



# A CHAOS OF DELIGHT

Science, Religion and Myth  
and the Shaping of Western Thought

Geoffrey P. Dobson

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AND THE SHAPING OF WESTERN THOUGHT**

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*Let each one examine his thoughts, and he will find them all  
occupied with the past and the future.* Blaise Pascal (1623–1662)<sup>1</sup>

## Preface

*A Chaos of Delight* has been a labour of love for over ten years. The title is taken from the words of Charles Darwin when he witnessed the natural magnificence and extraordinary diversity of life in a Brazilian rainforest. On 28 February 1832, he wrote in his diary: “The mind is a chaos of delight, out of which a world of future & more quiet pleasure will arise.”<sup>2</sup> My inspiration came around 1986 when I was working as a research scientist at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Maryland, USA. Ironically, the idea was not seeded in the intensely stimulating workplace at NIH with its thousands of scientists and medical discoveries, but when my neighbours in Highwood Road, Rockville asked what I did during the day and why science was important. When I look back on those enjoyable years chatting about the “news and views” of the day, usually over a beer, I don’t think I ever offered satisfactory answers.

Over the years, as I became more interested in promoting the understanding of science, I realized that any meaningful effort must include an *understanding of what science is not*. What began as a story about science grew into something much larger and more difficult than I had first imagined: a history of the different ways human beings have sought meaning and made sense of the world. The tantalizing fact that underpins our story is that despite human beings sharing 98.5 per cent of our 32 000 genes with the chimpanzee (differing only in about 500 genes), we are the only species to seek meaning by imposing order and process on external stimuli, and expressing it in language, art, history, myth, religion and science. Human beings are, as cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (*b.1926*) claims, “symbolising, conceptualising, meaning-seeking animals”, who possess the “drive to make sense out of experience, to give it form and order”.<sup>3</sup> This drive by different peoples in different places and at different times is a major factor responsible for the cultural parallels and differences that exist today.

*A Chaos of Delight* was written for a general readership with two principal aims: to understand how different cultures have looked at the same world and devised totally different explanations ranging from deeply mythopoeic existential–metaphysical reflections to purely physical ones; and to provide a history of Western ideas in which the reader can place their own worldview, and better understand its origins and

development. The book is a guided tour into the succession of ways human beings have constructed order and meaning over the past 5000 years. At a time in history when our knowledge-base is doubling every ten years or so, there is a growing concern that the general public are being left behind. It is my hope that this book will help to bridge this ever-widening gap.

It is further hoped that the book will help to promote a better understanding of the changing roles that science, religion and myth have played in shaping the images of ourselves and our place in the wider universe. For much of the last century, despite ongoing efforts to reconcile the differences between science and religion, deeper chasms appear to have formed. One school argues that there is no conflict because religion is completely in accordance with reality, and *within* its theological framework science is its servant not its master. Another school argues that science and religion are incompatible because each system relies on different methodologies, and disunity may arise when both seek to explain the same phenomena with different answers. In the public arena, religion is often associated with barrier-building, violence and wars, and science with mischief and mistrust. In my view, greater harmony between science and religion can be reached from a deeper understanding of their respective origins, intersections and divergence through the history of ideas. Much benefit can be gained by appropriating the past in the present and future. In this context, I agree with the sentiments of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) when he wrote: “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.”<sup>4</sup>

As we move through the Sumerian, Egyptian, Greek, early Christian, Medieval and Renaissance periods to the present, one unifying feature that stands out above all others as the most certain thing about human knowledge in general, and science, religion or myth in particular, is its uncertainty. From a cross-cultural perspective, one’s religious views are framed by articles of faith derived from history, and within their highly prescribed boundaries there exists a system that is just as dynamic as modern-day science. In all likelihood, you will come away from the journey with a cache of historical biases and legacies that frame and underpin your worldview. For me, one great legacy from the ancient Greeks, and befitting of the twenty-first century, is that you could be wrong in your thinking and still be highly productive in society by advancing knowledge through endless creativity and discovery. An important lesson for the third millennium is that diversity of opinion is healthy and essential; it is blind acceptance of dogma that impedes understanding and progress.

Lastly, and in accordance with my broader theme of appropriating the past in the present and future, I invite you to ponder the question on how human beings 2000 years from now might view progress in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Just as the ancient Greeks reflected on older cultures, and we reflect on all of them today, what do you think peoples of the future will write of our recent history? I asked this question of Nobel Laureate Sir John Cornforth (*b.*1917) early in 1993 and in his reply (23 June 1993) he wrote: “I think it is possible that our posterity 2000 years on might say something like this: *These people had the first opportunity to secure the earth’s future, and they squandered it. That might have been expected: they were imprisoned by the past, and they did not live long enough to break free.*” I sincerely hope Cornforth is wrong, as I am sure he himself does. The ball is in our court to make the changes we wish to see.

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