

UNDERSTANDING THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The human mind evolved to believe in the gods . . . [not] in biology.
—E. O. Wilson

HERE ARE TWO STATEMENTS that were reported in the press. See if you can guess what they are describing:

She felt a palpable sense of God's presence and an absorption of her self into his being.

You can feel his presence here. . . . I don't understand the phenomenon myself, but you feel it.

The first statement is a description of what a Franciscan nun felt during the most intensely religious moments of a forty-five-minute prayer.¹ The second statement was made by a middle-aged woman who is a frequent visitor to Graceland, and the presence she felt was that of the late Elvis Presley. She went on to say, "As many times as I've been here, I've never really lost that feeling." A man who had accompanied his mother to Graceland added, "It's like its own kind of religion." And a British tourist: "It's a bit scary. . . . He's their God, isn't he."²

I mean no disrespect to the nun, nor am I equating her devout Catholicism with the reverence in which the visitor to Graceland holds the departed Elvis. All I am doing is comparing what these two