

Spirituality With and Without God

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Followed the morning talk by Professor Sean Spence on “The Biology of Free Will” at the June 2nd, 2007 meeting of the Yorkshire Branch of the Scientific and Medical Network.

In this brief exposition I hope to sketch my personal understanding of spirituality, link it up with Sean’s theme and locate spiritual awareness on the trajectory of human evolution. I need hardly say that it would need months of study and discussion to deal adequately with the latter, so I cannot hope to do more than indicate some nodal ideas and suggest their connection.

Not having heard Sean’s talk as I write this, I am assuming that it follows along the lines of his published work, in which he argues that

“If the notion of free will is to be retained by philosophers, psychiatrists and psychologists, it will be a free will which is essentially non-conscious.”

That may seem to be a contradiction in terms, but is not too far away from the position I have reached, by a very different and non-clinical path. At the least, I would say that to hold with the poet W. E. Henley that “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul” is a dangerously simple answer to many questions, social, personal and spiritual.

The existence in the individual of a separate will of some kind is recognized by psychologists in several ways, but notably in auditory hallucinations, obsessive compulsive disorders and the so-called “alien hand” syndrome. These may well have been explained this morning but, at risk of repetition, I would like to single out the last mentioned condition, in which one hand of the patient does all kinds of things against his or her conscious will and has to be restrained by the other hand. It seems to have a life of its own, because it has a will of its own, but it also seems to be in opposition to what I recognize as MY will. That is to say, despite there being different centres of will in the brain, there is one which defines the real me. We are entering here into a rapidly expanding field of neuropsychology that is in creative turmoil, and I want to limit my attention to a particular aspect that bears on spiritual consciousness, and which may be called for the sake of simplicity “doing the will of God.” So far as the email discussion on “secular spirituality” between Christina, Chris, Max and myself revealed our basic positions, I think it would be fair to say that Christina and I believe that this phrase “doing the will of God” is both meaningful and centrally important in our personal spiritual development, Max would radically qualify this, and Chris would reject it, but since all will shortly explain and defend their positions, I will speak only of my own.

I begin by saying where I am coming from. Religiously, I was brought up RC, spent three years in a Benedictine community in my twenties, later joined the Quakers, had some experience of Unitarianism and am now wondering what useful role conventional religion has to play in a post-modern and post-Christian world, where spirituality is by no means associated with religious belief in the traditional sense. I became interested in neurology and spirituality over a long period, starting when I was doing my doctoral studies in psycholinguistics in the 1970's. At that time the field was very narrow and dominated by Chomsky's naïve concept of linguistic deep structure, and while a few professionals, such as Lev Vygotsky, accepted "inner speech" as legitimate data, I do not recall ever coming across any mention of auditory hallucinations in any of the literature. This is surprising in itself, and even more so when one considers how the whole of western history has been shaped by individuals who have "heard voices" and done what those voices have told them to do, often against their own expressed wishes. They are so many that one hardly needs to give examples, ranging through Moses and the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, Mohamed and Augustine to Joan of Arc, Teresa of Avila and George Fox. Not long after the scientific revolution, the voices seemed to lose public religious significance, and hearing voices is now considered a mental illness, where once it was valued as a source of insight and inspiration for the community. Interestingly, in *The Interior Castle* Teresa of Avila says that this phenomenon should be treated like an illness ("*como enferma*"). William James expressed the modern attitude to hearing voices when he called Fox (rather approvingly, I have to say) "a psychopath of the deepest dye."

We are on the edge here of a marvellously rich field of historical and practical theology, for while Socrates' heard the voice of his daemon and was directed by it, and Paul tells of both auditory and visual hallucinations, Jesus seems to have been free of both, and this surely is significant. I wonder if Jesus represented in his time an emergent new human type, for in moral matters he seems to have persuaded his hearers to develop an inner compass, such as he possessed, rather than follow religious law as a kind of external group command. His innovative teaching method of parables presses one to work it out for oneself, rather than follow the voice of the tribe. It anticipates Kant's principle of the Enlightenment, "Dare to think for yourself" and Fox's insistent question, "What canst thou say?" It may well be that the enduring significance of the Christian message is not that Jesus was the literal son of the Jewish sky god but that he was a clear example of a new kind of human whose God was, so to speak, "within". If the hypothesis be allowed, the present debate about secular and theistic spirituality may be taken as evidence that we are entering into a critical new phase in the evolution of human consciousness.

This speculation takes me to an earlier crisis in human evolution when our ancestors went from being units of a group consciousness and gained the first flickers of a sense of individual self-identity. The self-styled psychohistorian Julian Jaynes argued that this threshold of consciousness was crossed in the West some three thousand years ago over a period of perhaps five centuries. Jaynes is an interesting scholar for several reasons, not least because he started as an ethologist, and so has a strongly biological and evolutionary bent. The book which made his name was *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, first published in 1979. It became something of a cult, but

psychologists on the whole have been rather sniffy about it, with a few notable exceptions such as Daniel Dennett and Elkhonon Goldberg. Twenty years after first reading it, I still hold it in high regard, because I think that Jaynes makes a plausible case to show how normal self-consciousness emerged from the bondage of tribe-think, and I believe that we as a species are now facing a similar step change which will take us to a higher kind of self-awareness. I would summarise the emerging new consciousness as not only spiritual but God-centred. I am aware that many today would regard such a change as regressive, abandoning our hard-won progress to responsible individualism. That is a charge which cannot be rejected out of hand, but which I must leave unanswered for lack of time.

Jaynes refers to the state of living between group-consciousness and self-consciousness as schizophrenia, which is literally the case, since the individual must make every decision with two centres of will. In the past, Jaynes argues, the tension between these two conflicting wills was experienced, and in a sense resolved, in the hearing of a voice (literally the voice of authority) which seems to have come from within but doubtless, as with schizophrenics today, often from an identifiable location. (There is at least one case history of a sufferer who sometimes when driving his car had to go where he was told by a voice that came clearly from behind him, an unusual instance of a back seat driver.) I do not do justice to Jaynes' theme with this summary description, but it must serve to link his theme with the statement of my personal understanding and experience of spirituality.

I should say first of all that from the point of view of spiritual development it seems to me vitally important to distinguish between intellectual understanding and experience, for theoretical knowledge alone has very limited developmental value – rather like learning how to drive a car by reading a manual in the armchair – while, on the other hand, feeling on its own can easily degenerate into self-indulgence and delusion. Detached from a world view which is shared by the community, spiritual experience is almost impossible to communicate and easily lapses into the quirky and fraudulent. This, it seems to me, is the great danger in New Age spirituality. At the same time it needs to be said that the great pioneers in human advance have had to reject the common world view of their time in one respect or another, and this makes communication something of a Catch 22.

From this perspective I see an illuminating similarity between Jaynes' thesis about the past and a theory – I would say a vision – about the long term future of humankind. Where he looked back and saw normal human consciousness as a release from the higher authority of a tribal mind, I would look forward and see a new normality ahead of our species when the self identifies with another kind of authority, namely, the creating power from which it has emerged. In the meantime we must be prepared to live, like our ancestors, with a divided self and a kind of schizophrenia. However, relief is at hand in through the new creation story that cosmology and quantum physics are now telling.

The full story is yet to be told, but consider for a moment the obvious truth that everything in existence, including each one of us, was once contained potentially in the cloud of hydrogen that constituted reality some 15 billion years ago, and then consider that the hydrogen itself was contained potentially in the timeless and dimensionless singularity which was the beginning of it all. Once we

posit a creating consciousness as the ultimate source of all things – **the critical premise** - a ten year old can work out that we are within that primal consciousness and it is within us.

This is, of course, the doctrine of panentheism, but I would call my understanding of spirituality *entheistic* in order to emphasize the point just made that so long as it remains at the level of theory it is spiritually sterile. That said, I do believe there is a very dynamic interface between theology and experience in this regard. Or to put it oversimply, if one thinks about panentheistic themes deeply enough, it is likely that the feeling of oneness, or *advaita*, will begin to stir. As Poincaré once said, inspiration comes to the prepared mind.

This returns me to Sean's theme of non-conscious free will and Jaynes' hypothesis of split consciousness. Jaynes proposed that the crossover from proto-human to fully human came about as the corpus callosum thickened and created more powerful and stable left brain/right brain consciousness. I hope I am not garbling his argument too much with this summary description. In any event, I want to set it in the context of current thinking about the biological basis of spiritual awareness, which tends to locate its source in the prefrontal cortex (cf. Changeux, Damasio, Newberg, Goldberg) and/or the left temporal lobe (cf. Persinger, Ramchandran) – the so-called "God spot" - whereas I would go for whole-brain spirituality, with complex interaction between these and the hippocampus, amygdala and brainstem. I have put two diagrams in the hand-out that accompanies this paper to explain a little better the evolutionary and spiritual significance of this interaction. Although the brainstem is usually taken to be the seat only of our animal instincts, one of its most vital elements is the reticular formation, which has a trigger function in alerting and arousing focused consciousness. Thus a mother will pick up the slightest sound from her child sleeping in another room, because she is subconsciously aware of its significance.

My point is that highly spiritual individuals pick up signals of the divine around them in a way that the average person does not. Francis of Assisi is perhaps the best known of those to whom nature spoke of God-in-nature. He was the opposite of Wordsworth's Peter Bell, for whom "a primrose by a river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him, and it was nothing more." I believe that this area of neurotheology is far too neglected, and has great significance for our understanding and attainment of spirituality. Let me give another instance from the life of Ignatius of Loyola, who is more usually associated with military style efficiency than hearing voices. The story is told that in his retirement someone came across him in the garden shaking his stick at a flower bed and muttering, "Stop shouting." Now there's an auditory hallucination for you! And think of George Fox, who said that after his conversion experience, "the whole creation had a new smell." So the olfactory lobe as well is involved in spiritual experience. But I think Elizabeth Barrett Browning put the higher consciousness in a nutshell when she described it in her famous lines, "Earth's crammed with heaven/ And every common bush afire with God."

When the reticular formation comes into action, we have no free will, it seizes our attention whether we like it or not. But it is not entirely autonomic, for we can surely persuade it to seize us by particular things, just as musicians can become pitch-sensitive by constant training. We must be dull of soul indeed if we are not

seized by beauty, so that the rose reaches out and, as it were, grabs us and takes over our consciousness for a brief moment and we are, to quote Wordsworth again, “surprised by joy.” Viewed from the perspective of spiritual evolution, we can see a profound symmetry between the escape to self-consciousness in Jaynes’ theory and the escape from self-consciousness in the mystical tradition of religion that goes all the way back to the *Upanishads*.

This is why I began by saying that I accept, like Sean, the paradox that free will is ultimately non-conscious, and I would like to end by quoting from a well-known hymn by George Matheson which perfectly expresses the sense of being seized by a higher consciousness in which self and non-self are fused.

O love that will not let me go ...
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

Of its composition Matheson said, “I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice, rather than working it out for myself All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles: this came like a dayspring from on high.” Was that inward voice God? Did it over-ride his free will? Did he willingly let his free will be over-ridden? I will end here, leaving you with these three apparently simple questions.