



TYPE: Article

Title: Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief

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Source: Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

Published by: Whitestone Publications

Stable URL: <https://jcrt.org/archives/03.3/scott/>

DOI (newest version): [10.17613/9h6hv-b4r87](https://doi.org/10.17613/9h6hv-b4r87)

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Scott - Brain Science Supports Contemporary Religious Trends - JCRT 3.3

Brain Science Supports Contemporary Religious Trends

a review of Andrew Newberg M.D., et al., *Why God Wont Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2001. 320pp. \$14.00. ISBN: 0345440331

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Contemporary trends in American religion have long been moving away from traditional theology and ethics. A recent manifestation of this trend is that many people now prefer to call themselves 'spiritual' rather than 'religious.' The term, 'spiritual,' seems to mean that one is pursuing a self-determined spiritual journey grounded in authentic, private experience. This is in opposition to being 'religious,' which seems to mean that one is sectarian by adhering to the practices and beliefs of a historically established religious tradition. 'Spiritual' people believe that private experience makes public theology and ethics at best redundant and at worst abhorrent 'as being spiritual is to be more open, tolerant and authentic. It follows that 'spiritual' people have little knowledge and less need of the theology and ethics that grounds the tradition in which they often, ostensibly participate. Public theology is washed-out by the common denominator of private experience. It remains to be seen if this is a positive development for religion.

3. One of the many recent offerings on the subject of neuroscience and religious belief, *Why God Won't Go Away*, by Newberg, D'Aquili and Rause, seems to legitimize these trends with the stamp of scientific evidence. The authors find the alpha and omega of religion in certain brain states, which can be empirically observed with new brain scan technology. However, do the bright colors on computer screens of brain scans show us the essence of religion? Moreover, one might ask if popular trends provide the authors with a schema for interpreting the data, rather than the data legitimizing these popular trends? Whatever, the answer to these questions, and I will briefly worry about them later, this recent book, subtitled, *Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, is a good read. It does not make high demands on either one's time or concentration. Moreover, for those, like myself, not familiar with the exciting recent activity exploring the relationship between brain science and some religious activities, this book is an excellent place to start. It yields high returns for time spent.
4. In the first third of the book the authors describe their recent experiments and the current state of knowledge about brain mechanics and architecture. Along the way they briefly, but systematically, discuss how an understanding of these ideas inform their experiments on the brain and spirituality. These introductory chapters are good science writing for the curious lay public. The next four chapters are devoted to meta-scientific speculations about what can be inferred from brain science about the nature and origins of myth making, rituals, mysticism, and religion in general. In the penultimate chapter the authors speculate on the reality of mystical experiences, and, in the ultimate chapter they reveal the essence of religion from the view of brain science.

5. Excluding the first three chapters, most of the book is what Karl Popper would call pseudo-science, or more accurately, meta-scientific (metaphysical) speculations made in the guise of science. Such speculation can reveal legitimate insights. However, to avoid confusion about what warrants a particular assertion, distinctions should be made between scientific assertions and metaphysical ones. At times the authors are careful to qualify their meta-scientific speculations as speculations. Unfortunately, like many scientists who attempt to answer metaphysical questions, they are not always disciplined in making this distinction. With this caution in mind, the author's meta-scientific speculations are provocative. For instance, the authors' make the provocative claim that neuroscience reveals that the origin of all religions is to be found in a continuum of brain states. This continuum is hierarchical and represents something like an ascent up Plato's line that leads to a direct encounter with the "Absolute Unity of Being (162)." For Plato, enlightenment is noetic and requires decades of rigorous and systematic education to achieve. For Newberg, et al., enlightenment happens in the range of experiences one has during meditation or prayer as neural input decreases to the orientation areas in the brain. The orientation areas are the parts of the brain that create our sense of individuality or self. So, as neural input to these areas decreases one loses one's sense of self. On rare occasions, during intense spiritual exercise, the fundamental categories of self and not-self, which, again, are constructed by the orientation areas, dissolves as neural input to these areas completely shuts down. When this happens the spiritual practitioner experiences the mystical oneness of Absolute Unity. The authors describe this experience from the standpoint of brain science. They write: "There would be no discrete objects or beings, no sense of space or the passage of time, no line between self and the rest of the universe (119)."
6. The authors' most provocative claim is that this experience is an encounter with 'God.' Moreover, this experience is the ground of all spiritual reality and the beginning and end of all true religion. The authors write: "In [every religion]' the authority of that religion and essential realness of its God are rooted in transcendent experience of mystical union, whether mild or extremely powerful (139)." Later they continue this theme: "When we realize that any specific conception of God is a piece of this larger puzzle, rooted in a mystical understanding of what's fundamentally real, then all religions become siblings, all faiths become true, and all incarnations of God can be understood as real (162)."
7. While the authors argue that the encounter with 'God' can be explained in terms of brain architecture, mechanics and what happens to neural inputs during meditation and prayer, they want to say that this experience is nevertheless one of genuine transcendence (162). They in no way want to be dismissive of the reality of 'God'. Their basic argument for this claim is that those who have had this experience are sure that it is real, and moreover, we should take their word for this as there is something about such experiences that self-certify their reality. Furthermore, these experiences are epistemically foundational for religious truth. They point out, in an embarrassing comment, that "After centuries of inquiry, philosophers have come to suggest that true reality possess an unmistakable quality (152)." Wittgenstein, for example, does remark in *On Certainty* that at times doubt makes no sense, but I am sure he would have doubts about the above statement. The above statement is but one of many weaknesses in the story of religion from brain science. I will not attempt to make a list, but I would like to point out two obvious difficulties that caught my attention. One is that the authors frequently appeal to the theological point of *via negativa*. They approvingly cite mystics and theologians who in various ways affirm *via negativa*: the position that God so transcends the human understanding that we can make no positive assertions about God's nature. Yet in

one sentence the authors affirm that God's nature is unknowable, then in the next define God's essence. They write: "God is by nature unknowable' he is' being itself, the absolute, undifferentiated oneness that is the ground of all existence (159)." These terms are not being used metaphorically, analogically or even ironically, in the manner of negative theology. These are positive descriptions of the real experience of transcendence when neural input is shut down to the orientation areas of the brain.

8. The second difficulty concerns the authors' presumption that experience and interpretation can be neatly separated: the idea that there is a foundational mystical experience that yields unmediated Truth. Moreover, the truth of that experience as the Absolute Unity of Being is affirmed by brain science. The various religious schemas, or conceptual frameworks, used to interpret the experience are superfluous, due to the self-certifying nature of the raw experience. Hence, all public theology, which is worked out in a tradition, dissolves in the face of the unmediated truth of the authentic spiritual experience. However, there are considerable skepticisms that raw experience can be made meaningful apart from an interpretive schema. Thomas Kuhn, for example, wonders if something like a paradigm, an interpretive framework, is a prerequisite for perception itself. In the absence of such a schema all we would experience is William James' "bloomin' buzzin' confusion." The idea that there can be an unmediated, unitary spiritual experience that is foundational to all religious truth is a dubious claim.
9. Finally, there is a danger that this story will, for some, seem to provide the stamp of scientific approval for reducing religion to spirituality and spirituality to private experience. Again, this makes the public theology found in religious traditions superfluous. Mystical experiences are an essential part of religion, but they are not, as the authors' argue, its essence. Experience without interpretation is meaningless; interpretation without experience is vacuous. So, to make an epistemological point: experience cannot stand-alone. To make an ethical point: private religion is morally irresponsible. That is, if religion is a purely private affair then there is no way to hold each other accountable for any crazy notion that might, and most likely will, pop into someone's head. Only in and through living traditions, where we share common vocabularies, concepts and schemas, can we argue about the interpretive schemas that help provide meaning to experience. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, to be part of a living tradition is to be confronted with rival interpretations of what it means to live out that tradition. So within the Islamic, Judaic and Christian traditions, for example, one finds rival interpretations about what it means to be a Muslim, Jew or Christian. It is only by making these interpretations public that we can argue about who we are, what we should do and what we should become.

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