1 | Introduction

Over the last few years, we have been increasingly encouraged to 'embrace our subjectivity'. At one level, I am wary of this encouragement because I suspect that it sometimes leads people to ignore or downplay evidence that questions their prejudices. At another level, however, I think that this embrace – if properly controlled – can sometimes be helpful to the reader. When an argument is presented as one that arises from the author's subjective experience and set of interests, this can often be extremely helpful to the reader's attempt to assess the cogency of that argument.

I shall begin my embrace of subjectivity in a somewhat light-hearted way, by recalling my reaction to the United Kingdom's population census of 2001. This was the first occasion in which a question about religion was included in the regular census questionnaire in that country, although it was not mandatory to answer it. At that time, I was still trying to avoid disloyalty to the Christian tradition that had previously meant so much to me but was becoming increasingly pluralistic in my beliefs and had ceased, several years previously, to function as a priest of the Church of England. In the census form, I wanted to give an accurate but concise description of my beliefs and practices, so I therefore stated that my religion was 'idiosyncratic'.

Other people's responses were, however, more casually or inaccurately given. In that census, approximately 70 per cent of the population of England and Wales declared that they were Christian (a figure that was to fall to below 50 per cent in the census that occurred twenty years later). However, many of these responses almost certainly reflected the situation highlighted by an anecdote

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recounted by Kate Fox in her anthropologically informed but essentially humorous book, *Watching the English*. According to Fox, an adolescent schoolgirl, who was perplexed at having to fill in a form that asked about her religion, said to her mother 'We're not really any religion are we?':

> 'No we're not', replied the mother, 'Just put C of E.'
> 'What's C of E?' asked the daughter.
> 'Church of England.'
> 'Is that a religion?'
> 'Yes, sort of. Well no, not really – it's just what you put.'[1]

(As a former priest of the Church of England, I can vouch for the way in which this anecdote reflects the reality of many people's sense of being 'C of E' with a fair degree of accuracy.)

There were other factors that suggested that the 2001 census figures needed to be interpreted with caution. In their answer to the question about religion, a significant proportion of the British population had responded to a public campaign that clearly appealed to the famous (or infamous) British sense of humour. They declared as a joke that they were 'Jedi' (a term that had arisen from the fictional 'Star Wars' universe.) In official statistics, therefore, Jedi became the fourth most popular reported religion in England and Wales: behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, but ahead of Sikhism, Judaism, and Buddhism.

These kinds of difficulties in interpreting reported religious affiliation are, of course, far from being limited to my own country. However, the sociological factors that affect both reported affiliation and actual practice vary considerably from country to country, so that generalization is often difficult. One generalization does, nevertheless, seem to be justified, although it is not usually as evident from census returns as it is from more restricted surveys that have been carried out. This relates to the way in which religious doctrines

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[1] Fox, *Watching the English,* 354.

are now often viewed. What such surveys reveal is that, even among those who still adhere to some faith community, there are now many who sit rather lightly to the doctrines that are officially held within that community.[2] Moreover, there has been a clear growth, in recent years, in the number of people who do not adhere to any particular religious tradition but are not atheists or agnostics in the usual sense in which those terms are used. In order to avoid what they see as religious language, some of these people adopt what has been called 'pop-culture pantheism'. Meaningful coincidences of the kind that might traditionally have been ascribed to divine providence are often expressed by these people in terms of the way in which, for someone who 'trusts the universe', that universe may be seen as in some way 'responding' to particular situations. Others, however, make less explicit claims about the nature of reality and simply describe themselves as 'spiritual but not religious'.

Those who make these kinds of claims are now a significant and growing proportion of the population in some countries.[3] These people often acknowledge the existence in themselves of a propensity towards acknowledgement of a transcendent dimension of reality, and they sometimes have practices and beliefs that are characteristic of the kinds of 'religion' from which they abstain. (They sometimes, for example, indulge in meditative exercises and acknowledge strong ethical constraints.) Nevertheless, either they have never found a particular faith community with which they feel comfortable or else – and this seems to be increasingly

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[2] The Pew Research Center has found, for example, that only a minority of American Roman Catholics believe in their church's doctrine of transubstantiation. For many, this is because they do not understand the doctrine but, of those who do understand their church's teaching on this topic, 22 per cent reject it. See www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/

[3] Evidence for this is to be found in a number of surveys. The Pew Research Center, for example, surveying attitudes in Western Europe, found that those describing themselves as 'spiritual but nor religious' rose from 19 per cent of those surveyed in 2012 to 27 per cent in 2017. See www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/attitudes-toward-spirituality-and-religion/

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prevalent – the very notion of adhering to what they often call a 'doctrinal religion' is anathema to them. To be 'religious' is, for such people, to assent to the 'truths' – whether doctrinal or in relation to supposedly historical events – that are proclaimed by a particular faith community. It is usually their sense that they cannot do this in all honesty that leads to their sense of being 'not religious'.

At the time of the census in which I described my religion as idiosyncratic, it was clear to me that the Christian community – with which I still partially identified – contained many people whose beliefs relied on questionable assumptions about what they took to be the 'truths' of the Christian faith. This fact had recently become a matter of pressing concern to me at a personal level, and I wondered whether the 'spiritual but not religious' position was the one towards which I was inexorably moving. It would have surprised me, at that time, if I had known that I would soon find myself moving in a very different direction: towards what is perhaps the most obviously 'doctrinal' version of Christianity in existence: that of the Eastern Orthodox Church. However, within a year of the census, I had not only experienced this change of direction but had been formally received into that church. (Indeed, a few years later, I became one of its priests and remain so to this day.)

The reasons for this move were many, but one of them was that my longstanding interest in the Christianity of the East had made clear to me that there are aspects of Orthodox thinking that provide ways of addressing the problems that make many people wary of identifying with a particular religious tradition. In relation to the historicity of the Biblical accounts, for example, there is in Orthodoxy a strand of thinking that takes seriously the belief of the third-century Christian philosopher, Origen, that certain passages of scripture, 'by means of seeming history, *though the incidents never occurred*, figuratively reveal certain mysteries'.[4] This saying of Origen was, in fact, quoted directly in an anthology of his writings compiled by Gregory

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[4] Origen, *The Philokalia of Origen*, 18 (my italics).

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of Nazianzus and Basil the Great, two of the fourth-century church 'Fathers' who are held in high regard by Orthodox. This patristic use of Origen's understanding means that it is difficult for Orthodox to deny that, if there is good reason to doubt the literal, historical truth of some scriptural passage, then it is permissible to set aside that passage's literal meaning and to focus on its way of teaching moral or mystical truths. (In relation to the Genesis creation accounts, for example, patristic writers not uncommonly relied on this kind of interpretation, so that it is simply not true to claim, as Christian fundamentalists frequently do, that a literalist interpretation represents the only traditional reading of these accounts.)[5]

Even more important for my decision to be received into the Orthodox Church was the strand of its thinking – enunciated in modern times most clearly, perhaps, in Vladimir Lossky's book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* – that potentially undercuts one of the main objections to 'doctrinal religion' that many now seem to have. This strand of thinking views the terms that we use in theology as something other than 'rational notions which we formulate, the concepts with which our intellect constructs a positive science of the divine nature'. Rather, they are understood as 'images or ideas intended to guide us and fit our faculties for the contemplation of that which passes all understanding'[6] so that 'theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding'.[7]

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[5] In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo, in particular, quite explicitly suggested a scenario that is distinctly reminiscent of evolutionary theory. God, he said, may have created potentialities in the creation which – like dormant 'seeds' – only gradually came to fruition. In a comparable way, Basil the Great saw the earth as having been endowed from the beginning with all the powers necessary to realize the whole array of lifeforms intended by God to come into being in due course. See the comments on these authors in van Till, 'Basil, Augustine, and the Doctrine of Creation's Functional Integrity', and for a more general outline of early Christian interpretations of the creation accounts, see Bouteneff, *Beginnings*.

[6] Lossky, The *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 40.

[7] Ibid. 43.

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Not only did this 'mystical' approach to the nature of theological language seem to me, at an intuitive level, to be fundamentally sound. In addition, it seemed to allow me – if I extended it only a little – to see the Christian tradition as one to which I could still adhere without assuming that it provided a set of propositional truths that necessarily deny the 'competing truths' provided by other religious traditions. Instead, I could see the narratives and doctrines associated with Christianity as a set of signposts to aid those who had, like me, entered upon their spiritual journey from the starting point provided by the Christian tradition. The possibility that there might be other valid starting points – and other wayside signposts for those pursuing their spiritual journey along a different contemplative path towards the same destination – did not seem to be precluded by this understanding.

This possibility of the authenticity and equal status of other faith traditions was important to me because of the pluralistic implications of the academic research on the science–theology dialogue in which I was then engaged. For most of those involved in that dialogue, the relationship between the faiths of the world had been, at most, a peripheral issue. For me, however, it had become a major one because of my way of approaching a question that was at that time central to the dialogue: that of how God may be understood as acting in the world. Not only did I feel that there was something seriously wrong with the mainstream approach to this question within the science–theology dialogue of that time, so that I developed a new understanding that became – as we shall see in Chapter 10 – a significant component of what Sarah Lane Ritchie has called a 'theological turn' in recent discussions of that topic.[8] In addition, while most of those who explored this question of divine action did so in rather abstract terms, I myself – in my first two books, *Wrestling*

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[8] Richie, 'Dancing Around the Causal Joint'.

with the Divine[9] and *The God of Nature*[10] – tackled it at least partly in terms of the question of whether insights from the psychology of religion could allow a new, pluralistic way of linking the concepts of divine action and revelation.

This approach was motivated in part by my fascination with the way in which aspects of religious experience had been understood by the founder of analytical psychology, Carl Gustav Jung. Although I had already decided that aspects of Jung's understanding were extremely questionable, especially when he strayed into metaphysical speculation, I was nevertheless still intrigued by his notion that religious experiences are often, in some sense, eruptions of 'archetypes of the collective unconscious' into conscious experience. My interest in this notion was linked the way in which I was also intrigued by the potential links between Jung's understanding of archetypes and the rather different understanding of them developed by someone else whose thinking I also regarded as flawed but still of considerable interest: the historian of religion, Mircea Eliade.[11] I was aware that Eliade's influence in the theological community was – like Jung's – diminishing. Nevertheless, I suspected that the (partially valid) reasons for this might create a danger of 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater'. Might there not, I wondered, be a way in which something that seemed intrinsic to both Jung's and Eliade's way of talking about archetypes could be retained?

All these considerations led me, in my first two books, to discuss the way in which the apparently contrasting beliefs of the various faith traditions of the world are often described in terms of three possible positions that the religiously inclined person can adopt. The first of these positions is *exclusivism*, in which the authenticity and

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[9] Knight: *Wrestling with the Divine.*

[10] Knight, *The God of Nature.*

[11] Important distinctions that exist between the ways in which this notion of 'archetype' is used by Jung and Eliade will be discussed in Chapter 7. For general perspectives related to this distinction, see Spineto, 'The Notion of Archetype in Eliade's Writings' and Dudle, 'Jung and Eliade: A Difference of Opinion'.

salvific efficacy of any religious tradition but one's own is denied. The second is *inclusivism*, in which some degree of these qualities in other traditions is acknowledged but is understood in terms of the essential correctness of one's own tradition and the incomplete or only approximate correctness of others. The third is *religious pluralism*, in which no particular religious tradition is given a priori precedence.

This third position – towards which my thought was at that time leaning – has been expressed in a number of ways, but in the community of academic theologians, it is perhaps most often associated with its defence by John Hick, who has argued that all the great faith traditions should be seen as equally authentic responses to experiences of what he calls *Reality*. (He uses this term – rather than the term *God* – in order to include those perceptions of ultimate reality which are to be found within non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism.) Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is essentially that 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 the various religious traditions.[12]

At the time of my entry into the Orthodox Church, I was aware of the tendency of my fellow-Orthodox to view non-Christian faiths from an exclusivist or, at most, an inclusivist standpoint. In contrast to this stance, my first book – which had already been published – was oriented towards the kind of pluralism that Hick had defended, while my second book, already in preparation, was not intended to modify the pluralistic conclusions of the first. However, this tension with the views of most of my fellow-Orthodox did not unduly worry me. In part, this was because I was aware of a very small minority of pluralists (or at least near-pluralists) among them, of whom, at that time, Philip Sherrard was the one with whose work I was most familiar. In part, however, my sense of ease arose from something quite different. This was the way in which I had come to recognize that the perspectives that I had first explored in *Wrestling with the Divine* need not

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[12] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion.*

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involve what I had seen, at the time of that book's publication, as 'a radical undermining of the cozy Christian orthodoxy of at least one strand of modern writing about science and religion'.[13] Rather, as I put it in my second book, *The God of Nature*, I now recognized that those perspectives could, without major change, be recast in terms of 'the Christian tradition of incarnational thinking, especially of the development of this thinking that occurred in the Eastern part of the Christian world during the early centuries of our faith'.[14]

In particular, I followed Sherrard in his conclusion that the fourth gospel's notion of the divine *Logos* (Word) had important implications for exploring religious pluralism because of its assertion that this *Logos* 'enlightens everyone' (John 1:9), so that it becomes possible to claim, as he had, that it 'is the Logos who is received in the spiritual illumination of a Brahmin, a Buddhist, or a Moslem'.[15] However, I went beyond Sherrard's perspectives by arguing that the Christian *Logos* understanding has significant implications for the debate about divine action because of its notion that not only had this *Logos* 'become flesh' in Jesus Christ but also that it was through this *Logos* that 'everything that was made was made' (John 1:1–14). This linking of creation and incarnation – especially when interpreted through aspects of the seventh-century thinking of Maximus the Confessor[16] – makes it possible, I suggested, to develop a new approach to divine action through an understanding of naturalism that is rather different to the usual kind. This understanding, I argued, points towards an understanding of God's revelatory action that is at least inclusivist and potentially fully pluralist.

However, because of my focus on the concept of incarnation, I tended to hesitate before presenting my approach as anything other than an essentially Christian theology of divine action and of the faith traditions of the world. I already wondered, nevertheless,

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[13] Knight, *Wrestling with the Divine*, xi.

[14] Knight, *The God of Nature*, xi.

[15] Sherrard, *Christianity*, 62.

[16] The relevance of Maximus's understanding will be explored in Chapter 10.

whether this focus on the Christian concept of incarnation was the only one possible in relation to the kind of *Logos*-focused approach that I had developed. This questioning arose initially from my awareness that the notion of the divine *Logos* – with its origin in pre-Christian Greek philosophical thinking – is not one that is peculiar to Christianity. Before its use in the fourth gospel, it had been used in Hellenistic Judaism, and it is still used in strands of Islamic thinking.[17] (Indeed, it has at least partial counterparts in other religious traditions; it can, for example, be seen as comparable to the Taoist conception of the *Tao*.)[18] Moreover, I gradually came to see that, while the arguments I had presented could certainly be interpreted in terms of Christian incarnational thinking, they could also be recast in terms of a set of five theses that in practice rely on no particular religious tradition. These theses[19] were as follows:

1) 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.

2) 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

[17] This is not to imply that the Islamic understanding of the term *Logos* is precisely that of Orthodox Christianity. In practice, the Islamic usage is closer to that of the Arian Christians – for many of whom the prologue of the fourth gospel was a favourite text – than to the understanding developed by those who eventually suppressed Arianism and imposed the understanding of the Council of Nicea (held in 325) on the Christian community. It may well, in fact, have been this Arian interest in the Biblical text that led to the Nicene council of 325 avoiding the term *Logos* altogether in its creed, though in a later period – when Arianism was no longer a major threat – its use became more central, especially (as we shall see) in the seventh-century work of Maximus the Confessor.

[18] For an Eastern Orthodox view of this, see Damascene, *Christ the Eternal Tao*.

[19] These theses were first articulated three years after the publication of my second book in Knight, '*Homo Religiosus*', 30. They were later repeated in slightly different contexts in Knight, 'Biological Evolution and the Universality of Spiritual Experience', 63, and in Knight, 'Have a Bit of Nous', 51.

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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.

3) 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.

4) 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.

5) 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, at that time I argued that these tensions can be overcome, and since then I have developed other arguments that reinforce this view.[20] Both sets of arguments – together with an exploration of the links between them – will be presented in this book.

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[20] These newer arguments have not hitherto been presented in book form but some of them have been presented in two journal articles: Knight, 'Reciprocal Inclusivism' and Knight, 'Neo-Perennialism'.

However, before we begin to explore these arguments, I would like to make several preliminary observations. The first of these relates to the style that I have adopted, which reflects the broad audience at which this book is aimed. This style is related to a comment that I made in my third book, *Science and the Christian Faith*, which was aimed at a similarly broad audience. In that book's introductory remarks, I suggested that a certain degree of repetitiveness is often appropriate for such an audience because of 'the old advice to preachers that, if their message is to be effectively communicated, they should "say what they're going to say, then say it, then say what they've just said"'. Something of the same strategy has been adopted in the present book, so that I shall repeat here, for its readers, what I went on to say in that previous book: that 'I trust that those who do not need this kind of reinforcement will forgive the assumption that at least some of my readers might.'[21]

My second preliminary observation is that because much of my thinking about the issue of religious pluralism has its roots in a tradition that speaks about *God*, it has seemed best to me to retain a specifically theistic vocabulary in much of what follows. While I have considered the possibility of replacing that term throughout the text with Hick's *Reality* (or with one of the other expressions sometimes used with the same intention, such as *Ultimacy*), I have concluded that this would be counterproductive. It would not only – as so often with neologisms – have hindered the flow of my exposition. Because of the roots of my thinking in a theistic tradition, it would also have been untrue to the embrace of subjectivity that I have adopted. I do, as the reader will see, in practice urge the abandonment of some of the 'personalistic' connotations commonly associated with the term *God* (which are, as I shall observe, incompatible with traditional theistic metaphysics even if a pluralistic attitude is not adopted).

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[21] Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith*, 21–22. (A less repetitive version of this third book's arguments was presented, with additional material, in my fourth book, which was aimed at an exclusively academic audience: Knight, *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue*.)

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Nevertheless, I still find that the term *God* is the one that occurs to me more naturally than any other does, and as a result I have used it in most of what follows. It should be borne in mind, however, that I believe that the considerations set out in this book are often as applicable to non-theistic religious traditions as to theistic ones and that, whenever I use the term *God*, substitution of a term like *Reality* or *Ultimacy* would usually have been possible.

This perspective is related to my third preliminary observation, which is that there are aspects of my presentation that are very much rooted in my knowledge of, and existential commitment to, certain aspects of a *particular* theistic tradition: Christianity. I have quite deliberately not attempted to hide this aspect of my embrace of subjectivity. Even though my (less-extensive) knowledge of non-Christian traditions suggests to me that parallels to my thinking can be found in these other traditions, it will be for those more fully conversant with those traditions to examine such parallels in detail. In what follows I shall do no more, therefore, than hint here and there at where I believe such examination might begin. This relative lack of engagement with the details of other faith traditions means that this book might seem to some to be no more than an attempt to develop a Christian – or even a specifically Eastern Orthodox – theology of those other traditions. However, the fact that these arguments relate to perspectives that are to be found both within and beyond the Christian world means that it might be better to see what follows as a kind of prolegomenon to what I hope this study will evoke: a multi-faith, collaborative exploration, to which those with more extensive knowledge of other faith traditions will contribute.

My penultimate observation is that while several of the chapters that follow could have been expanded very considerably, and further considerations added,[22] I have resisted the temptation to do

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22 I might, for example, have explored the way in which – as Christopher Pramuk has indicated in an important recent study, *Sophia* – the openness to religious pluralism displayed by the modern mystic, Thomas Merton, is linked to his fascination with

this because the resulting volume would have been so long and complex that it would have been effectively impenetrable to many of those in the broad audience at which the present book is aimed. (For the same reason, I have mentioned existing approaches to religious pluralism only relatively briefly, preferring to focus on the new perspectives that I have developed.) While I hope that specialists in the debate about religious pluralism will find what I present to be of interest, the purpose of this book is not to present a comprehensive exploration of the kind that would be of interest only to those specialists. Rather, it is to make a contribution, for a wider readership, to the theological debate that has been evoked by both the pluralism of our culture and the 'spiritual but not religious' phenomenon. My judgement has been, not only that this requires something of manageable length but also that the required brevity is possible because the arguments that I have chosen to present do not constitute links in a chain of reasoning that would snap if one of the links proved weak. Rather, these arguments may be seen as relatively independent considerations that all point in the same direction, so that their cumulative force will not be significantly weakened if one (or even more) of them is judged to be questionable. As a result, what I have written is not an attempt to present all relevant considerations in an exhaustive way, nor is it a closely reasoned argument of the kind that tries to anticipate all possible counterarguments. It is, quite simply, a set of signposts for those who may wish to take my exploration further.

Eastern Orthodox (and especially Russian) thinking about the concept of Divine Wisdom (*Sophia*). I might also have expanded my suggestion that the spiritual efficacy of any particular tradition may involve essentially mythical stories that have no straightforward relationship to historical or philosophical 'truths' by using, as an example, my experience of the Eastern Orthodox tradition's liturgical approach to Mary, the 'Mother of God'. I might even have explored the way in which art might be seen as a way of revelation, as has been suggested, on the basis of his own experience, by Peter W. Rogers in his book *A Painter's Quest*. None of these topics is, however, to be found in what follows (though I may in future write papers on them).

My final observation is that the arguments that I present arise from two strands of theological thinking that not only reflect my embrace of subjectivity but also are rarely, if ever, taken into account in discussions of religious pluralism. The first of these strands is a 'mystical' way of understanding the nature of the theological task, which is characteristic of an important component of Eastern Orthodox thinking but is by no means limited to that thinking. The second is the science–theology dialogue as it has developed over the last half century, particularly in relation to the concepts of naturalism and divine action. (Here, those familiar with my work on these issues will find that I repeat much of what I have said elsewhere, but this repetition seems necessary because many of the readers of the present book may have little or no knowledge of the somewhat specialist debates in which I was engaged in that earlier work.)

For many who are familiar with current discussions of religious pluralism, these two sets of insights may seem somewhat peripheral to the mainstream debate on this topic. This peripherality is, however, something that is an advantage rather than otherwise. As those familiar with the present state of debate about religious pluralism will know, this debate – because of its narrow focus on philosophical issues and scriptural exegesis – is in danger, not only of becoming stale but also of spluttering to a halt in a situation of stalemate. The perspectives that I offer can, in my judgement, change this situation in a significant way by providing a new and refreshing context for exploration.