic understanding of revelation as a divine "shaping of human thoughts in particular cultural and historical contexts."[5] As a result of attempts of this kind, God is now increasingly being seen as revealing himself differently in different cultural contexts. Not only (as Ward puts it) "does God use the natural language of a people; God uses their thought forms, their characteristic modes of expression, and their penumbra of tacit connotations and resonances."[6]

This kind of understanding—with its move away from propositional statements to a more subtle focus on soteriological factors and cultural appropriateness—clearly allows us, as Ward suggests, to see the apparent incompatibility of different faith traditions as being possibly illusory. Moreover, this general perspective may, for the Christian, be reinforced by the kind of christological thinking emphasized by people like Philip Sherrard, who sees no tension between his Christian understanding and an essentially pluralistic outlook. The divine *Logos* he argues, because it truly enlightens everyone, should be seen as "hidden everywhere" so that "the types of His reality, whether in the forms of persons or teachings, will not be the same outside the Christian world as they are within it."[7] Like Ward, Sherrard sees the differences between various faith traditions as being "due to the differences in the cultural milieux for which each is providentially intended and to which each is therefore adapted."[8] It is, he says, perfectly consonant with a traditionalist Christianity to suggest that it is "the Logos who is received in the spiritual illumination of a Brahmin, a Buddhist, or a Moslem." [9] The fact that this pluralistic possibility is not widely recognized by Christians is, according to Sherrard, largely due to the fact that they have often adopted a false, "linear" notion of salvation history.

What Sherrard means by this may be illuminated by some perceptive comments by John Behr, who has argued that throughout the early centuries of their faith community's existence, Christian theologians did not think in terms of the notion of salvation history that has been prevalent among Christians in modern times, in which one

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[4] Quoted by W. Henn, "The Hierarchy of Truths According to Yves Congar, O.P.," *Analecta Gregoriana* 246 (1987), p.115
[5] Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation: A Theology of Revelation in the World's Religions* 9Oxford, Clarendon, 1994) p.91, n.73
[6] Ibid, p.24
[7] Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* (Edinburgh, T and T Clark, 1998) pp. 62-3
[8] Ibid., p.63
[9] Ibid., p.62

event follows another in a linear progression towards some well-defined intended end. Early Christian thinking was based, according to Behr, not on this linear view, but on a perception of the revelation in Christ as the "beginning" that makes sense of all other salvific events, whatever their temporal relation to it. For traditional Christianity, he insists, the truth of Christ "is eternal, or better, timeless."[10]

Sherrard's adoption of this kind of perspective is in some respects less subtle than Behr's. Where he goes beyond Behr in a creative way, however, is in his adding to this type of critique an understanding of the divine *Logos* of the kind found in early Christian writers like Justin Martyr, in which "the economy of the divine Logos" is specifically recognized as including religious and philosophical traditions other than the Judaeo-Christian one, so that this economy "cannot be reduced to … manifestation in the figure of the historical Jesus."[11] What was experienced in the historical Jesus is, for Sherrard, something to be understood in a fully pluralistic context: as a manifestation of an eternal reality that is experienced, at least in some degree, in all authentic[12] revelatory experience, whether this occurs within or outside of the community within which Christianity arose historically.

If we accept the immediate theological implications of this approach,[13] then a number of interrelated questions arise. If the history of revelatory experiences is to be understood other than in terms of a simple succession of events initiated by God, then in what sense are these events to be seen as "actions" of God? Are they still the result of temporal "responses" of God to situations that arise in particular cultural and historical contexts, as seems to be implied by Ward's approach? If so, then these responses are still actions of the kind of temporal God that Sherrard and Behr seem to be moving away from and, what is more, of a God who might be seen as having little awareness of the troublesome consequences of his actions. (For example, can pluralists really speak of the wisdom of a temporal God who provided a revelation for the Arabs who were to become Muslims that would prove extremely difficult to reconcile with the one that had previously been given to those who became Christians – a problem that has fuelled Christian-Muslim antagonism for centuries?) However, if we take a different approach, and see the revelatory experiences of humankind other than in terms of this kind of temporal model, then we seem to be heading towards a model in which revelatory experiences are regarded as manifestations of an eternal reality that arise, so to speak, in a way that is "naturally appropriate" to particular cultural contexts. From this it is only a short step to an essentially naturalistic, psychological understanding of revelatory experience, of the kind that for many will seem to be susceptible to the kind of reductionistic analysis that claims that some particular scientific insight - from evolutionary psychology, say, or from neurophysiology - is adequate to "explain" revelatory and other religious experiences in terms that need make no reference at all to the divine reality.

This observation brings us to the second of the major issues that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay: that of how naturalistic explanation in general, and evolutionary understanding in particular, may be used in relation to the question of the nature of spiritual experience. This is, of course, a question related to more general questions about divine action that have long been considered within the dialogue between science and theology. However, while many books and articles have addressed this wider question, there has been little focus on the specific issue of spiritual experience in this context, despite the fact that it was highlighted on a number of occasions by Arthur Peacocke - one of the leading voices in the dialogue between science and theology of the last half-century - who pondered (but never fully answered) the 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".[14]

Up to now, the only detailed response to this specific question is that in my own work, summarized in my books *Wrestling with the Divine*[15] and *The God of Nature*[16]. An interesting characteristic of the general model

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[10] Ibid., p.17
[11] Ibid., p.61
[12] The question of authenticity inevitably arises from the existence of experiences that are clearly neurotic or pychotic in origin. Here, judgment must be based partly on the "fruits" of the experience in existential terms, and partly on the coherence and explanatory success of the doctrinal language that arises from the experience, See the discussion of the latter in Christopher C.Knight, *Wrestling With the Divine: Religion Science and Revelation*,(Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001)especially pp.35-43,
[13] These implications are explored in Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007) pp.61-68; c.f. Christopher C .Knight, "The Christian Tradition and the Faiths of the World: Some Aspects of the Thought of Philip Sherrard", *Theology* CXI (2008), 336-345.
[14] Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming – Natural, Divine and Human (*London, SCM 1993) p.202
[15] Christopher C .Knight, *Wrestling With the Divine: Religion, Science, and Revelation* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2001)
[16] Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2007)

outlined in these books, which has only become clear to me since their publication, is that it is not dependent on the particular (Christian) perspectives through which it was developed and expressed in those books, but may be developed on the basis of five basic theses[17] that do not rely on any particular faith tradition:

> The human psyche may be understood in principle entirely in terms of the development of the cosmos through natural processes from the Big Bang to the evolutionary emergence of specifically human qualities.
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> 1. All experiences that give the impression of being revelatory of a divine reality are the spontaneous, natural products of the human psyche, and do not require any notion of "special" divine action to explain them. These experiences are culturally-conditioned, in that their specific forms will relate to both the individual psychological make-up and culturally-determined expectations of those who receive them. These factors are sufficient to explain why, in different individuals and cultural contexts, there is considerable diversity in the types of such experiences and of the religious languages that arise from them.
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> 2. The belief of most religious people, that their own faith's foundational revelatory experiences have given rise to a religious language that is genuinely referential to a divine reality, is a valid one. This divine reality - as something to which reference can validly be made - is therefore ontologically defensible.
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> 3. The diversity of the religious languages that arise from different revelatory experiences does not necessarily imply that they cannot all validly refer to the divine reality. A pluralistic understanding of their referential success is possible.
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> 4. The cosmos, in which the revelation-oriented human psyche has arisen naturalistically, is attributable to the "will" or character of the divine reality to which authentic revelatory experience bears witness. (As those of the Abrahamic traditions might put it, the probability that some creatures would come to know their creator was built into the cosmos, by that creator, from its very beginning.)

At first sight, these theses may seem to be in tension with one another or even seem irreconcilable, and I cannot fully set out here the somewhat complex philosophical and theological arguments, set out in my books, which indicate that these tensions may be overcome. These arguments depend partly on what I called a *psychological-referential model of revelatory experience*, based in part on the kind of approach to God's action as creator developed by Arthur Peacocke, and in part on an assessment of the nature of religious language rooted in philosophical reflections on the nature of scientific language.[18] In addition, especially in the second of these books, this approach takes into account the growing recognition within the scientific community – emphasized by Simon Conway Morris[19] – 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 about what some have called *evolutionary convergence* provides, I have argued, an important underpinning to extending Peacocke's idea that God designed a world that makes itself naturalistically with particular ends in mind. It allows us. I have argued, to attribute to God the specific goal in the evolutionary process of the coming into existence of a particular "human" psychology – one in which revelatory experience naturally occurs when the conditions for such occurrence are satisfied.[20]

As already noted, however, my five main theses do not depend upon the particular arguments, rooted in the Christian tradition, which I have used in these books. They may in fact be developed from a number of different perspectives, and are not dependent on any particular faith tradition. In this sense, the model, as expressed in terms of them, is remarkably robust, and may be seen as having strong claims to coherence, scope, agreement with data and fertility.[21] In particular, because each of these theses may be defended in terms other than those that I have myself found most persuasive, the claim to fertility is perhaps the most obviously defensible. The theses are able to give rise to many research programmes parallel to my own, and any one of these might ultimately lead to an understanding of the human propensity to religious experience that will, without denying the validity of religious belief, be widely acceptable in our scientific and pluralistic age.

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[17] These five theses were first set out explicitly in Christopher C. Knight, "*Homo Religiosus*: A Theological Proposal for a Scientific and Pluralistic Age", in Nancey Murphy and Christopher C. Knight, eds., *Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology and Religion* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010) pp.25-38

[18] Ibid., pp.11-22

[19] Simon Conway Morris, *Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003)

[20] Knight, *The God of Nature*, pp.117-120

[21] For an explanation of how these "foundationalist" concept may remain applicable in a postfoundationalist context, see Knight, *Wrestling With The Divine*, pp.53-62

In a postfoundationalist age with its emphasis on particularity, however, a universalist model of this sort will be persuasive for many only if it can be developed through research programmes rooted in particular faith traditions. Here, perhaps, my own previous exploration in the context of the Christian tradition may serve as an exemplar to those of other traditions, for, as the arguments set out in my books illustrate, my five basic theses may be illuminated and rendered more plausible for the Christian by two auxiliary theses:

> 1. The prime revelatory experiences that gave rise to the Christian faith – the resurrection appearances of Christ – may be seen as consonant with the general model of revelatory experience that I have defended. [22]
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> 2. The traditional distinction between "special" and "general" modes of divine providence may be rendered redundant (as required by my second main thesis) by developing an understanding of divine action in terms of a "teleological-christological" understanding of a panentheistic kind, based in part on the Logos cosmology of the Eastern Christian tradition and in part on current evolutionary thinking.[23]

The fact that the first of these auxiliary theses involves a case study may perhaps point the way forward for research programmes in other faiths also. For while it might be thought that the most difficult possible case study for my general model lies in the experiences at the heart of the Christian revelation – the resurrection appearances of Christ – this difficulty in fact turns out not to be insuperable. It is, I have argued, possible to analyse these appearances in a way that links my general understanding of revelatory experience to mainstream Christian thinking about these appearances, drawing out important parallels between my view and that of Roman Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar.[24] If this kind of underpinning can be found in the hard case of Christianity, we might wonder, is it not likely that something comparable can be found in other faiths as well?

The second of these auxiliary theses may be also of interest to those beyond the Christian tradition, because it indicates that although each faith tradition must use its own resources when it comes to finding a specific theological underpinning for (or critique of) my model, it may turn out, when this is done, that parallels with other faiths will present themselves. Here, in fact, the specific content of this auxiliary thesis - the Eastern Christian understanding of the presence of the divine *Logos* in all created things – turns out to point towards significant parallels in other religious traditions, not least in some of Islam's more mystical strands (in which the notion of the *Logos* is important) and in Taoism, where the notion of the "eternal Way" manifests interesting parallels with the Christian understandings of the *Logos*.

It is, I believe, through this use of the concept of the divine *Logos* – especially as worked out in the thinking of St.Maximos the Confessor - that the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, and of other theologians who see evolutionary perspectives as central to their understanding, can be significantly clarified, not only for the Christian but also for those of other faiths if they can accept or adapt a *Logos* philosophy of the kind that existed prior to its adoption and modification by Christian theology. My argument hinges on the way in which St. Maximos's understanding manifests a general intuition that is implicit throughout the Eastern Christian tradition: that it is quite wrong to speak— as Western theology often has— of divine grace as something added as a supernatural gift to "pure nature". Rather, as Vladimir Lossky has rightly noted, this Eastern tradition knows nothing of "pure nature", since it sees grace as being "implied in the act of creation itself". Because of this, as he goes on to note, the cosmos is seen as inherently "dynamic... tending always to its final end".[25]

Teleology—the belief that things have a natural "place" or *telos* towards which they naturally tend—is now extremely unfashionable, especially among scientists who are aware that the birth of modern science came about partly through the rejection of the kind of Aristotelian teleological thinking that dominated the intellectual landscape of the late medieval period in the West. What Lossky hints at here, however, is something rather more subtle than this kind of teleology. He is certainly right in perceiving the way in which, for important strands of Byzantine theology, at least some aspects of divine providence arise from within the creation through the intrinsically teleological factors that have been, so to speak, built into its components. However, when we look at the classic expressions of this viewpoint in the Byzantine tradition, we find something that is in fact not at odds with a modern scientific outlook at all.

This is particularly clear in the work of St. Maximos himself, since he sees the *logos* that constitutes the inner reality of each created thing, not only as a manifestation of the divine *Logos* of which the fourth gospel speaks, but

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[22] Ibid., pp.23-33; cf. Knight, *The God of Nature*, pp.40-46.
[23] Knight, *The God of Nature*, 111-123; c.f. Christopher C. Knight, "Divine Action: A Neo-Byzantine Model", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005), pp.48-61
[24] Knight, *Wrestling With the Divine*, pp.23-35; c.f. Knight, *The God of Nature*, pp.40-46
[25] Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge, James Clarke, 1957) p.101

also as what Kallistos Ware has described as "God's intention for that thing, its inner essence, that which makes it distinctively itself and at the same time draws it towards the divine realm." [26] For St. Maximos, - and for the strand of the Greek patristic tradition that culminates in his work - the way in which each created thing has its origin and intended final end in God is intimately linked to the constitutive presence in it of a characteristic *logos* which is a manifestation, in some sense, of the divine *Logos* itself. This presence not only gives, to each created thing, the being it has in the temporal world, but also draws it — from within, not by some external, "special" action — towards its ultimate fulfillment.

This approach posits, then, a model of the created order that is both teleological and christological. It is a teleological model in the sense that created things are continuously drawn towards their intended final end (though not in a way that subverts human free will and its consequences). It is a christological model – though not, as Sherrard's thinking illustrates, one limited to an exclusivist Christian interpretation - in the sense that this teleological dynamism comes about, not through some external created "force", but through the inherent presence of the divine *Logos* in the innermost essence of each created thing.

At the present time, perhaps, few outside the Eastern Orthodox tradition are likely to accept the details of the Byzantine philosophical articulation of this cosmic vision, and even within that tradition it may seem legitimate, and even necessary, to recast or expand that vision in terms of recent scientific insights.[27] Whatever view we take of this, however, what seems a legitimate goal, for both those within, and those outside this tradition, is the articulation of what we might call a neo-Byzantine model of divine action, based on the general "teleological-christological" character of the vision that St. Maximos sets forth. For what such a model promises is a capability of envisaging a mode of divine action that is neither the "special", nor the "general" mode of the predominant strand of Western thinking. By allowing us to transcend the need for any distinction between what nature can do "on its own" and what can only be done through some "special" mode of action, a neo- Byzantine model of this sort would allow us to see God's presence and action in the cosmos simply as two sides of the same coin. In this respect, it seems not only to tend towards the sort of Western Thomist model which speaks in terms of primary and secondary causes—and especially toward the form of that model recently developed by Denis Edwards,[28] which effectively makes the distinction between special and general providence redundant just as my own model does. In addition, it gives to this model a far more definitive theological grounding than it has usually been given, with clear links to the kind of teleological thinking that is characteristic of the work of Teilhard de Chardin.

Here, two key points need to be made. The first is that, in speaking of a teleological factor in this context, I am speaking of something that is not the same as the teleological factor assumed in the Aristotelian thought of the late medieval West and reacted against in the development of modern science. Rather, I am speaking in terms of the kinds of consideration that have given rise to arguments about the so-called anthropic cosmological principle[29], based purely on scientific insights. The model I advocate does not compete with the concept of laws of nature, as understood scientifically, but focuses –as do anthropic arguments in their modern form - on the meaningful outcome of the working of those laws. It envisages – in a way that is consonant with what is valid in Teilhard's thought - what we might call a teleology of complexity: a framework in which we can see significance in the increasing intricacy of the cosmos's structures and in the successive emergent properties to which this intricacy gives rise. Just as it is possible for Simon Conway Morris to talk about evolutionary convergence in terms of predictable, functional solutions to problems of adaptation— "attractors" analogous to those in chaos theory— so here teleology is understood, not as in medieval Western philosophy, but in terms very similar to those Morris has outlined. The interaction of chance and the laws of nature is such, it would seem, that certain developmental paths are in practice very likely to be followed, and these "attractors" may, in a theological perspective, be explicitly understood as a component of the divine intention. In terms of biology, for example, what for Morris is simply a guess about the outcome of a scientific research program may be taken, for a theological model, as axiomatic: that there is "a deeper fabric in biology in which Darwinian evolution remains central as the agency, but the [attractors] are effectively determined from the Big Bang."[30]

The second point to be made arises from this insight. It is that, in speaking here in terms of teleology, I am not adopting the sort of quasi- vitalistic framework in which the components of the universe are seen as being drawn towards an intended final end by some external agent or force. "Attractors"— in the sense in which Conway Morris uses the term — do not literally attract through some kind of force or influence that they exert. They are simply some likely outcomes of the laws of nature acting on the components of the universe, and they may be understood,

[26] Ware op. cit, p.160 [Ward?]
[27] Louth op.cit.p.189
[28] Denis Edwards, *How God Acts: Creation, Redemption, and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2010)
[29] See John D. Barrow and Frank J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford, Clarendon Press. 1986)
[30] Morris, *Life's Solution* pp.309-10

scientifically, in terms that make no reference to these outcomes themselves. We may, in a theological context, choose to speak of the reality of these attractors in terms of God's design of the entire universe, but, if we do this, it is important to recognize that the tendencies we identify as part of the divine design are, for the purposes of purely scientific description, irrelevant. The theological interpretation of these tendencies in no way impinges on their scientific description in the way it would if a vitalistic understanding were adopted.

The relevance of this second point to the question of divine action becomes clear when we recall the character of the teleological tendency posited by the strand of the Byzantine tradition embodied in the work of St. Maximos the Confessor. For there, too, as we have seen, there is an understanding of the cosmos' teleological tendency that has precisely this character. Put in modern terms, the *logos* of each created thing, as perceived by St. Maximos, is not something which is added to the laws of nature, but is, rather, something manifested in those laws.

Recognition of this parallelism between ancient and modern perspectives cannot, of course, lead in any simplistic way to the claim that the earlier model anticipates an important aspect of contemporary science. At the level of details, this is clearly far from true. At a more fundamental level, however, we can surely recognize that there is a broad consonance between the two kinds of understanding. By pointing to the way in which the "laws of nature" perceptible to the scientist have a teleological effect — both in the physical development of the cosmos, and in the biological evolution of the species of our planet — scientific perspectives do suggest important parallels between what we now call the laws of nature and what St. Maximos calls the *logoi* of created things. At the very least, there seems to be a sense in which, when teleology is discussed at this low level, there need be no dissonance between the scientific perspectives and the basic insights of the teleological-christological model may be articulated on the basis of his thinking.

Moreover, when we take into account both the philosophical and scientific perspectives on the effects of complexity that are now widely accepted, we can go much further than this. In *The God of Nature* I have argued - from a philosophical rather a theological perspective - that there is no need to limit the "fixed instructions" of the universe to scientifically explorable ones, and have further argued that this conclusion will have a specific application here. These arguments indicate that there is no reason to limit the teleological tendency of created things to the inherent creativity of the particular, limited set of the laws of nature that scientists can investigate. Rather, from the perspective of a teleological-christological model, it is quite possible to see the laws of nature that are perceptible to the scientist as representing no more than a "low-level" manifestation of what St. Maximos calls the characteristic *logoi* of created things. Over and above this level of manifestation, there may be for this model, at least in principle, higher levels of manifestation which — even though they are "law-like"— are inevitably beyond what the scientific methodology is able to examine. In this sense, it is not impossible that "paranormal events" or "miracles" might occur – not as the result of something being added to or replacing the processes of the world, but as manifestations of laws of nature that are not susceptible to scientific investigation because of the level of complexity at which they occur. This has interesting implications for the future development of the cosmos, because the correlation of miracles with human sanctity indicates that a process that until very recently was powered (so to speak) purely by the divine intention, through natural processes, now requires, in some sense, human co-operation. What the Eastern tradition sees as the returning of the world to its natural state from its present "fallen" state – what Teilhard would have spoken of as the future movement towards the omega point – is something that requires the transformation of the human person, so that the miraculous can increasingly become the norm.[31]

My conclusion from all these considerations is that we can articulate a teleological-christological model of divine presence and action in the world which allows us both to acknowledge the general insights about teleological tendencies that arise from the natural sciences, and also to appropriate these insights in such a way that we can by-pass the usual objections to the concept of teleology and avoid the conventional distinction between general and special providence. On the one hand, we can acknowledge that the teleological traits of the cosmos that are visible to the scientist — those to be seen in the physical development of the universe and in the biological evolution of the species of our planet — represent an important clarification of what we might call the "low-level teleology" inherent in a teleological-christological cosmos. On the other hand, we can insist, from a theological perspective, that manifestations of a "higher-level teleology" are to be expected in the model we are using. These latter manifestations, while lying beyond what the scientists' methodology can investigate, need not in any way be contradicted by a scientific understanding. They can, in principle, account for all that has previously been attributed to God's special providence.

To conclude this essay, I should like to outline an aspect of my model that is in fact relevant to our thinking even if we do not adopt my antireductionist stance. This arises from the way in which, by speaking of revelatory

[31] Knight, *The God of Nature*, pp.86-95; c.f. Christopher C Knight, "The Fallen Cosmos: An Aspect of Eastern Christian Thought and its Relevance to the Dialogue Between Science and Theology", *Theology and Science* 6 (2008) pp. 305-18

experience as the spontaneous, natural product of the human psyche, we are inevitably drawn towards an analogy with the way in which we speak about how life has developed and diversified on our planet. Just as in the latter case we understand diversity partly in terms of the possibilities inherent in particular ecological niches, so in the case of revelatory experiences, I have suggested, we may understand diversity by recognizing the existence of particular "psycho-cultural niches," defined - as is indicated by my second main thesis - by two inter-related factors, both explored in the work of Karl Rahner. The first is the way in which the content of any particular revelatory experience will relate to certain culturally-conditioned expectations and needs. The second is the way in which it can only arise in the context of a particular sort of "contemplative" psychological openness to the divine reality.[32]

The analogy of these psycho-cultural niches with ecological ones provides some interesting insights. One is that just as a particular ecological niche restricts the kinds of new biological species that can emerge and spread within it, so a particular psycho-cultural niche may be seen as implying restrictions on what kinds of religious experience will be possible within it. Just as polar bears could not have emerged as a species other than in a polar region, so, in this view, any particular religious faith will have been able to emerge only in a particular culture, and within that culture only in certain individuals.

This is, of course, simply another way of expressing Sherrard's and Ward's insights about the way in which the differences between religious faiths are, as Sherrard puts it, "due to the differences in the cultural milieux for which each is providentially intended and to which each is therefore adapted."[33] When expressed in niche terms, however, another insight arises which does not arise straightforwardly from this sort of language. Because the possibility of religious conversion – the acceptance of a particular revelatory "story" – is clearly linked to the psychological and cultural factors that made that story's initial emergence possible, the spread of religious traditions becomes intelligible in a new way.

Thus, for example, the niche model not only provides a way of thinking about how Christianity emerged as a successful "mutation" of first-century Judaism, but it also provides an explanation of why the Christian revelation had its most profound secondary impact in the Hellenistic world and not in other regions to which early Christian missionaries also went. There is a direct analogy with the reasons that a species would be expected to flourish after its emergence only in a certain type of environment. Thus the development of Hellenistic Christianity may be seen, in "niche" terms, as equivalent to the successful adaptation of a species – sometimes with important modifications – to an environment other than that in which it emerged. The relative failure of Christian evangelism in other areas can similarly be understood: as a failure in adaptation, analogous, for example, to the failure of polar bears to flourish in more southerly regions than they do. The way in which a biological species is no longer to be found in its original geographical location, because of ecological changes, also has its parallels here. Thus, the dying out of the original Judaistic Christianity may be seen in terms of the way in which the psycho-cultural niche provided by early-first-century Judaism was so radically changed – both by the emergence of Christianity and by the fall of Jerusalem as a Judaic city—that Judaistic Christianity could no longer flourish and in fact gradually died out.

The core of the idea of the psycho-cultural niche is, then, that just as life is potentially multiform and will arise and develop new forms spontaneously through natural (chemical and biological) processes, in accordance with the possibilities inherent in a given ecological environment, so revelatory experience, arising through natural, psychological processes, is also multiform, in a way that makes more readily explicable, in a pluralistic way, the many faith traditions of the world.

If regarded reductionalistically, this aspect of what it is to be human will be regarded merely as something that once had survival value for our ancestors and perhaps still has survival value today. If taken in the context of my five main theses, however, it has a much richer content.

[32] Knight, *Wrestling With the Divine*, 112-114; c.f. Knight, *The God of Nature*, pp.55-56
[33] Sherrard, *Christianity*, p.63