

Bio-Theology

A Neuro-Scientific Interpretation of Human Spirituality and God

- Jojo Varakukala¹

*The God Part of The Brain - A Scientific Interpretation of
Human Spirituality and God.* By. Mathew Alper. New York:
Rogue Press, 2001. pp. x + 206.

Is man a product of God, or... Is God a product of human evolution? Man, the most powerful creature of this earth has the power of reason, the most precise and distinguishing feature that enables him/her to create himself/herself. Yet with all the knowledge, we still remain puzzled before that mystery which looms over all the physical sciences, the question about God. The problem of God's existence demands to be solved before all others. Probably, the question of God's existence underlies the answer to man's. From time immemorial humanity was grappling with the question of God and the intellectual culture has maintained a dualistic interpretation of reality consisting of two distinct substances: the physical and the spiritual. It was cross-culturally perceived as the first cause of all that exist. The question of God is one concerning all for without God there is no absolute moral order and even the individual existence. With God one is conceived in meaning. Does God exist or not? Does death mark the decisive end of my existence or the inception of my new beginning? The author is of the opinion that God is wired into our system as an inherited human gene.

The author presents the *God Part of the Brain* in such a lucid and systematic style with logical arguments, phenomenological analysis and speculative rigourism. The book is sandwiched with a prologue and an epilogue. The book is neatly divided into two parts with different chapters comprehensively reading into the question of the genetically hardwired human make up of the brain. The author comes to the conclusive answer that God is not out there but is part of the human brain.

Scientific Reading of Theory's Evolution

Scientists are the high priests of the new faith referring to particles that are incomprehensible and elusive. Science is the genuine truth by which human beings could gain a clear and distinct insight into the underlying nature of the reality. It has taken man to a scientific knowledge of God. The grasping of world by human is no better than others but simply a different grasping for just as a fly sees the world from its fly-perspective we humans grasp the world from human-perspective. Hence the human interpretation of the world or reality is neither better nor more real but it is just different. One of the fundamental principles of science is that every action has got an effect, which would imply that every effect has its cause. Today we are well informed of the happenings of the world through a scientific interpretation. We know why it rains and we don't better believe in that rain is produced by the whims of God. Alper takes a step further to answer the God question from a scientific perspective. The various sciences, which are so integrally interrelated and integrated, takes us to the quest for a scientific interpretation of God. The evolution of things and human chromosomes speak of the story of gene. Each gene contains information that could bring about an individual physical race. Even the slightest individual differences are caused by the formation of gene. The human beings possess an evolving brain.

Science could heed to everything in the physical universe. It was true to its method. Science accounts a lot for the fifteen billion history of universe from its origin to the present status without the backing of any spiritual power or transcendental deity. But however the question remained unanswered: why was I here? The author brings in the Kantian notion of inherent mode of perception which humans possessed by birth

that shape human perspective of reality and he says that the God question does not lie out there but within the workings of human mind, the brain. Science could however give no clear knowledge of God though it equipped humanity with the knowledge of the origins of matter, atoms, planets, man, life and of himself.

Alper says that, ‘God was a word’, which represents a concept of transcendent force, word just like all other words, which originated from the workings of human brain. Before humans existed there were no such thing as words. He says, “Now if brains were strictly biological in nature and the word ‘God’ originated from within that same organ, then perhaps the concept of God was somehow inextricably linked to our biological natures as well” (p. 49). Does it mean that the question of God represents the consequence of a genetically inherited trait and if this is the case how to account for it? He is of the opinion that the physical characteristics that are cross-culturally shared represent a genetically inherited trait. In other words, the behaviours of human beings are hardwired with the genetically inherited trait. Within the brain there exist specific structures responsible for generation of universal behaviour patterns. He analyses the musical responses of our species cross-culturally which is responsible for the musical part of the human brain. That is to say there exists in brain the capacity for music directly connected to our cerebral physiology. “Humans from every culture express the emotions of grief, fear aggression and amusement with the same exact facial expressions. As an exception to this rule, the people born with a damaged or dysfunctional “fusiform gyrus,” that part of the brain from which we derive our capacity to distinguish certain facial *cues*, will not possess this capacity” (p. 56). The same is applied to our species cross-culturally, the propensity to believe in a spiritual reality. If we possess such hardware must not it originate from the distinct physiological site within us? This could be perhaps told as the God part of our brain?

Emergence of the Bio-Theology

Every generation has the potency to articulate and comprehend the language. Within the chromosomes there exist the genes from which the linguistic capacity emerges. Every behaviour that exists has a specialized gene, which prompts the development of neuro-physiological

site in us. This could be applied to human spirituality also. Man, just as a musical, linguistic and mathematical animal is also a spiritual animal. The author opines that we inherit our propensity to perceive a spiritual reality, and there exists certain physiological site in us from which spiritual perceptions originate. If all perceptions originate from the brain, it would follow that the spiritual consciousness must also be generated from that same order. It amounts to say that our species possess a neuro-physiologically based spiritual function - God as part of the brain. Karl Jung finds a collective consciousness common to all, which he calls the 'natural religious function.' Applying the bio-psychological sciences to the study of human spirituality, it would be possible to construct a physical, organic, scientific and mechanistic interpretation of human spirituality as well as of God. All cultures have notions of after life, which is manifested through cross-cultural funeral ceremony. The universal spiritual proclivities must represent an inherent characteristic of our species, a genetically inherited trait innately predisposed to believing in the existence of spiritual reality. Humans hence possess spiritual genes.

Mankind is hardwired to have faith in a spiritual reality and this spiritual consciousness is just integrally linked to our neuro-physiological nature as in any of our cognitive capacity. It could mean that God does not exist as something out beyond and independent of us but he becomes a product of the inherited perception. If this is true there is no actual spiritual reality. Consequently man is not a product of God but God as the product of human cognitive evolution. That is to say we are programmed to interpret reality. All of our spiritual cognition, perceptions, sensation and behaviours are the manifestations of inherited impulses generated from the neural connections in the brain and therefore not indicative of any actual spiritual reality. The author asks the question, "why would our species have evolved a spiritual function?"

Why a Spiritual Function for Humans?

If man possesses spiritual consciousness, what is its purpose? It might be a forced neuro-physiologically based function. We have the awareness of death, the possibility of my impossibility. With this awareness humans have suffered life's first existential crisis. The pain, or the *Dhukha* (of which Buddha speaks) experience keeps organic forms

alive and intact. “Pain is nature’s electric prod that is incessantly goading us towards those things which benefit us and away from those which can do us harm” (p. 91). The experience of pain is the chief stimulus by which life is formed to survive. Anxiety, a specific type of painful response, has motivated us to be equipped to face the potential future threats. The human capacity for foresight envisioned him to see the possible future. It is an advanced type of intelligence that comes with high price. The capacity for foresight mixed with anxiety function keeps us perpetually vigilant to venture out any next possible threat.

Man is the only creature of this planet that comprehends the concept of his own existence. Alper says that we possess the elements of the eternal and the infinity, a series of neurological connections emerged in our species that compelled us to perceive ourselves as spiritually eternal. Alper summarizes that we have come up with an enabled status to cope up with the awareness of that by having the cognitive mechanism; neuro-physiologically generated cognitive phantoms that can protect us from inevitable death. Religion is of the function to reduce the fear of death. Hence God is not a transcendental power actually existing out there but rather expressing the manifestation of an inherited human perception, a coping mechanism generated from human brain.

Inner Propulsion for the Beyond

Experiencing spiritual sensation in us truly represents the inherent characteristics of our species, the physical mechanism of human consciousness. Contemporary neuro-scientists are of the opinion that spiritual experiences are not the result of the contact with the divine but rather the effects of the electrochemical elements as they are interpreted by our brain. None of such spiritual experiences give us the proof of any spiritual reality. The fright of man’s self-conscious awareness of his death is really great. Even though no spiritual reality might exist, in merely believing in one, one is able to undergo this cathartic and therapeutic experiences.

Human consciousness is also a physical phenomenon, the manifestation of electrochemical impulses being transmitted through the

brain. Neuroses are the behavioural consequences of an unhealthy developed ego function. It is the ego function that experiences needs and wants and not a particular organ of our body. That there are certain drugs, which can evoke spiritual experience in us grants the notion, that spiritual consciousness must be physiological in nature. The author brings in studies that substantiate the neuro-physiological origin of the spiritual experience. He hopes for a new gene-theology so as to account for the human spiritual gene that causes spiritual function. Such evidences go to the heart of the matter and make it difficult to argue against a neuro-physiological explanation of religiosity and thus supporting an argument for the existence of a spiritual religious function – a “God” part of the brain.

The act of prayer has the distinct healing power. The new age sciences across the world speak of the healing properties of prayer. Healing through the act of prayer is not the act of miracles but purely physiological response to having one’s anxiety level diminished. We are also the converting animals whose sense of personal identity can be suddenly and drastically transformed in a way that religious concerns come to predominate in our conscious experience. If humans are inherently spiritual why are there atheists? If in a sense we are wired to believe in a spiritual reality, how is some who do not? Though an atheist is inherently spiritual, they are brought up in a non-religious or aspiritual environment where their innate proclivities may have atrophied and consequently being substituted by a secular worldview. There are some others who suppress their inherent proclivities. He says that similar to all other spiritual experience, near-death experiences are rooted not in the soul but in our brain’s neuro-chemistry. Glossolaliya, speaking in tongues, constitutes yet another universally enacted behaviour through which mystical experiences could be evoked. The universal taboos exist because we as species are neuro-physiologically hardwired to be repelled by such acts. People who suffer the brain injury of the particular area of cortex of the brain exhibit severe anti-social activity. Our guilt function is also integrally linked with our spiritual function.

Cross-cultural concepts like God, soul and afterlife constitute nothing more than manifestation of the way our species happens to process information and interpret reality. If God is a cognitively generated

subjective human phenomenon, it may be difficult for many to grasp the rational, reductionistic, evolutionistic, organic, and cognitive interpretation of God. Whether God exists or not, our ultimate goal is still the same. Without a God all is not necessarily lost. The underlying logic - a bio-theology by which we explain our religious and spiritual properties - would tell us: "What kind of a God would install a device in us that would compel to believe him to be so many different things that we would each be prompted to kill one another in order to prove that our version of him is the right one" (p. 182). We live in a global community with diversity of belief systems. What we need perhaps is that we create and embrace a simple humanistic ideology of tolerance, compassion and forgiveness. If at all we are just composed of matter and nothing more and if there is no spiritual reality like God, soul or afterlife - none of which are warranted by the present day developments in neuroscience as of now, even then we have the neuro-scientific compulsion to shift our priorities to deter future wars to minimize our suffering and pain and maximize the chances of happiness in life and this is what is entailed by a scientific interpretation of human spirituality and God.

Alper comes to the lifelong quest for God. Even if no spiritual reality exists the most meaningful moment in life is to experience happiness in the fleeting show of its vanity. Whether human is a spiritual being or spiritless organic mechanism, the experience of happiness is true to him. He interrogates, either way, am I any less me? Alper puts it in such a scientific style that his elucidations are scientifically verified with deeply experienced life's momentums and scientifically conceived conceptions are to the embellishments of the arguments. He argues out that our concepts are derived from the mechanics of our brain. Thus on the whole, *The God Part of The Brain* is a beautiful piece of scientific and philosophical truth, a living memento with philosophical brilliance and scientific fascination, a scientific reading of man's spiritual nature with neural basis of spirituality, a very positive and dynamic understanding of human make up of the brain. It has opened the way to the currents of bio-theology and scientific hermeneutic of human internal hard-wiring spiritual genes.

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