



Minds, Brains, Souls and Gods: A Conversation on Faith, Psychology and Neuroscience

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Ask Jeeves?

In the tradition of C. S. Lewis's *Letters to Malcolm*, Malcolm Jeeves presents a fictional conversation between professor and student which addresses the complex life issues one faces as a psychology student, and how to make sense of one's faith in early adulthood.

Says Malcolm: "My main motivation remains to help students who are already Christians and struggling with problems arising from psychology and neuroscience and, at the same time, produce something that such Christian students can use in seeking to lead their fellow students who are not already Christians to a living faith."

Written by a leading expert in the fields of psychology and neuropsychology, *Minds, Brains, Souls and Gods* presents an up-to-date discussion of the latest research in those same fields, but providing it in a question-and-answer style that breaks down complex topics into easily digested bits.

"In this capstone to his distinguished career, Malcolm Jeeves—a pioneering cognitive neuroscientist and our wisest thinker about the interplay of psychological science and faith—helps a student wrestle with big questions," says David G. Myers, professor at Hope College. "The student is fictional, but the issues are real, and these insightful 'letters from Malcolm' speak to the heart of Christian students' engagement with today's science."

Can Science "Explain Away" Religion?

Malcolm,

Your emails have pointed out that the same evidence is often interpreted in very different ways. For example, some Christians point to the evidence that certain parts of the brain are active during prayer, and they try to use that as proof for the existence of God. Others understand the same evidence as showing that praying to God is "nothing but" the selective activity of specific brain areas. Can you help me understand how to properly relate scientific findings to Christian beliefs?

Ben,

The question you raise has cropped up repeatedly as we have discussed how to relate scientific accounts of human life to other accounts, including the religious. There is undoubtedly an ever-present temptation, to which some have succumbed, to believe that scientific descriptions can reduce human life, including religion, to nothing more than biological, physical or psychological processes.

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An unthinking commitment to reductionism crops up even in the writings of our most illustrious scientists. For example, Francis Crick, whom I've mentioned before, wrote in his book *The Astonishing Hypothesis*, "You are no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules. . . . You are nothing but a pack of neurons." I mentioned earlier in our correspondence that the logical conclusion to Crick's approach would be that his own written words are "nothing but" ink strokes on the page carrying their message. But even he drew back from that at the end of the book when he wrote, "The words 'nothing but' in our hypothesis can be misleading if understood in too naive a way." Crick's fellow Nobel laureate Roger Sperry alerted to the dangers of reductionism when he wrote, "The meaning of the message will not be found in the chemistry of the ink."

Only recently I came across another instance of this when a respected and high-profile neuroscientist in Britain, Professor Colin Blakemore, was talking about "God and the Scientist" when taking part in the Channel 4 series titled *Christianity and History*. Among other things, he expressed the hope that "science will one day explain everything including the human need for religious belief." He probably had in mind the suggestion that has been made that we have developed brains with properties that inevitably produce a predisposition to belief in a God or in gods. This then means (so he implies) that our beliefs in God are "nothing but" the selective chattering of the neurons of our brain.

The problem with this sort of argument, which Colin Blakemore failed to point out, is that it applies equally to his views about the possibility that one day science will explain everything including the human need for religious belief. In terms of his argument, his views are "nothing but" the chattering of the neurons in *his* brain. In effect, this kind of appeal to reductionism really gets you nowhere and never takes seriously the arguments being put forward about why people believe or do not believe. The point is that these have to be taken seriously on their own merits. The same applies to properly interpreting the results from studies of the genetics or social psychology of religion and religious behavior. These are simultaneously a study of irreligiosity since they frequently compare more and less religious people. Hence Colin Blakemore's irreligiosity is put under the microscope, but that does not explain away any grounds for his irreligiosity that he puts forward. These must be considered on their own merits.

Malcolm,

I shared with some of my Christian friends what you said about explaining and explaining away. Some said that even long before the challenges from neuroscience, Freud had already explained religion away using psychology, claiming it was all wishful thinking. What do you say about that?

Ben,



Your friends were right. There have been many attempts to explain the origin of religion, whether by anthropologists or psychologists or, as we were saying, more recently from neuroscientists such as Colin Blakemore. Broadly speaking, when psychologists have taken an interest in religion they have concentrated on what we might call its roots and its fruits—questions about the origins of religion and questions about how religious people should behave.

Since your friends raised it, here is a bit of detail. In the twentieth century Sigmund Freud's radical views became widely known, and the stage was set for a strong resurgence of what has been called the "warfare metaphor" when discussing how science and religion are related. According to Freud the practices of religions are "nothing but" the persistence of what, using his psychoanalytic terminology, is an "interim social neurosis." He said that we must eventually grow out of this.

Freud wrote at length about this in *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. According to Freud, an "illusion" stands for any belief system based on human wishes. He was careful to point out that such a basis does not necessarily imply that the system is false; nevertheless, as far as Christianity was concerned, he clearly believed that it was. In that sense he was championing and perpetuating the warfare metaphor. A major problem for the psychoanalytic treatment of religion as being the product of unconscious wishes, or for any effort to explain religion away, is that such an explanation can be applied equally well to the understanding of unbelief. This was penetratingly demonstrated by Rumke in his little book *The Psychology of Unbelief*. In it he looked carefully at the history of Freud's own life—such as his poor relationships with his father and his intense dislike of his Roman Catholic nanny—and he put these together to show how, on the basis of Freud's own theory, a picture emerges from which we would predict that a person with such a background would, on reaching maturity, produce a rationalized set of beliefs in which he would reject religion, particularly a religion in which God was seen as a father figure. And Freud did just that. Likewise today's atheist skeptics reflect certain cultural influences—they manifest the thinking styles of western white males (which they are).

— From Chapter 18, "Can Science 'Explain Away' Religion?"