

Spiritual Intelligence and the *Nous*: Implications for Understanding the Relationship Between the Faith Traditions of the World

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Abstract: The modern concept of spiritual intelligence exhibits parallels with the ancient Greek philosophical understanding of the *nous*. This ancient understanding was used extensively in late antique and early medieval theological thinking and is still influential in some faith traditions. However, the implications of this understanding for exploring questions about religious pluralism have not been widely acknowledged. These implications arise from the way in which the *noetic* perception that arises from the full functioning of the *nous* is seen as essentially intuitive in nature, so that the relationship between this perception and religious doctrinal statements may be understood in terms of a radically apophatic understanding of religious language usage. Vladimir Lossky has proposed this stance as characteristic of Eastern patristic perspectives. In relation to this understanding, parallels with the perennialist tradition are evident and—even though this tradition in its classic form exhibits major flaws that need to be corrected—its pluralism becomes highly suggestive. This suggestiveness is reinforced by a number of other considerations, not least the recent “theological turn” in discussion of divine action within the science-theology dialogue, which permits an essentially “naturalistic” understanding of revelatory experiences. There may, nevertheless, be reasons for adopting “reciprocal inclusivism” rather than a full-blown pluralism of this kind.

Keywords: apophaticism; esoteric ecumenism; nous; perennialism; religious pluralism; spiritual intelligence

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Spiritual intelligence is a concept that is often approached through scientific or psychotherapeutic considerations in much the same way as is the concept of emotional intelligence. My intention in this paper is not, however, to contribute to these lines of enquiry but to outline some *theological* perspectives that may be related to the concept of spiritual intelligence and contribute to our exploration of it. At the heart of these theological perspectives is the way in which the concept of spiritual intelligence may be seen as echoing aspects of the understanding that ancient Greek philosophers—and after them the Greek-speaking Christian theologians of the patristic and later periods—expressed in terms of what they called the *nous*. (This concept has many other theological implications, and I have outlined these implications elsewhere.)¹

This word *nous* is often translated into English as “intellect,” partly because of its early translation into Latin as *intellectus*. This English translation is, however, potentially misleading to present day readers because the English term “intellect” is often now understood as the seat of discursive reasoning. However, the term *nous*—at least in philosophical usage²—refers to something quite different: to an essentially intuitive faculty that enables discernment of what is true or real. Indeed, especially in its theological usage in the patristic period, it may be seen as anticipating the general meaning that is now often associated with the term spiritual intelligence.

1 For an analysis of the *nous* concept in terms of both these theological implications and modern scientific understandings, see Christopher C. Knight, “The Human Mind in This World and the Next: Scientific and Early Theological Perspectives,” *Theology and Science* 16:2 (2018): 151–165, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2018.1455265>.

2 The term *nous* was common enough among Greek speakers of the ancient and late antique world to be used in their everyday speech in a way that did not always fully reflect philosophical usage. In the New Testament, for example, it was used quite often in the letters of Paul. Some regard Paul’s usage as reflecting ancient philosophical understanding, at least in some degree, while others claim that his use of the word *nous* related more to what was referred to in later writings as *dianoia*, the discursive rational faculty. However, the view that one takes on this issue of proper exegesis of Paul’s usage does not affect what follows, since it does not rely on any particular New Testament exegesis but on the philosophical perspectives that informed later patristic usage.

There are, admittedly, several distinct, if related, understandings of the *nous* to be found in early Christian authors, due in part to the ways in which they took up one or other of the different nuances of the term to be found in the works of Aristotle, of Plato, and of the Neoplatonists. Nevertheless, the concept of the *nous* was widely used by these authors in relation to its perceived functions as “a connector, the medium by which we relate to God, the ordering principle of our relation to the complex that is ourselves, and the director of external relations, inasmuch as our moral existence stands at its command.”³

An aspect of this use of the concept by early Christian authors was a sense that the *nous* should be seen as the organ of a kind of contemplation that transcends discursive thinking. Indeed, in many strands of Christian thinking, it was seen as central to the relationship between the human person and God: the point at which the human mind is in some sense in direct contact with the divine mind. In the patristic roots of modern Eastern Orthodox understanding, for example, faith itself was often seen as related to the *nous*,⁴ and in general the *nous* was seen as “the highest faculty in man, through which—provided it is purified—he knows God or the inner essences of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception.”⁵ The full noetic perception to which the unfettered use of the *nous* gives rise was, however, regarded as being at least partially eclipsed in “fallen”

3 A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.

4 In relation to Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, for example, see Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Gregory did not use the term faith (*pistis*) as it had been used in much early Greek philosophy, in which it had denoted the lowest form of knowledge. Instead, as Laird puts it, while Gregory uses notions to be found in the work of the Neoplatonist Plotinus, he nevertheless ascribes to faith “qualities which Neoplatonism would reserve for the crest of the wave of *nous*” (2).

5 Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 248–249. (The implicit reference here is to the understanding that was most highly developed in the work of Maximus the Confessor.)

humanity, and this eclipse was seen as remediable only through spiritual practice.⁶

This understanding is reflected in the way in which, in the Greek vocabulary employed in patristic (and modern Eastern Orthodox) use of the *nous* concept, different words are used for different kinds of knowledge, which are seen as arising from different kinds of mental and spiritual activity. Especially in the hesychastic⁷ understanding that became highly influential in Eastern Orthodox thinking, full knowledge of God must be based on contemplation (*theōria* in Greek) which is seen as the direct perception or vision by the *nous*.⁸ This faculty is not the same as the discursive reasoning faculty (*dianoia*), which may have a role to play in overcoming the partial eclipse of the *nous* in “fallen” humanity but is nevertheless understood as functioning adequately in theological analysis only if rooted in the spiritual knowledge (*gnōsis*) obtainable through direct apprehension by the *nous*.⁹ Without this rooting, there is a significant danger that the concepts we form “in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing

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- 6 Here, we need to recognise that there is a difference between the dominant interpretations of the effects of the Fall in the Eastern and Western parts of the Christian world. In the West, the Augustinian notions were highly influential, in contrast with the less pessimistic understandings of the East, so that the role of the *nous* and of its relationship to discursive reasoning tend to be seen in different ways. See the discussion in Christopher C. Knight. “Natural Theology and the Eastern Orthodox Tradition,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 213–226.
- 7 This word, *hesychast*, deriving from the Greek term for silence or stillness, refers to the understanding of contemplative practice which—especially since its defence by Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century—has been dominant within Orthodoxy and particularly in its monastic practice.
- 8 This term *theōria* is, admittedly, used in some strands of patristic thinking in a different way that relates to discursive thinking, so that it is specifically the hesychastic strand of thinking to which I refer in what follows.
- 9 See, e.g., the brief discussion of all these terms given in the “glossary” section of *The Philokalia*, vol.1, ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 357–367. There may, however, be a tendency in this glossary to suggest a uniformity of usage that is in fact not to be found in the texts of *The Philokalia*, which is an anthology of texts from many different writers.

ourselves on an intelligible representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself.”¹⁰

Linked to this understanding is the kind of apophaticism that scholars like Vladimir Lossky present as central to the Eastern Christian understanding of theological language usage.¹¹ In this “mystical” understanding, there is a strong sense that the terms used in religious language can never circumscribe the realities towards which they attempt to point. This understanding is often presented as constituting a “negative theology” that focuses on saying what God is not, rather than on what God is, and this certainly reflects part of its meaning. To speak of this apophaticism only in terms of negative theology is, however, potentially problematical because these terms can be understood in different ways.¹² It is important to state straightaway, therefore, that the kind of apophaticism on which I shall focus in what follows is essentially of the radical (and somewhat controversial)¹³ kind that Lossky propounds. As he himself has stressed, this version of apophaticism is not to be understood only in terms of the distinction between the theological path that it offers and the path of *cataphatic* or positive theology, which proceeds by affirmations rather than negations. The more radical form of apophaticism that he advocates, and which I shall

10 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957), 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2.165).

11 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*.

12 Aydogan Kars, *Unsayng God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), has commented that negative theology, when “unqualified is also disqualified” (14). Kars makes this point in relation to Islamic negative thinking, on which his study concentrates, but his point is valid in relation to other traditions as well.

13 Patristics scholars, especially in recent decades, have seen the sometimes too strong a stress on the apophaticism of certain patristic writers as ignoring some of the nuances to be found in their writings, including those of Gregory of Nyssa, on whom Lossky puts significant emphasis. See, e.g., Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), in which it is asserted that we should see Basil and Gregory less as “mystics devoted primarily to the *via negativa*” and more as “subtle thinkers devoted to preserving the coherence and consistency of the myriad positive affirmations of Christian scripture and worship, while nonetheless acknowledging the ultimate incomprehensibility of God” (vii).

expand in what follows, is what he calls “an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God.”¹⁴ This kind of apophaticism is not merely “saying what God is not” because—as Lossky’s fellow-Orthodox, Olivier Clément, has stressed—this strand of Orthodox understanding is one in which “negation is denied just as much as affirmation.”¹⁵

This apophatic understanding has parallels in several non-Christian faith traditions,¹⁶ and among its implications is one that has hitherto largely been ignored. This is the possibility that it provides new ways of analysing attitudes towards faith traditions other than one’s own.¹⁷ As we shall see, it provides, not only a way of rejecting the kind of exclusivism that can see no validity in faith traditions other than one’s own, but also of modifying the separation that is usually assumed

14 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 38–39.

15 Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Text and Commentary* (London: New City, 1993), 31.

16 For example, Marco Pallis, in his book, *A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003), has stressed that the Buddhist tradition’s reluctance to speak of God (or even of the self) should be understood in terms of the “apophatic method which Buddhism favours” (131). In a comparable way, strands of Islamic thinking manifest an apophatic attitude. In Islam’s Shi’ite strand of thinking, for example, negative theology is related to a sense of the unknowability of God’s *essence* that is comparable to the similar stress that exists within Eastern Orthodox Christianity (in which the distinction between God’s *essence* and *energies* became especially influential through the work of Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, though the distinction can be found much earlier). The Arabic term for “negative theology,” *lahoot salbi*, the practice of which involves the use of *ta’til*, which means “negation,” is related in Shi’ite teaching to the way in which God is seen in terms of “two ontological levels: first, of the Essence (*dāt*). This is said to be forever inconceivable, unimaginable, above all thought, beyond all knowledge. It can only be described by God through revelations and can only be apprehended by a negative apophatic theology ... However, if things were to remain so, no relation would be possible between the Creator and His creatures. Thus God, in his infinite grace, lets blossom in his own being another level: of Names and Attributes (*asmā’ wa šefāt*) by which He reveals himself and makes himself known. This revealed level, recalling the *Deus revelatus* of Christian theology, is no longer God the Unknowable, but God the Unknown who aspires to be known. It is the exoteric, manifest, revealed level of God that can be known in Him.” (“Shi’ite Doctrine,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine>; accessed 15 April 2020).

17 Much of what follows is examined in greater detail in Christopher C. Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: From Mystical Theology to the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

to exist between inclusivism—which sees other faith traditions as holding only incomplete or distorted versions of the “truths” proclaimed by one’s own tradition¹⁸—and religious pluralism, which sees other faith traditions as being of equal validity to one’s own.¹⁹

Pluralism and the “Truth Claims” of Different Faith Traditions

In relation to this spectrum of opinions, one of Lossky’s observations is of considerable interest. This is his contention that a radically apophatic approach to theology implies acceptance of a degree of apparent logical inconsistency—what is sometimes called *antinomy*—that contemporary analytic philosophy would usually reject. As he has put it,

theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding. This is why the dogmas of the Church often present themselves as antinomies ... It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contempla-

18 This inclusivist position is perhaps best known in the Christian world through the thinking of Karl Rahner. For a summary of Rahner’s thinking on this topic, see Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “Rahner and Religious Diversity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 235–248.

19 Perhaps the best known (though by no means the only) version of religious pluralism is that of John Hick, as set out in his book, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Hick argues that all the great faith traditions may be seen as authentic responses to what he calls *Reality*. His “pluralistic hypothesis” is essentially that this Reality is ineffable and beyond adequate comprehension, but that the presence of this Reality can be experienced through the different linguistic systems and spiritual practices offered by various faith traditions. He sees Kant’s distinction between things as they are in themselves (*noumena*) and things as they are experienced (*phenomena*) as applicable to this Reality, so that a person’s experience of Reality will depend on the interpretative frameworks and structures through which that experience is comprehended.

tion of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him.²⁰

This emphasis on contemplation and the role of antinomy²¹ would appear to be applicable—in a way that Lossky himself does not consider—to many of the philosophical arguments sometimes used to attempt to refute a pluralistic understanding.²² In these arguments, incompatibilities between the doctrinal “truth claims” of different faith traditions are stressed in order to conclude that pluralism is incoherent because no more than one of these “competing” truth claims can be true. If we accept Lossky’s antinomic approach to theology, however, then apparent incompatibilities of this kind cannot automatically be seen as definitive for assessing compatibility at a deeper, contemplative level.²³

The point here is that when we expand Lossky’s antinomic and contemplatively focused understanding to differences between the doctrinal frameworks of the various faith traditions of the world, these doctrinal frameworks may—at least in principle—be seen as something other than as sets of “truth claims” of the abstract kind often assumed by analytic philosophers of religion.²⁴ They may be seen, instead, as

20 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 43.

21 For an interesting analysis of the way in which aspects of Lossky’s approach may not be purely patristic in origin, see Brandon Gallaher, “The ‘Sophiological’ Origins of Vladimir Lossky’s Apophaticism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66:3 (2013): 278–298, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930613000136>.

22 I first argued this point in Christopher C. Knight, “Reciprocal Inclusivism: A Methodology for Understanding the Faiths of the World,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55:4 (2020): 609–629, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2020.0048>.

23 It may be that patristic theology cannot be said to *entail* this pluralistic possibility, since different patristic writers had different views on the importance of apophaticism and—as observed in n. 13—different patristic scholars of the present day have different views on the extent to which Lossky’s radical apophaticism should be seen as a legitimate overarching interpretative principle for understanding patristic writings. My argument is not that patristic theology entails the conclusions to which I come, about the validity of religious pluralism, but that patristic theology may be seen as compatible with a pluralistic understanding when sufficient weight is given to its apophatic component.

24 As John Cottingham has put it, “analytic philosophers are prone to use the

what Lossky calls “images or ideas intended to guide us and fit our faculties for the contemplation of that which passes all understanding.”²⁵ They may, in other words, be seen as relating to noetic apprehension rather than to discursively developed understanding.

For pluralists, this understanding may, I would argue, be linked straightforwardly to the well-known “one mountain, many paths to the summit” analogy, in which the various spiritual pathways provided by different faith traditions are seen as beginning from different starting points but ending at the same destination. This analogy points to the way in which, because they start from different cultural “locations,” different spiritual pathways inevitably require different “signposts” as guides. These signposts may be seen as functioning, not primarily at the conscious, discursive level of the mind, but at the deeper, intuitive level that relates to the *nous*. Their role is—through their use in meditative, sacramental, or liturgical contexts—to serve as guiding “methods” or “means” that are appropriate to the particular contemplative pathways to which they relate.

The Perennialist Tradition, Neo-Perennialism, and Esoteric Ecumenism

This language of “means” or “methods” is not, admittedly, usually associated with Lossky’s understanding, and it is unclear how far he himself would have been willing to see his perspectives as indicat-

‘fruit-juicer’ method” of looking at words in isolation from the total context in which they are used, requiring “the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what they take to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context.” John Cottingham, “The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion, and Analytic Philosophy,” in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P. M. S. Hacker*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209. This means, among other things, that—as another scholar has observed—these philosophers often have “a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different to those with which they are familiar.” Mike Burley, “Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy,” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5:2 (2015): 39–64, at 40.

25 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 40.

ing the plausibility of a pluralistic understanding.²⁶ Nevertheless, his understanding is comparable to that to be found in another kind of mystical understanding, which does use this kind of language. This is the understanding of the pluralistic school of thought associated with the work of scholars like René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, which is sometimes referred to as the Traditionalist school, sometimes as perennial traditionalism, and sometimes simply as perennialism.

While often associated primarily with certain Islamic scholars, in practice this school of thought has followers in many different faith traditions, including Christian scholars such as the Methodist Huston Smith,²⁷ the Roman Catholic Jean Borella,²⁸ and the Eastern Orthodox James Cutsinger.²⁹ While these Christian authors express their views in slightly different ways, they all reflect the perspective articulated by the perennialist writer William Stoddart in his “Foreword” to a multi-author collection of perennialist essays on Christianity:

The perennial philosophy—which is true universalism and true ecumenism—is, at least extrinsically, a recognition of the divine origin of each religion. The essence of each religion is pure truth.

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- 26 Lossky seems to have made little reference to other faiths. See the comments of Paul Ladouceur, “Religious Diversity in Modern Orthodox Thought,” *Religions* 8:5 (2017): 77, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8050077>. But it is noteworthy that Olivier Clément, who had comparable views on apophaticism, did have a general interest in interfaith dialogue, speaking of the need to listen “in order to understand, and not dismiss with the back of our hand” and noting approvingly the attitude of the Orthodox missionary Spiridon Kislyakov, who “used to say that he held the Buddhist sages in such high esteem that he hardly dared to speak to them of baptism!” See “Orthodoxy and the Mystery of the Person: Interview with Olivier Clément,” available at <https://tinyurl.com/7wnd8c4z> (accessed 15 May 2022).
- 27 See, e.g., Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World’s Religions* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1976).
- 28 See, e.g., Jean Borella, *Guénonian Esoterism and Christian Mystery* (Hillsborough, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2005).
- 29 See, e.g., James S. Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997). In Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, I have suggested that a number of other Orthodox writers—such as Philip Sherrard and Robin Amis—while not strongly influenced by classic perennialism, have nevertheless developed what I call “quasi-perennialist” perspectives.

And the various religions clothe that truth in garments of different designs and colors. 'In my Father's house are many mansions.' This saying of Christ's applies not only to Heaven, but also to earth. The function of the various religions is to express the truth, and to offer a way of salvation, in a manner suited to the different segments and ethnicities of mankind. Each religion comes from God and each religion leads back to God. Each religion, moreover, comprises a doctrine and a method, that is to say, it is an enlightening truth coupled with a saving means.³⁰

While I believe that we should be highly critical of certain aspects of classic perennialism,³¹ I see in it, nevertheless, a number of positive characteristics. One of these relates directly to what I have said about the *nous* because perennialists emphasise the way in which—in the ancient traditions that they view as authentic—the human person is seen as composed of three levels of being: spirit, soul, and body. (In Greek, for example, ancient and medieval writers spoke of *pneuma* or *nous*, *psyche*, and *soma*; in Latin, they spoke of *spiritus* or *intellectus*, *anima*, and *corpus*; and in Arabic of *rûh*, *nafs*, and *jism*.) While the differences between traditions in their use of this threefold taxonomy are often insufficiently acknowledged by perennialists, what is relevant to our present exploration is their use of it to point to the importance of a capacity that they usually associate with the “spirit” component of what it is to be human. Like those who stress the *nous*

30 William Stoddart, “Foreword,” in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Souras de Azevedo (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), x–xi. Note that there is one aspect of this description that I question in chapter 8 of my *Exploring Religious Pluralism*. This is its focus on “ethnicities,” which I suggest should be replaced by a focus on cultural diversity; see my comments later in this paper on the notion of the “psycho-cultural niche.”

31 Two of my objections are ones that many other critics of classic perennialism have voiced: that it exhibits distortions that arise from nostalgia for a fictional past, especially in relation to Guénon's notion of an ancient and now partially lost “primordial tradition,” and that it has a strong tendency to impose an interpretative framework on historical and empirical evidence in a questionable way. A third objection—less often voiced but important for my own approach—is that it tends to ignore the natural world.

in a Christian or Islamic³² context, perennialists see this capacity, not as the seat of discursive, rational thinking, but as something that operates at a deeper, intuitive level. This understanding leads them to stress that perceiving the “truth,” which they see as being at the heart of all authentic faith traditions, involves an essentially intuitive kind of spiritual intelligence; they believe, with Guénon, that true metaphysics “constitutes an immediate, or in other words, intuitive knowledge, as opposed to the discursive and mediate knowledge that belongs to the rational order.”³³

This aspect of perennialist understanding can, in my judgement, be retained in a kind of *neo-perennialism*, in which classic perennialism’s genuine insights (as I see them) can be retained while, partly through attentiveness to aspects of current religious studies, its flaws can be discarded.³⁴ One of the things to be retained in such a neo-perennialism is classic perennialism’s disdain for modern philosophy of the analytic kind, especially when it is applied to religious doctrines. This attitude—which exhibits parallels with the expansion of Lossky’s approach that I have outlined—is rooted in the belief that, what philosophers in the analytic tradition usually take to be the “truth claims” of the doctrinal languages of the world’s faith traditions, are in fact no more than what perennialists call the *exoteric* aspects of those traditions.

These exoteric aspects are seen by perennialists as constituting part of the “method” or “means” by which adherents of different traditions are guided along the particular spiritual paths that have been developed in those traditions towards the goal of full noetic insight. What perennialists see as important is the way in which—as one

32 In the Islamic world, the influence of a Neoplatonic understanding of the *nous* is often perceived by modern scholars in the work of early Islamic philosophers like Al Farabi, Avicenna, and Ibn Rushd.

33 René Guénon, *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. John Herlihy (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2009), 105.

34 See Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*. For an earlier articulation of this viewpoint, see Christopher C. Knight, “Neo-Perennialism: A Trap to Avoid or a Valid Research Programme?” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 58:1 (2023): 60–85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2023.0003>.

makes progress along any one of these spiritual pathways—one will increasingly apprehend these doctrines’ *esoteric* meaning in a noetic manner. Because this esoteric meaning is apprehended intuitively rather than discursively, it is not, for perennialists, to be understood in terms of apparently competing “truth claims.” Rather, this esoteric meaning may be seen as identical in all authentic faith traditions. For this reason, their understanding of pluralism is sometimes labelled by them as *esoteric ecumenism*.³⁵

Divine Action Theories and Their Relevance

As we have seen, the kinds of mystical understanding expounded by Lossky and the perennialists manifest overlapping understandings of spiritual intelligence. Analysis of these parallels need not, however, be limited to observation of this overlap, since further exploration is possible in terms of several other considerations.³⁶ One of these considerations relates to the question—central to the science-theology dialogue of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries—of how God is to be understood as acting in a world characterised by obedience to “laws of nature.” Here, I would argue, the kind of pluralism that I have outlined may be strengthened by an account of divine action which differs significantly from the “causal joint” model that has, until very recently, been dominant within that dialogue. In this latter model, while God is seen as always acting “in, with, and under” the laws of nature, there is still a clear distinction between the “general divine action” that occurs through the normal operation of those laws and the “special divine action” that is seen as arising from God’s direct “response” to situations in the world.

35 See, e.g., Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 1985); James S. Cutsinger, “Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism,” in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2002).

36 Not all of these can be mentioned in this paper, but they are set out in Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*.

This causal joint model is now increasingly being questioned, partly because of Nicholas Saunders' critique of it³⁷ and partly because of what Sarah Lane Ritchie calls a "theological turn" in recent discussion of divine action,³⁸ which has three independent but conceptually linked components. This conceptual linkage arises from the way in which, in all three, the causal joint model's distinction between "special" and "general" modes of divine action is blurred or even abolished.

In my own contribution to this theological turn,³⁹ I argue that we may see all events—including miraculous ones—in terms of an "enhanced naturalism" comparable to that which, in the patristic era, was hinted at by Augustine of Hippo, as Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed out.⁴⁰ (Indeed, I argue, this kind of understanding is reinforced when we expand it in terms of aspects of the thinking of Maximus the Confessor.)⁴¹ In this kind of naturalism, a distinction is made between "ordinary" laws of nature, which are susceptible to investigation

37 Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

38 This "theological turn" was first discussed in Sarah Lane Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint: Challenging the Theological Turn in Divine Action Theories," *Zygon* 52:2 (2017): 361–379, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12336>, the contents of which were modified and expanded in an important book: Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

39 This contribution was first developed in Christopher C. Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine: Religion, Science, and Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) and expanded in terms of Christian incarnational insights in Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

40 See Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The Concept of Miracle," *Zygon* 37:3 (2002): 759–762, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9744.00452>.

41 Maximus the Confessor developed what may be seen as a kind of theistic naturalism by linking the fourth gospel's notion of the divine *Logos* to the principles (*logoi*) through which all created things have their being and act as they do. My model takes up the teleological aspect of Maximus' thinking, arguing that this may be applied to divine action in a way that does not compete with the "naturalistic" perspectives of science but simply interprets them theologically. In a paper with a word limit, however, it is not possible to explain this model adequately, so the reader of this paper must be referred to Knight, *The God of Nature* and to the paper in which the model was first set out: Christopher C. Knight, "Divine Action: A Neo-Byzantine Model," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 58 (2005): 181–199, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-005-1076-5>.

through the scientific methodology, and “higher” laws of nature, which are not susceptible to this methodology because they are not manifested in events or behaviours that are straightforwardly repeatable. In this understanding, God is not seen as “responding” to situations in the world because, instead of being seen as a temporal being, God is understood in terms of divine eternity. This is not only traditional—in the sense of reflecting the understandings of late antique and medieval philosophical theology⁴²—but is also consonant with both mystical apprehension⁴³ and our current scientific understanding of time as an aspect of the created world.⁴⁴

If we expand this “single act” understanding of divine action⁴⁵ to include God’s action in revelatory experiences, in what we might call a “single act of revelation,” we can reinforce the kind of openness to religious pluralism that arises from ancient understandings of spiritual intelligence. Such an expansion allows our exploration of the faith traditions of the world to focus, with greater clarity than hitherto, on the roles of “natural” human religiosity and psychology in our analysis of the experiences through which those traditions have arisen.

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- 42 This subtle view was expressed by Thomas Aquinas in terms of what has been called the “classical view of divine eternity.” See Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 141. It was expressed in an even more subtle way by Maximus the Confessor. See Sotiris Mitralaxis, *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor’s Theory of Time* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017).
- 43 As one commentator on mystical experience has noted, “the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where ‘all is always now,’” so that such an experience is not understandable “unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time.” F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1963), 48.
- 44 One of the main differences between Newtonian mechanics and its replacement—Einstein’s relativistic mechanics—is the way in which Newton saw space and time as absolutes within which the universe unfolds, while Einstein saw them simply as aspects of the created order, which were in fact interdependent in a way that means that distances and time intervals between events may be different for different observers.
- 45 This particular “single act” account is, it should be noted, very different to the “single act” account of Maurice Wiles, in which miraculous events are seen as impossible. See the comments in Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, 173–177.

This approach allows us, I believe, to develop what I call a non-reductionist “psychological-referential model of revelatory experience,” which may be understood in an evolutionary context by analogy with the well-known concept of the ecological niche. As I have written elsewhere, this analogy allows us to see how we may use a related concept—that of the “psycho-cultural niche”—“which may be defined by both the cultural assumptions and the individual psychological makeup of those able to experience some religious revelation or enlightenment.” A particular psycho-cultural niche “provides the necessary psychological environment for some particular revelation to arise, and also limits the type of experience that could arise and flourish, in a way analogous to that in which a particular ecological niche allows only certain new biological species to emerge and spread.”⁴⁶

This framework allows us, I argue, to develop a plausible understanding of the origin and development of different faith traditions in terms of a set of five theses that rely on no particular faith tradition. These theses are as follows:

- 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.
- 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.

46 Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine*, 112.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.)

There are, of course, tensions between these theses, since the first two are fundamentally naturalistic while the remainder take the view that theological language can be truly referential. Nevertheless, in the essays in which I first articulated these theses,⁴⁷ I argued that these tensions can be overcome, and since then I have developed other supporting arguments from a wide range of considerations.⁴⁸

47 These theses were first articulated in Christopher C. Knight, “*Homo Religiosus: A Theological Proposal for a Scientific and Pluralistic Age*,” in *Human Identity at the Intersection of Science, Technology and Religion*, ed. Nancey Murphy and Christopher C. Knight (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 25–38. I repeated these theses in slightly different contexts, in “Biological Evolution and the Universality of Spiritual Experience: Pluralistic Implications of a New Approach to the Thought of Teilhard de Chardin,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48:1 (2013): 58–70, and in “Have a Bit of *Nous*: Revelation and the Psychology of Religion,” in *Mutual Enrichment: Theology, Psychology and Religious Life*, ed. Russell Re Manning (London: Routledge, 2020), 47–60.

48 Among these newer arguments—presented in Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*—are expansions of the somewhat different notions of “archetypes” articulated by Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade, and the analyses of the role of

One of the most important of these considerations arises from the recent focus, within the psychology of religion, on what Fraser Watts calls a “dual-process” understanding of human cognition.⁴⁹ In this understanding—sometimes expressed in terms of the different functions of the two hemispheres of the human brain⁵⁰—two cognitive modes are distinguished: a phylogenetically older system that is largely intuitive, and a later, more distinctively human system that is more rational and articulate. The scientific basis of this kind of two-mode understanding represents something of great importance that is too often ignored in the field of religious studies: a revived recognition of a universal aspect of human religiosity. This recognition is based, not on anthropological speculations of the kind that became common in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (which scholars in the field of religious studies rightly regard as very questionable), but on current explorations of human brain functioning and of its evolutionary development.

Watts suggests that these two modes of mental functioning may legitimately be related to Harvey Whitehouse’s distinction between early “imagistic” and later “doctrinal” developments in humanity’s religious apprehension,⁵¹ and to Robin Dunbar’s comparable distinction between “shamanistic” and “doctrinal” developments.⁵² These analyses, Watts shows, point to the relevance of evolutionary perspectives in our understanding of the history of human religiosity and of the faith traditions to which that religiosity has given rise. However, he rightly insists that this development over time should not be seen as involv-

imagination in religious visions in the work of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, which I link to the notion of the *imagination* developed by the poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge and to the notion of the *imaginal* developed by Henry Corbin.

- 49 Fraser Watts, “The Evolution of Religious Cognition,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42:1 (2020): 89–100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0084672420909479>.
- 50 This kind of perspective has been popularised in Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World*, expanded edition (Yale: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 51 Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Lanham: AltaMira, 2004).
- 52 Robin Dunbar, *Human Evolution* (London: Pelican, 2014).

ing the replacement of one mode of religious “knowing” by another. Rather, he says, we must acknowledge that “new capacities exist side by side with older ones.”⁵³ (This perception is reinforced by the way in which adherents of doctrinally focused religious communities still sometimes experience what William James called “mystical states” that “seem to those who experience them to be ... states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.”)⁵⁴

All these considerations point, in my judgment, to the plausibility of religious pluralism and even to its status as the best understanding available to people of faith—if they see the choice before them simply in terms of the question of whether to support exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism as these positions are usually presented. However, for those believers who incline towards a pluralistic understanding, an important question arises at this point, of whether there is an aspect of perennialism that should cause them to hesitate before adopting a full-blown pluralism.

Reciprocal Inclusivism as the Best Way Forward?

The reason for this hesitation is that one of the things that is characteristic of perennialist thinking is its stress on the need, not just for following a religious tradition of some kind, but for following one of the *particular* traditions that can provide adequate “methods”—meditative, sacramental, or liturgical—through which the esoteric truth at the heart of a valid tradition can eventually be apprehended. In this understanding, it is usually only the experience of these methods that can provide access to a tradition’s esoteric heart, and yet not all faith traditions or sub-traditions are seen as possessing such methods. If the perennialists are right in this contention, then it would seem that while believers can know—from their own inner experience—that their tradition has the necessary “methods” for developing valid noetic

53 Watts, “The Evolution of Religious Cognition,” 93.

54 William James, “Mysticism” (from Lectures XVI and XVII of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*) as reprinted in Douglas W. Schrader and Asok K. Malhortra, *Pathways to Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 416.

insights, a comparable knowledge of the efficacy of other traditions in this respect will be impossible.

Disagreements among classic perennialists about which faith traditions provide an authentic spiritual path⁵⁵ may be seen as arising from precisely this problem. Not only can one never know the effects of the methods of other traditions “from the inside,” but—and more importantly—the apprehensions that have arisen through the characteristic methods of those other traditions are not ultimately expressible in propositional terms that are susceptible to interrogation because they relate to an intuitive, noetic apprehension rather than to discursive description. This is the case both from the perennialist perspective and from the more general perspective provided by a focus on the *nous*. For both perspectives, full use of our spiritual intelligence gives rise, not to a set of propositions that are susceptible to discursive investigation, but to what Guénon calls “an immediate, or in other words, intuitive knowledge, as opposed to the discursive and mediate knowledge that belongs to the rational order.”⁵⁶

In the light of this inability of an adherent of any one faith tradition to judge other traditions’ contemplative capacities, it would seem that the pluralism that is indicated by the understanding I have outlined may not be one that can be embraced wholeheartedly because, even if religious pluralism seems plausible and even cogent to us, we cannot—at least in this life—test its validity beyond reasonable doubt. Its verification can only be eschatological in nature.⁵⁷ In this situation,

55 For example, Guénon, with his early stress on Vedantic teachings, initially rejected Buddhism as a genuine traditional religion because he saw aspects of its teaching as unacceptable. Only gradually—under the influence of other perennialists—did he accept at least early Buddhism as valid. He also tended to reject Christianity and had considerable doubts about Schuon’s more positive view of it.

56 Guénon, *The Essential René Guénon*, 105.

57 This notion of eschatological verification has been the subject of considerable discussion since its defence (in a different context) in John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957). An interesting question related to this notion is that of whether—in the context of evaluating assertions that pluralism is “untraditional”—this kind of focus on the eschaton may profitably be expanded in terms of the notion of doctrinal development as something comprehensible only in terms of “tradition” being oriented towards

those of us who are existentially committed to a particular faith tradition may well see the need to adopt a version of what is sometimes called the precautionary principle, in which—usually in a technological context—it is seen as necessary to avoid taking a path of potential harm in any situation in which the risk of that harm cannot be fully evaluated but may not be negligible. Many exclusivists and inclusivists seem to believe that religious pluralism constitutes a spiritual danger and, if we cannot be certain that they are wrong in this, then at least some kind of inclusivism arguably remains the best option for us. We cannot become dogmatically pluralist.

However, what seems necessary, if we follow this line of thought, is that we must not only avoid dogmatic pluralism but must also avoid dogmatic inclusivism. We must recognise at least the possibility, and perhaps even the probability, of the validity of a pluralistic understanding. The inclusivism that is called for in this context cannot therefore be of the usual kind, in which the superiority of one's own faith tradition is assumed. It will be an essentially methodological inclusivism that acknowledges that we may eventually—eschatologically—come to recognise that just as other faith traditions have been viewed by us in an inclusivist way, so also our own faith tradition, in a reciprocal way, may have validly been treated by others in an inclusivist way. This extended inclusivism will not, therefore, be inclusivism of the usual kind, but will be what we might call *reciprocal inclusivism*.⁵⁸

This kind of inclusivism has important implications for methodology in exploring the relationship between the world's faith traditions. Our starting point must involve a focus on our own particular tradi-

the *eschaton*, as expressed in David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2022). In Hart's view, "openness to an unanticipated future is no less necessary than fidelity to the past" (128), and "no tradition is truly alive except one that anticipates and even wills its own overthrow in a fuller revelation of its own inner truth" (154).

58 I coined this term originally for my paper "Reciprocal Inclusivism: A Methodology for Understanding the Faiths of the World," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55:4 (2020): 609–629, <http://doi.org/10.1353/ecu.2020.0048>. At the time of that paper's publication, I was unaware that the term had also been used in earlier publications by others, sometimes with much the same meaning as I gave to it but sometimes in terms of a more classically inclusivist stance.

tion. This will not preclude use of the perspectives of other traditions, but it will make adherents of any particular tradition wary of any kind of syncretism, so that in their exploration they see the need to focus primarily on exploring the potential for aspects of other traditions to deepen their appreciation of their own.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The arguments I have outlined cannot, of course, be presented fully or even adequately in a short paper such as this. They may be found in much fuller form in my recent book, *Exploring Religious Pluralism*, and those who wish to assess those arguments critically must examine that book in its totality. Nevertheless, my hope is that those who are interested in the concept of spiritual intelligence will, from what I have presented here, see that such examination may not only throw important light on the question on which I have focused in this paper: that of how we should understand the relationship between the faith traditions of the world. In addition, it suggests new possibilities in relation to our more general exploration of the concept of spiritual intelligence, taking that exploration beyond the scientific (or quasi-scientific) understandings that have sometimes caused the concept to be criticised.⁶⁰

In the framework that I have outlined, the concept of spiritual intelligence becomes not only something to be explored through the

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- 59 This seems consonant with the perspective set out in Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, which suggests not only that the Vedantic thought of Shankara might throw important light on the thinking of Maximus the Confessor, but also that “the whole rationality of the Christian tradition ... entails and requires a kind of metaphysical monism that has only sporadically manifested itself in the tradition, but that certain schools of Vedanta (not to mention certain schools of Sufism) have explored with unparalleled brilliance” (183).
- 60 For example, Howard Gardner—in his article “A Case Against Spiritual Intelligence,” *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 10:1 (2000): 27–34, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327582IJPR1001_3—has avoided speaking of spiritual intelligence because of the difficulty of codifying quantifiable scientific criteria in relation to it, preferring to speak of “existential intelligence” which may (or may not) include a concern for explicitly religious matters.

methods of the sciences, but also an explicitly theological concept. As has been indicated by my critique of the widespread assumption that religious doctrines constitute straightforward “truth claims,” I believe that the theologian must recognise the way in which the role of doctrines is primarily to be understood in terms of the part that they play in believers’ meditative, sacramental, or liturgical experience, acting as signposts along the pathway that leads towards the goal of full noetic apprehension of the divine Reality.⁶¹ It is in the context of this understanding, I believe, that we should see spiritual intelligence, not only as a concept that should be explored theologically, but also as a concept that is crucial to our understanding of the theological enterprise as a whole: not as something “abstract, working through concepts” but as what Lossky calls “contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding.”⁶² Here, as we have seen, the role of the *nous*, and of the intuitive, noetic perception to which it gives rise, will be central to our understanding of what this “raising the mind” must involve.

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- 61 John Hick (see note 19) uses this term *Reality*, arguing that all the great faith traditions—including non-theistic ones—may be seen as authentic responses to this *Reality*. He uses this term, rather than the term *God*, so as not to exclude the perceptions of ultimate reality that are to be found within non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism.
- 62 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 43.