

Natural Spirituality, Thomas Merton, and Christian Renewal

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Introduction

This work emerged from thoughts on whether Thomas Merton's spirituality could fit into the 'natural spirituality' that neuroscience is making possible with its claim that there is a spiritual doorway in the brain. And there may be more. There is reason to think that further developments in understanding brain function may give further scientific support to natural spirituality and in doing so change the face of religion.

Along with that possibility go some fundamental changes in religious belief that are occurring which may also have far reaching consequences and which we will address.

All of this coming together could mean a much needed revival of interest in spirituality and perhaps a renewal in Christian faith.

This is a time of great change. The supernatural world may be closing, but the world of natural spirituality is opening in a dramatic way.

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The recognition that there is a spiritual doorway in the brain, which neuroscience came to as a result of research into near death experience (NDE), means that experience of transcendence, or what may be called mystical experience, can now be regarded as a natural phenomenon. Nothing other-worldly about it. Nothing supernatural.

That mystical experience is a natural phenomenon was suggested many years ago by Aldous Huxley, who experimented with drug-induced states of altered consciousness. He came to regard mystical experience as a natural phenomenon, similar to the aesthetic intuition that precedes the creation of a work of art or the intuition of a philosopher who rises above his concepts in finding a synthesis. His view now has scientific support.

However, another scientific development may be even more important. Some time ago, two very eminent men in their respective fields of neuroscience and philosophy of science – Nobel prize winning Sir John Eccles and Sir Karl Popper – worked together to try to understand the impact of consciousness on the brain, and they came up with a startling hypothesis.

Their hypothesis is that self-consciousness is an entity that has a life of its own, independent of the brain, and actually becomes the controller of the brain; that self-consciousness is a projection of the brain that has an independent existence outside the material world. An entity outside the material world! The title of the book, *The Self and its Brain*, in which they reported their hypothesis, says it all. Could it open a new world of the spirit?

The hypothesis is startling because it is strongly dualistic and suggests that there is a spiritual world beyond the material world where independent entities can exist. It goes against current scientific beliefs, although the scientific credentials of the proponents are excellent.

Were it proved to be right, their suggestion could be of the greatest importance and it is surprising that it has received so little attention. If Eccles and Popper are right, and there is mounting evidence that they could be, then the playing field is radically changed. It means that there *is* something beyond the physical world; that there is, as William James suggested long ago, spiritual life and force beyond the material world. If so, we no longer would need to fear that we are only a cog in a machine and belittle ourselves by doing

so. It would provide confirmation that we do have free will, freedom of choice, the capacity to fashion our lives as best we can. All this we have known in our hearts to be true but we hadn't scientific grounds to support it. Now we may have. And there could be more to come from the Popper-Eccles suggestion.

Until recent times, the traditional supernatural world has provided the grounds in which religious beliefs could operate, but that is no longer a reality for most people. The universe as we now know it has no place for supernatural beings. But there may be another spiritual realm opening up to replace it. Because, if it is true that self-consciousness is an independent entity, then it exists in another world, in a world 'out there' beyond the physical world, and there is no reason why that world should not contain other entities, the possibility of which is now receiving much attention.

Led by philosopher/theologian William Craig a great deal of discussion is at present centring on the concept of unembodied mind. Do such entities exist? The Eccles-Popper hypothesis suggests they do. If self-consciousness is an independent entity, then it is an unembodied mind and one that is very powerful at that. It has a controlling influence on the brain.

However, that there are ghostly entities hovering about 'out there' is so much out of synch with current world views that most of us find it hard even to imagine it. But there is now the growing belief that the quantum world can make such a view a reality. Quantum physics is changing our view of the world and will go on changing it.

Craig uses the unembodied mind concept to define the nature of God. He argues that it would have taken an unembodied mind outside the universe to get the universe going. A Creator God must therefore be of that nature. In the context of the changes that are occurring, this idea is not totally unreasonable, but I find it lacking in spiritual appeal. I prefer that God remains a mystery that can be known by experience but not through rational concepts.

However, this new territory may prove very fruitful in other ways, and I am going to use it to suggest an explanation for the perplexing question of the reality of the risen Christ, a belief that has been affirmed by so many people over so long a time and which is at the heart of the life of Thomas Merton. Without it there is no true Christianity and *risen* means not just 'there' in one's imagination providing an imaginary companion, but 'there' in the sense of a living presence with whom one can commune. How can that be? Can neuroscience and psychology together provide an answer?

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What I am offering in this book is material in support of the idea that neuroscience may be offering a new and revitalizing understanding of the basis of Christian belief and faith, particularly belief in the healing power of the risen Christ.

I start by examining the division that is occurring at present between 'belief-based' faith and 'experience-based' faith, a division that is exemplified by two recently published books. Then I give portraits of two of the great Christians of the last century – Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas Merton – who demonstrate how different ways of experiencing God can be equally effective. I then use Merton's prophetic utterances to challenge institutional Christianity and, finally, I draw attention to how natural spirituality may provide a context in which different beliefs in the nature of God may be reconciled, as well as establishing grounds for Christian renewal.

The Divide

I believe a division is happening in Christian faith, a division that is based on whether belief or experience is the main basis of faith, and on whether or not exclusivity is part of the belief. Two recently published books – *Jesus the Inner Teacher* by Martin Freeman and *God's Word for God's World* by John R. W. Stott – exemplify the difference.

Freeman's book has an introduction by the Dalai Lama who gives praise to the Christian tradition for having been a source of inspiration to many people for so long. He then draws attention to what the two faiths have in common: that the founding masters, the Buddha and Jesus, both exemplify their teaching in their lives and also that their teaching is remarkably similar.

However, he does not advocate attempting to unify the traditions. He thinks that a single tradition cannot satisfy all needs and therefore people should not change the religion of their birth. But he does think that spiritual enlightenment helps people to appreciate the value of other traditions as well as their own and regards that as preferable to holding on to the exclusive value of one's own.

In contrast, John Stott is strong on exclusivity and on being born again. American evangelicals wanted to make him their pope. He believes that the word of God in the Bible is the sure and only way to divine deliverance and that without such guidance man is like a

boat without a rudder. He goes as far as to say that secular theologians of today, by which he means those who deny the personality of God and deity of Jesus, are writing what he describes as 'such rubbish' because they have not been born again.

I reveal which side I am on when I say that I do not believe in the deity of Christ and do not understand what Stott means by the personality of God. For me, God is spirit, the creative spirit of the universe that can be experienced as a 'presence' in states of meditation and prayer. The sense of 'presence' can also be experienced 'as if' of a person who can speak to us, which is the way Thomas Merton experienced God. I also believe that Jesus became the Christ by fully incarnating the Holy Spirit. He was not born that way.

The spiritual life of Thomas Merton is a good example of experiential belief. He believed that revelation came to him from within and that finding God went along with finding the truth of himself. He believed that God spoke to him in many ways but in particular through His divine presence in nature.

The difference of his view from Stott's is apparent in their different ways of understanding the words of Jesus:.. 'spirit of truth'. John Stott, who is very erudite and persuasive with words, understands Jesus's words to mean the truth that is carried by words, meaning the literal truth of the New Testament. Merton, on the other hand, would regard 'spirit of truth' as referring to being true to oneself and worshipping God, as Jesus is reported as having said, 'in spirit and in truth'.

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As already stated, advances in understanding the human brain are now occurring that bear on religious experience and, as they make mystical experience a natural phenomenon, such belief would support the experiential side of the divide which could well result in a spiritual surge that could be divisive if the two sides cannot be reconciled. The only way that can happen would be for them to find

