

CHAPTER SIX

The Modification Strategies: A Concluding Analysis

As the year 2012 dawned, the journal *The Economist* greeted its readers with the following information:

In Nigeria scores of Christians have died in Islamist bomb attacks, targeting Christmas Prayers. In Iran and Pakistan Christians are on death row, for “apostasy” – quitting Islam – or blasphemy. Dozens of churches in Indonesia have been attacked or shut. Two-thirds of Iraq’s pre-war Christian population have fled. In Egypt and Syria, where secular despots gave Christianity a shield of sorts, political upheaval and Muslim zeal threaten ancient Christian groups. Not all Christianity’s woes are down to Muslims. The faith faces harassment in formally communist China and Vietnam. In India Hindu nationalists want to penalize Christians who make converts. . . . Regimes or societies that penalize Christians tend to oppress others minorities too. Sunni Muslims who demonize Christians loathe Shias.¹

One does not often hear about violence against Christians. We hear more frequently, for instance, about the violent conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India. But this account serves to remind us that religious violence is not limited to only one or two of the world religions. Above all, it should remind us that the desire to adopt modification strategies is not simply about persons addressing abstract challenges that confront them as intellectually

curious individuals: it is also about the possibility of undercutting the causes of violent persecution.

Having reminded ourselves of the serious implications of our topic, suppose that we begin this final chapter with a thought experiment. Imagine that the use of modification strategies such as those we have explored in the previous chapters becomes widespread. Two results are likely to follow. First, religious pluralism, far from being a threatening source of disconfirmation of one's beliefs, will be heralded as effecting a particular moral good (one that we first met in Chapter Three in our discussion of Karl Rahner). If the world religions were in fact inconsistent, I would face the Other as a source of disconfirmation. In addition, to the extent that I nevertheless attempted to maintain my conviction that my own belief system was correct even though it contradicted the other religious belief systems, I would likely experience the moral burden of feeling that the vast majority of my fellow inhabitants of planet Earth were being denied access to salvific truth. But the modification strategies eliminate this moral conundrum as effectively as they ward off disconfirmation: questers in other traditions are not destined to be cast into the outer darkness but are fellow travelers who will simply reach the same mountaintop via a different path.

Now those who have adopted the modification strategies and who read them as a much more sensitive moral stance toward the Other than the exclusivism with which they began will trumpet the moral responsibility to embrace their newly discovered pluralistic theology. As a result, far from being a threat that ought to be feared, religious and spiritual pluralism, specifically the particular approach to pluralism associated with the modification strategies, will be hailed as something that ought to be taken up by all sensitive souls. The duty to embrace theological pluralism will, for many, take on the impassioned character of a creed.

But in addition to taking up a pluralist theology as a moral as well as spiritual duty, champions of such a pluralist theology might reasonably be regarded as utilizing a genuinely distinctive religious or spiritual epistemology. Whereas before embracing the

modification strategies, the plurality of religions in my midst weakened the plausibility structure of my own faith, now the situation is reversed: because every one of the world religions is believed to be engaged in essentially the same enterprise as I am in my faith, the plausibility of religious and spiritual belief and practice is now high. That is, the general tenets of my spiritual convictions are now mirrored, with what are essentially only cultural differences (perhaps in the manner that John Hick proposes), in the spiritual convictions of all of the other world religions so that nothing could seem more plausible than the existence of the ultimate reality to which they mutually point.

But something more results from the employment of the modification strategies allowing us justifiably to speak of a new state of affairs in religious epistemology. Specifically, widespread adoption of the notion that the Others' religions are just different routes to the same truth to which mine leads gives new life to the notion of a religious sense built into the human mind, a capacity that can intuit the presence of the ultimate in a fashion parallel to how the physical world is given to us through our five senses.

This is, of course, an entirely familiar claim among the world's pious (not to mention among various influential nineteenth-century thinkers such as the German Post-Kantians and the American Transcendentalists). But let us distinguish two varieties of this specially attuned sense. First, there are those who would claim for it the ability to receive specific truths communicated from on high, whether in the form that the Upanishads are said to be the product of specially gifted seers or in the form of heirs of the radical Reformation who claim to receive specific messages from God. The second form of the claim that human beings possess a special religious sense is more modest than the first. Rather than supposing that individual persons can receive detailed revelations from God, this version of the notion of religious intuition holds that we are put together in such a way that it is possible for us to intuit the presence of the ultimate (i.e., rather than a detailed message from that same ultimate). Rahner's claim, based on his version of transcendental method, that we all possess an unthematic and preliminary

awareness of God can be seen as one form of this more modest proposal about a faculty of religious intuition (though it is well to remember that Rahner did not himself move beyond inclusivism to a full-blown pluralist theology). And it coheres with the specific sorts of claims about the role of experience and of sensing the divine presence that we encountered in our three paradigmatic authors regarding modification strategies, namely, Thich Nhat Hahn, Deepak Chopra, and John Shelby Spong. Hence it is this second, more modest form of the claim that we possess an intuitive faculty sensitive to ultimate reality that will be at issue for us here.

In a world where the widespread adoption of modification strategies has not yet occurred, not only will the encounter of the world religions lead the most honest and probing questers to fear that the existence of a multitude of other religions with other beliefs are disconfirming of their own, but the claim to an intuitive faculty aimed at the transcendent, a sense in addition to the five earth-bound senses, will appear unfounded and even falsifiable. In order to see how this is so, one need only consider how differently a physical sense such as sight operates than does an alleged sense specially attuned to the ultimate. Suppose that you and I are walking along a path in the woods at dusk. Suddenly, I stop and grab you by the shoulder in order to stop you as well. I point to a spot several hundred feet ahead of us on the trail and whisper excitedly, "There's a bear ahead!" You, however, disagree: "That's just a large tree limb that has fallen across the path." One of the constitutive aspects of our regular five senses is that their deliverances can be put to the test of inter-subjective validity. To continue our story, you bravely walk toward the disputed object on the trail before us, while I hang back in fear and trepidation. You walk right up to the thing, motion for me to follow, and shout out: "I told you: it's just an old tree limb," at which point I walk toward you, sheepishly no doubt, and as I get close, I can see for myself that what had looked to me like a bear is indeed nothing more than an old tree limb.

This not uncommon sort of incident shows that, while my five senses can deceive me or be defective in some circumstances – the

senses may sometimes be undermined by something as insignificant as a poorly digested bit of dinner, as Ebenezer Scrooge avers to the ghost of Jacob Marley – most of the time I have every reason to trust that they are essentially reliable, precisely because I and my fellow human beings will, at least after a little investigation, agree about the sort of thing that, to remain with the sense of sight, we are seeing (even if we cannot figure out what the thing is, we will be able to agree on the traits it presents to our vision). The momentous problem that the claim to an intuitive religious sense faces (even when the claim is only the modest one that we can intuit the divine presence, not the more radical claim that we can receive specific revelatory content) is that, when the world religions are regarded as mutually contradictory, then we have no inter-subjective agreement to reassure us about the soundness of such a religious sense. In fact, such an intuitive faculty will appear to be nothing more than wishful thinking, given the fact that the alleged ultimate reality that my tradition claims can be intuited will inevitably be appear significantly different from the ultimate reality that your tradition claims you can intuit.

If, however, all of the world's major religions are understood to be pointing to the same ultimate reality, then I could be excused for holding that what persons from traditions other than my own are given by their religious intuition is basically the same ultimate reality that I intuit. Inter-subjective validity can now be understood as being applicable to a religious sense in essentially the same fashion as it is to the five physical senses. If one does embrace this optimistic approach toward the existence of a reliable intuitive faculty where ultimate reality is concerned, then it is perhaps not such a stretch to suppose that scientific experimentation might be able to shed some empirical light on its existence and operation, even if the natural sciences are ill equipped to detect the existence of the ultimate itself.

This brings us to the well-publicized work of Andrew Newberg and his colleagues, who believe that they have discovered the seat of spiritual intuition in the human brain and that they have at least a rudimentary grasp of how it works. Newberg's hypothesis centers

upon the parietal lobe of the brain which contains what he calls the “Orientation Association Area.” This portion of the brain orients me in space and helps create my awareness that my body possesses definite boundaries. It thereby helps to build up a sense of my being a unique entity distinguishable from the other entities that make up the universe. Newberg’s fascinating work has included doing brain scans on Buddhist monks in deep meditation and Catholic nuns in the midst of contemplative prayer. At the height of their respective spiritual practices, individuals in both groups report losing the awareness of their own bounded, distinctive identities and being taken up into something much larger than themselves. Of course, the Buddhists may name what they are experiencing “emptiness,” while the Catholic nuns will indubitably identify the larger reality with which they merge as “God.” In any case, Newberg has consistently found that, at the height of their respective spiritual experiences, both the Buddhists’ and the Catholics’ brains show a readily observable quieting in the parietal lobe. In other words, according to Newberg, his brain scans are actually detecting the dissolution of the practitioners’ sense of having a firmly bounded, separate identity. The quieting of the Orientation Association Area is the physical correlate of a potent sense of being absorbed into the ultimate.² Of course, whether this indubitably real sensation of self-transcendence actually involves merging with an ultimate reality is a question beyond the scope of Newberg’s empirical investigation.

In summary, then, widespread adoption of the modification strategies would disarm the capacity of religions or spiritualities other than my own to threaten my beliefs with disconfirmation and to convict me of moral insensitivity. In addition to this negative function – negative in the sense that it removes threats – this widespread adoption would also have a positive function in that it would greatly enhance the plausibility structure undergirding belief in an ultimate, infinite reality. Furthermore, in a world full of persons who have adopted the modification strategies with which we have been dealing, the notion of a human intuitive faculty for knowing the ultimate would be rendered a distinct possibility.

Of course, there is no firm evidence to suggest that the practitioners of the world's great religions are rushing to adopt the modification strategies in large numbers, nor that they will do so anytime soon. The strategies could, of course, be embraced by a relatively small number of questers. We might do well to recall our discussion in Chapter One about the number of actual persons who can be expected to resemble our ideal type, the Christian quester dedicated to the task of faith seeking understanding. In the most stringent reading, that ideal type might be dubbed a Christian intellectual. What would be the result if, for example, my friend Bartholomew embraced the modification strategies but did not know anyone else personally who had also embraced them? At least initially, it appears that there is nothing preventing Bartholomew from making this move, though it will not have the aura of plausibility conferred upon it that it would if a large number of people, many of whom Bartholomew knew quite well, had already made the same move.³ Yet, it would still ward off the threat of the disconfirming Other for Bartholomew, because in his own heart of hearts, he would now believe that what the Other believes does not contradict his own faith convictions.

Still, it must be admitted that to embrace the modification strategies in total isolation from the persons around me would have its challenges. The plausibility structure backing up the modification strategies would be less potent and reassuring in this scenario. And surely it will be difficult for a lone quester to embrace the modification strategies, or something like them, if religious persons around him not only fail to embrace those strategies but actually choose to emphasize the difference between their own religion and other traditions. For instance, when one major task that a religion accomplishes for its adherents is to provide them with a unique history and identity in the midst of a larger world that seeks constantly to undermine their sense of identity – some commentators interpret fundamentalist Islam, for example, in these terms – then it is understandable when that tradition self-consciously and vocally opposes something such as the notion of religious unity championed by the modification strategies. And

thanks to this vehement opposition toward a theology of religious unity, Bartholomew's relatively isolated attempt to embrace the modification strategies and convince himself of the ultimate unity of the world religions will no doubt be an uphill battle compared to the task faced by those who live in a world where the modification strategies are embraced by large numbers of devotees of each of the world's major religions.

An even more sober assessment of the modification strategies and their future results from recognizing that undesirable consequences for faith might also result if modification strategies were ever widely embraced. Such unhappy consequences, if they were to materialize, would mean that religious and spiritual pluralism are, consistent with this book's title, destructive of belief after all. What, specifically, might the undesirable consequences turn out to be? First, it is not entirely implausible that adoption of the sort of modification strategies that we explored in Chapters Three and Four would cause many believers to abandon their traditional church communities.

Consider the following scenario: One begins as the sort of believer that we specified as an ideal type in Chapter One. That sort of believer was an intellectually astute Christian who could in good conscience and with a reasonable grasp of its meaning stand up in church to recite the Apostle's Creed. However, when this believer honestly confronts the threat of the disconfirming Other, she feels the need to modify her religious stance; she adopts something along the lines of the modification strategies explored above, with their emphases on immanence, experience, and ineffability. Suppose that this modified way of understanding her Christian faith provides a thoroughly satisfying spirituality for our believer. She happily embraces it and, as a result, the religious Other turns from being a potential source of disconfirmation to being a fellow traveler who reinforces the confidence of our believer in her (modified) Christian convictions.

The question at hand is whether this idealized believer will be motivated by the modification experience to cease actively participating in her church community. On the one hand, there is no necessity for her doing so, for now her Christian faith is

immune from disconfirmation from the religious Other. As a result, she can be an even more confident believer and remain in her Christian church. On the other hand, her remaining in her church may require something akin to a constant, and perhaps unpalatably laborious, translation of much that she hears in worship. She will hear, for example, the famous passage from John's Gospel which quotes Jesus as saying "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). Having adopted a modification strategy, our ideal believer will think of this statement as requiring creative reinterpretation. Rather than taking it at face value, she may, for instance, interpret it to mean that no one can attain unity with God without enhancing his or her God-consciousness – this is Jesus' central function – but that "Jesus" here stands not just for Jesus of Nazareth but for any of the world religions' central figures.

But she may also find that such exclusivist claims, biblical or otherwise, simply go too clearly against the grain of her present religious worldview. She may now feel an outsider to her previous religious home, an outsider who no longer experiences a sense of spiritual sustenance when she attends her church. Of course, one might ask why our hypothetical believer's abandonment of her church community is necessarily undesirable. What is the problem with hitherto faithful members of churches becoming what one might call religious "free agents"? At least one answer is that through the bulk of human history, the phenomenon of community has been one of the most important assets of spirituality and religion. The ability to count on the support, both cognitive and emotional, of one's fellow believers no matter what difficulties the world throws one's way is a powerful resource in the search for a life of meaning and purpose. Such meaning and purpose can only be found if one feels reasonably secure in his or her world, and a spiritual community can go a long way indeed toward engendering that sense of security. Furthermore, at least in some brands of Christian theology, participation in the being of Christ, what Paul Tillich called the "New Being" in Jesus as the

Christ, can only be had by participation in Christ's earthly, physical body, which in the present day and age is, in essence, the Christian community, the church.⁴

Consider a second possible problem exacerbated, if not uniquely caused, by the adoption of the modification strategies we have discussed: the erstwhile member of a church may choose to abandon the form of spirituality found in that church in favor of the New Age variety. After all, once one has come to the momentous conclusion that Jesus Christ is just one way among many to unity with the ultimate, it is but a small step to buy into the New Age's estimate of spiritual beliefs and practices as just so many techniques and commodities. In that case, the question about possible disconfirmation from the Other does not even arise (at least not where other New Agers are concerned, though it may well face contradiction from mainline religions, a paradoxical situation for one who initially embraced the modification strategies precisely because of the other world religions that seemed to contradict his or her own). The disconfirmation threat fails even to arise mainly because the mindset that focuses upon technique and commodification is unlikely to raise the truth question about spiritual and religious beliefs. At the very least, as we saw in Chapter Five, New Age spirituality marginalizes the truth question. This is a decidedly undesirable outcome if one assumes, as I have assumed throughout our discussion, that truth claims are part and parcel of spiritual pursuits and that those truth claims face various challenges, including the disconfirming Other, that must be faced if one's spirituality is to maintain its integrity.

To put this problem a bit differently, the ideal type – in this case a Christian ideal type – that I sketched out at the beginning of this study and to which I have remained tied throughout the book fits the orientation of the theologian and the philosopher of religion. That is, we are focusing on those members of the Christian community – and perhaps they are decidedly in the minority – who put a good deal of emphasis upon the cognitive dimension of religion, the dimension of explicit belief, and who recognize the need to back up their truth claims with some sort of reasoning

process. We have just considered the likelihood that some of these folks may be directed to the New Age camp precisely by having first confronted the modification strategies, a move that I would denigrate as having started in a position that offers rational justification for one's beliefs but ending up in a position where that intellectual rigor has been essentially abandoned. But we should take the time here to consider the fact that things could be worse. It may be that the influence of New Age spirituality and of various other *laudable* factors that push Americans toward toleration of the Other will bring many Christians into the New Age camp without any particular process of rational deliberation at all: they will *not* be induced to embrace the essentially non-rational aspects of New Age spirituality *as the paradoxical outcome of having worked through the rational modification strategies* at the heart of our deliberations. Instead, they will simply bypass the deliberation that makes up the modification strategies and, perhaps mainly due to the apparent ubiquity and emotional appeal of New Age attitudes in contemporary America, come up with what is essentially an accidental concatenation of Christian and New Age belief. Note that the persons we are imagining here are not the thoroughgoing New Agers who give up any ties to mainline religions, if ever they had such ties, or who disdain those religions. Rather, these are folks who continue to think of themselves as part of the Christian religion but who haphazardly add New Age convictions and practices to their Christianity.

That this dynamic is in fact unfolding before our eyes in the present historical moment is given empirical support by another of the Pew Charitable Trust's polls on religion (recall the polling data they provided us in the Introduction in our discussion of potential weak spots in American piety). In a poll released at the end of 2009, the Pew researchers found that 29% of those in America who identify themselves as Christian claimed to have been in touch with the dead; 17% claimed to have seen or been in the presence of ghosts; 14% consulted a psychic; 23% believed that there is spiritual energy in natural entities such as trees; 23% believed in reincarnation; and 17% believed that there is such a thing as the

Evil Eye, in other words, that some persons can place curses upon others.⁵ To wax editorial for a moment, to embrace belief in the Evil Eye, and most of the other things the Pew poll lists, seems predicated on the total abandonment of interest in rigorous rationality, indeed the abandonment of the project dear to the heart of our ideal type, namely, the enterprise of “faith seeking understanding.”

Of course, if we are honestly and fairly to evaluate the role of rationality in forming our spiritual convictions, we must admit a potential weak spot where rationality is concerned in the modification strategies too, whatever laudable degree of faith seeking understanding they represent. A thoughtful analysis of the modification strategies reveals that, while they can ward off the disconfirming Other, *those strategies provide no evidence at all of their own truth*. Thinking of the Christian God and of Jesus Christ in terms such as those suggested by Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong may allow me to avoid anxiety about disconfirmation or about moral insensitivity, but what leads me to suppose that my new spiritual worldview accurately depicts the real ultimate and its actual relation to human life?

It is understandable that I will be inclined to accept the truth claims of a pluralist theology for the pragmatic reason that it takes care of the aforementioned anxieties: this may well make the pluralist perspective seem almost inevitably true. But while thinkers such as Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong may be able to put together theological proposals that, if embraced, make the world religions largely intellectually consistent with one another and accepting of each other's salvific power, none of these admittedly significant boons of a pluralist theology provide direct evidence regarding the truth question. Simply because a theological perspective is morally sensitive and intellectually consistent does not imply that the sort of God or ultimate that the perspective presents is real. This should become all the clearer when one stops to think about the fact that different sorts of modification strategies than the ones we have investigated could no doubt also be crafted. That is, it seems theoretically possible that we could attain moral sensitivity toward

and intellectual consistency among the world religions through strategies built not upon immanence, experience, and ineffability but upon completely different elements, elements that might be more salient in other cultural times and places. This would provide us with a picture of the divine that might very well conflict in various ways with the picture provided by our exploration of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong. There is simply no guarantee of truth provided by disarming the disconfirming power of the Other – though this of course eliminates one reason for thinking that one's beliefs are untrue – or by committing oneself to a morally sensitive theological position.

There is also another, formally different, possibility: suppose that instead of religious thinkers coming up with proposals that clash with those of Nhat Hahn, Chopra, and Spong but that still apparently solve the pluralist challenge, we imagine a situation in which the plausibility structure for my beliefs is propped up not by explicitly harmonizing my beliefs with those of potentially disconfirming Others but in a different fashion. I have argued elsewhere that it might be possible to construct a distinct spiritual community held together not by explicit agreement about the tenets of individual members' beliefs but by the commitment of the community or church to support each seeker's quest.⁶ There would be common beliefs here too, but they would be on a different level; they would be beliefs about the dignity of all human beings and of their various spiritual quests. This approach too might be able to disarm the disconfirming power of the Other and provide a robust plausibility structure for each member's beliefs, but it would be operating on the level of attitudes of the community toward the general project of belief rather than on the level of particular theological convictions. It is an approach that seems well adapted to contemporary American sensibilities, with their egalitarian yearning to let as many persons as possible into the inner circle of spiritual life without sacrificing one's own most basic convictions. Yet, here too there is no necessary correlation between this program's ability to disarm the threatening aspects of pluralism and the truth of any of the beliefs embraced in any of the spiritual quests going on within the community.

Of course none of this implies that it is impossible to come up with arguments in addition to those we have been examining – we have been focused here specifically upon the challenge of the disconfirming Other – that would in fact provide evidence in favor of the existence of the divine or ultimate as our modification strategies perceive it. The point, however, is that this is a task that we have not even begun to undertake and which, while we cannot rule out its possible success, we have no way of knowing in advance can be successful. It is advisable to remember that Christian thinkers have for centuries attempted to come up with “proofs” for the existence of God, or at least with arguments that suggest the preponderance of evidence in theism’s favor, and that they have been unable decisively to close that intellectually challenging deal. Of course, it may be easier to meet the age-old challenge of coming up with convincing evidence for the existence of the ultimate once the modification strategies have at least prevented the apparently different claims of the competing world religions from canceling one another out.

What, then, should be our penultimate conclusion about American religious and spiritual pluralism as a threat to belief? We can express that penultimate conclusion in the form of five brief propositions: First, pluralism does, without a doubt, raise the specter of the disconfirming Other. Second, it is possible to craft modification strategies that will render the religious Other friend rather than foe so that the disconfirmation challenge is met, with the moral bonus that one need no longer bear the guilt associated with looking down on religious Others. Third, there is no way of knowing, however, how many persons in American culture will be interested in and willing to embrace such modifications to their belief systems. An all-too-familiar American anti-intellectualism suggests that only a small percentage of believers will be interested in pursuing the project of faith seeking understanding with the sort of rigor that analysis and adoption of the modification strategies demand. Fourth, there are possible side-effects of taking up those modifications that suggest that religious and spiritual pluralism will, when all is said and done, still prove a threat to faith. Those side-

effects include dislodging the believer from his or her erstwhile religious community, which may, in addition, lead him or her to view piety in terms of the New Age emphasis on technique and commodification, which tends to push the truth question out of the picture. Finally, if the modification strategies, whether or not they point one toward technique and commodification in one's spiritual life, have no implications for the truth of one's modified beliefs, then the all-important truth question will stand in its own way as a challenge to the modification strategies, as it has challenged more traditional views of the divine throughout modernity.

There is one more topic left to consider: the five conclusions just summarized are only penultimate because, in our investigation thus far, we have left out any analysis of the challenges that natural science poses to piety in the present day and age. This was no mere oversight. In Chapter One we observed, just in passing, that some commentators predict that the scientific worldview will eventually lead to a thoroughgoing secularization of even a culture as religiously and spiritually energetic as American culture. But our interest throughout this study has lain elsewhere, namely, with how spiritual and religious pluralism can threaten belief and with the different approach believers can take to this challenge. But we ought not wrap up our investigation without noting that, though it is usually not understood in this fashion in the perennial debate between science and religion, the scientific worldview can be viewed as one more voice in the pluralism that is at issue for us, one more instance of the potentially disconfirming Other.

At first blush, the notion of science as yet another form of the disconfirming Other because it is an additional belief system seems to result from a confusion. Suppose that we think of each of the belief systems of each of the great world religions as a circle. If the modification strategies can be trusted, then in terms of their specific truth claims, and especially where the general category of topics they address is concerned, these circles have large areas of overlap. That is, while some of the specific content of the religions differs, modification strategies or no, the aspects of life and the universe that each attempts to explain – we are keeping intact our focus upon

the cognitive dimension – are much the same. For instance, each religion senses that human life is, as the Buddhists have put it, out of joint, and each religion has its analysis as to just what causes that problem. In addition, each of the religions supposes that the key to dealing with the slings and arrows that finitude thrusts our way is to move beyond the merely finite realm. Theists will see this goal in terms of proper relation to God; others will look to an impersonal infinite such as the Tao or an infinite state such as Nirvana.

Now natural science can hardly be one more circle massively overlapping these religious belief systems, for science ordinarily limits itself to empirical investigation of the physical world. An investigative procedure that, at least methodologically speaking, takes materialist reductionism as its vantage point upon reality can, strictly speaking, neither investigate realities that lie beyond matter-energy nor offer judgments about their reality or unreality. The mistake that has too often been made, however, when talking about religion or spirituality and science is to suppose that if science is indeed limited to the realm of matter-energy, it can have nothing to say about religious beliefs. But in fact science and spirituality do have points of contact. While there are large areas of the Christian worldview, for instance, that speak of matters wholly outside the purview of the scientific method, there are other portions of that Christian worldview that cannot avoid making assumptions about the universe of matter-energy that is science's area of expertise. For instance, if God is said to have miraculously cured someone of cancer, practitioners of science, while methodologically unable to view the divine cause, will of course be able to see the effect wrought by that cause. What is more, if they had sufficiently intricate tools to investigate that effect in perfect detail, they would notice a violation of the law of conservation of matter and energy.⁷ God would have to have smuggled energy from outside the closed system of the physical universe into the inner workings of that universe. This would be the case even if God were to operate within the physical world by "pushing around" energy that already exists here: that "pushing" would itself require the extra, scientifically prohibited energy. In other words, a definite conflict arises here

between spirituality and science; science and religion are not wholly separate arenas of discourse.

We can easily adduce other examples of spirituality and science both dealing with the physical universe in which we find ourselves, examples which suggest that science and religion are sometimes competing worldviews, each threatening the other with disconfirmation. Consider the notion that human beings possess an immaterial (and hence immortal) soul, a notion that most of the great world religions affirm in one way or another (even if the Buddha preached the doctrine of *anatman*, that is, “no self,” he believed that there is something, if no more than a heap of qualities, that passes via spiritual inertia from one life to another and eventually into Nirvana). Those religions such as Christianity and Hinduism and Islam that put particular emphasis on the notion of a soul see it as distinguishable, if not wholly unconnected, from the physical dimensions of our being. At the same time, the Abrahamic religions most often think of the soul as the seat of our identities, the deep center within which our personalities are formed and which directly affects our behavior in the world, especially our moral behavior. But the materialist worldview of the neuroscientist suggests that the most distinguishing aspects of our personalities can be changed by changing the physical organ that is the human brain. Imbibing alcohol can turn a usually well-mannered man into the proverbial “mean drunk” who goes home from the bar and beats his wife and children. Or a stroke can take a person who had been unfailingly gracious and kind into a cantankerous curmudgeon who spends most of his or her time cursing and complaining. But surely these instances show that an object of science, the purely physical human brain, is the cause of who we are in a fashion that spiritualities have traditionally asserted could only be a function of an immaterial soul. Spirituality and science meet here, and that meeting seems to be a contentious one.

It is a notorious fact that, even in the present day and age, there are biblical literalists within the Christian community who hold that to embrace the Darwinian notion of evolution through natural selection would be to succumb to the disconfirmation of one’s

religious convictions. Although they have attempted strategically to appropriate different labels for the program that they want to advance – for instance, “creationism,” “creation science,” and, most recently, “intelligent design” theory – their goal is always the same, namely, to defend their biblical literalism at whatever points that literalism seems to be falsified by the natural sciences.

One response to the potential conflicts between spirituality and science is simply to embrace a willful ignorance about the scientific worldview and these potential conflicts with spirituality and religion. At first blush, this sort of avoidance technique seems formally similar to the sort of avoidance techniques we discussed in Chapter One, techniques that were intended to protect one’s own beliefs from the challenge of the disconfirming Others who are devotees of other world religions. But upon closer inspection, we find an important difference between the two instances of avoidance: where the potentially disconfirming power of another world religion is concerned, we can avoid facing the threat of disconfirmation by trying to avoid thinking about the other religious traditions. One reason for the possible “success” of this avoidance maneuver is that, while there are persons of other faiths all around me in the United States, I do not actually participate in any of those other traditions. In our pluralistic society, I necessarily rub up against Buddhism and Islam, for example, but I may be able to put the implications of their existence out of my mind insofar as I have not accepted any of their unique tenets.

But surely the majority of Americans are in a different situation *vis-à-vis* the scientific worldview. While we may refuse to believe in particular results of that worldview such as biological evolution, we happily embrace other components of the scientific worldview, whether we wish to or not, in a host of circumstances. For instance, we are convinced that antibiotics can oftentimes eliminate infections from which we suffer. And consider that most all of us would be furious if, while suffering the symptoms of a heart attack, we were rushed to a hospital where the staff responded by chanting, dancing, and burning incense rather than with medical interventions grounded in the scientific worldview.

Thus it is that we find ourselves with a new version of the problem of fragilization represented by pluralism. There is a plurality of spiritual and religious worldviews, but in addition to all of these there is another worldview that the vast majority of Americans at least tacitly embrace, namely the scientific worldview – Sallie McFague goes so far as to call scientific accounts of our origin the “common creation story”⁸ – and it sometimes contradicts spiritual convictions to a sufficient degree that it counts as another version of the potentially disconfirming power of pluralism. Of course, unlike the case of the disconfirming threats represented by world religions confronting one another, the pluralism represented by a religious worldview confronted with the scientific worldview is that *this* pluralism and its concomitant conflict tends to exist *within* the mind of a single individual.

What, then, are the implications of this science-centered variation on the theme of the disconfirming Other? Perhaps some fine-tuning of the modification strategies that we have explicated in Chapters Three and Four might be able to equip them to deal with this new, scientific player in our story about spirituality and pluralism. But there is another possibility as well. In briefly treating the modification strategies’ irrelevance to the truth question above, we noted the very real possibility that one could construct alternative modification strategies, strategies concentrating on themes other than immanence, experience, and ineffability. Perhaps the challenge of the scientific worldview to some forms of spirituality and religion can best be met by making harmony with science the guiding principle in constructing a modification strategy, and only when that is achieved moving on to mold the strategies so that they can avoid the mutual fragilization of spiritual perspectives that has been our concern in this study. But that is, as the saying goes, another story for another time.⁹