

Conceiving God – The Cognitive Origin and Evolution of Religion

by David Lewis-Williams.

Thames and Hudson 2010.

With an endorsement on the back cover from Philip Pullman, a hefty hint is dropped to the reader that Professor Lewis-Williams' book on the original and development of religious belief will not sit comfortably with many traditional people of faith. As a convinced non-traditionalist that immediately disposes me to him very favourably indeed!

Conceiving God considers the way in which religion evolved over many millennia, and particularly how human beings came to conceive the idea that there were gods, or a God, with power over the Universe and their own individual lives.

The book is divided into ten chapters, with a Prolegomena and Epilegomena to initiate and complete the study. Lewis-Williams takes in such significant figures as the Emperor Constantine, St. Augustine and Hildegard of Bingen, as well as considering the ways in which the theses of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace immeasurably enhanced the tensions between mainstream religious belief and the truths of scientific discovery.

As a South African scholar, he also writes fascinatingly about San rock paintings and the perspective they offer on religious vision as well as the inferences that may be drawn from cave paintings found in Spain and France dating back to the Upper Paleolithic period.

Lewis-Williams unhesitatingly avers that religion cannot compete with science, nor can it make any sound claims about reality, but he would not wish to deny anyone the sense of awe and wonder that can be stirred by so many things in the world, both natural and made by human beings; he just believes that these things can be enjoyed without bringing God, or fantastical beliefs that defy science and reason, into the equation.

Conceiving God is a fascinating investigation into the human propensity for religion and religious belief, at the same time as dismissing the validity of both, but if it is a polemic, unlike the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens and others, it is a very gentle one, and no one should hesitate to engage with it, or deny themselves the opportunity to be illuminated by the wisdom in its pages.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh