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OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Neural Buddhists

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In 1996, Tom Wolfe wrote a brilliant essay called “Sorry, but Your Soul Just Died,” in which he captured the militant materialism of some modern scientists.

To these self-confident researchers, the idea that the spirit might exist apart from the body is just ridiculous. Instead, everything arises from atoms. Genes shape temperament. Brain chemicals shape behavior. Assemblies of neurons create consciousness. Free will is an illusion. Human beings are “hard-wired” to do this or that. Religion is an accident.

In this materialist view, people perceive God’s existence because their brains have evolved to confabulate belief systems. You put a magnetic helmet around their heads and they will begin to think they are having a spiritual epiphany. If they suffer from temporal lobe epilepsy, they will show signs of hyperreligiosity, an overexcitement of the brain tissue that leads sufferers to believe they are conversing with God.

Wolfe understood the central assertion contained in this kind of thinking: Everything is material and “the soul is dead.” He anticipated the way the genetic and neuroscience revolutions would affect public debate. They would kick off another fundamental argument over whether God exists.

Lo and behold, over the past decade, a new group of assertive atheists has done battle with defenders of faith. The two sides have argued about whether it is reasonable to conceive of a soul that survives the death of the body and about whether understanding the brain explains away or merely adds to our appreciation of the entity that created it.

The atheism debate is a textbook example of how a scientific revolution can change public culture. Just as “The Origin of Species reshaped social thinking, just as Einstein’s theory of relativity affected art, so the revolution in neuroscience is having an effect on how people see the world.

And yet my guess is that the atheism debate is going to be a sideshow. The cognitive revolution is not going to end up undermining faith in God, it’s going to end up challenging faith in the Bible.

Over the past several years, the momentum has shifted away from hard-core materialism. The brain seems less like a cold machine. It does not operate like a computer. Instead, meaning, belief and consciousness seem to emerge mysteriously from idiosyncratic networks of neural firings. Those squishy things called emotions play a gigantic role in all forms of thinking. Love is vital to brain development.

Researchers now spend a lot of time trying to understand universal moral intuitions. Genes are not merely selfish, it appears. Instead, people seem to have deep instincts for fairness, empathy and attachment.

Scientists have more respect for elevated spiritual states. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that transcendent experiences can actually be identified and measured in the brain (people experience a decrease in activity in the parietal lobe, which orients us in space). The mind seems to have the ability to transcend itself and merge with a larger presence that feels more real.

This new wave of research will not seep into the public realm in the form of militant atheism. Instead it will lead to what you might call neural Buddhism.

If you survey the literature (and I'd recommend books by Newberg, Daniel J. Siegel, Michael S. Gazzaniga, Jonathan Haidt, Antonio Damasio and Marc D. Hauser if you want to get up to speed), you can see that certain beliefs will spread into the wider discussion.

First, the self is not a fixed entity but a dynamic process of relationships. Second, underneath the patina of different religions, people around the world have common moral intuitions. Third, people are equipped to experience the sacred, to have moments of elevated experience when they transcend boundaries and overflow with love. Fourth, God can best be conceived as the nature one experiences at those moments, the unknowable total of all there is.

In their arguments with Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, the faithful have been defending the existence of God. That was the easy debate. The real challenge is going to come from people who feel the existence of the sacred, but who think that particular religions are just cultural artifacts built on top of universal human traits. It's going to come from scientists whose beliefs overlap a bit with Buddhism.

In unexpected ways, science and mysticism are joining hands and reinforcing each other. That's bound to lead to new movements that emphasize self-transcendence but put little stock in divine law or revelation. Orthodox believers are going to have to defend particular doctrines and particular biblical teachings. They're going to have to defend the idea of a personal God, and explain why specific theologies are true guides for behavior day to day. I'm not qualified to take sides, believe me. I'm just trying to anticipate which way the debate is headed. We're in the middle of a scientific revolution. It's going to have big cultural effects.

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