

## **The return of Spirit – Christian theology and contemporary consciousness research**

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Why, you may ask, have I chosen to give this talk the ridiculously ambitious title 'The Return of Spirit?' Well, on one level the answer is of course very simple – it is Whitsunday, after all. But let me say at the outset that my theme is not a 'return' of the Third Person of the Trinity, as if the Holy Spirit ever abandoned us since the tongues of fire descended on the apostles on that day of Pentecost nearly two thousand years ago. The return that I *will* however attempt to describe is rather what I believe to be an immensely significant cultural change in at least some corners of contemporary Western society, and especially the scientific project that arguably constitutes both its greatest achievement and its supreme temptation.

### **A pack of neurons?**

It would not be altogether fanciful to suggest that the intellectual life of the West in post-Enlightenment modernity can be read in terms of the progressive evacuation of the notion of Spirit, both Divine and human, from an ever-more materialistic culture dominated by an increasingly reductive scientific paradigm. In the light of what might at first seem spectacular advances in our knowledge of physical reality (until you start taking quantum uncertainty seriously), there have been no shortage of dogmatic pronouncements from the high priests of modern science to the effect that the mystery of human personhood has evaporated. Co-discoverer of the structure of DNA Francis Crick put it this way in his *The Astonishing Hypothesis* of 1994:

"You', your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.

As Lewis Carroll's Alice might have phrased it, 'You're nothing but a pack of neurons'.<sup>1</sup>

The scientific establishment has generated many variations on this reductionist theme of things being 'no more than', 'nothing but' their component parts; biologist Richard Dawkins (who for thirteen years was professor for the *Public Understanding of Science* at Oxford University) famously declared human beings, and indeed all animals, to be 'machines created by our genes', while pioneer of artificial intelligence Marvin Minsky no less memorably described our brain as just a 'computer made of meat'. This sentiment was echoed last year by Stephen Hawking in an interview for the British *Guardian* newspaper:

'I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.'<sup>2</sup>

In other words, some of the most visible representatives of modern science have been loudly proclaiming not only the death of God but the death of the human spirit as well. There is no room here for a soul, subjectivity or the self, no 'ghost in the machine', to use philosopher Gilbert Ryle's much quoted phrase from his 1949 book *The Concept of Mind*.

As many of you will know we at the American Church in Paris have been exploring the faith-science relationship via our participation in the Templeton Foundation's *Scientists in Congregations Ministry Initiative*. One of the recurring features of several of the consistently stimulating guest presentations that we have hosted has been a concern to demonstrate that the reductionist vision of reality, which effectively excludes all questions of value and meaning, is not the whole story.

This had already been the main thrust of our 2011 Lenten Lectures given by Holmes Rolston III on his book *Three Big Bangs: Matter-Energy, Life, Mind*. Rolston argues that the story of cosmic evolution needs to be seen in terms of the ongoing generation of 'more out of less', as new levels of being arise – due to an 'increase in

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis : the Scientific Search for the Soul* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 3.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven>

the information possibility space<sup>3</sup> which cannot be explained purely in terms of the lower levels from which they have emerged. Biology, for example, has proved fundamentally irreducible to physics and chemistry (despite Crick's determined efforts to demonstrate the contrary) on account of informational differences which are not explainable in terms of matter-energy.<sup>4</sup> This year a similar theme was taken up by Keith Ward, whose recent book *More than Matter* is a sustained argument against Ryle's view of mind on behalf of a chastened form of dualism, persuasively contending that science's dismissal of the reality of subjective experience, mental events and feelings neither stands up to philosophical scrutiny nor rings true to our own lives. For Ward, it is implausible to regard the world as a mere aggregate of its material properties; any account of reality also needs to make room for the non-material considerations that make our conscious human experience meaningful.

### **Preaching to the choir?**

So what?, skeptics might and do retort (Keith Ward has faced more than his fair share of abuse from the atheist community in the comment pages of the British press). What do you expect a Professor of Divinity and Anglican Priest to say? After all, he has a prior commitment to believing in a soul, so he's simply clinging to his dogma. This may be a crude objection, but it is a difficult one to overcome, and one of the main reasons why, realistically, the work of Keith Ward is unlikely to be given a fair hearing where it is most needed, i.e. outside Church circles. The same unfortunately applies to other valiant Christian academics such as Philip Clayton and Steven Knapp, authors of the recent book *The Predicament of Belief*, which also makes an extremely cogent philosophical case against reductionism. Even the excellent *Test of Faith*, a DVD-based course produced by the Faraday Institute in Cambridge to help congregations such as ours consider the interface between

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<sup>3</sup> 'What makes the critical difference in evolutionary history is increase in the information possibility space, which is not something inherent in the precursor chemical and physical materials, nor in the incrementally developing evolutionary system.' Holmes Rolston III, *Three Big Bangs: Matter-Energy, Life, Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 53.

<sup>4</sup> 'In Earth's big bang, singularly different from the primordial big bang, nature wonderfully, surprisingly, regularly breaks through to new discoveries because there is new proactive information emergent in the life codings. [...] Something higher is reached, something "super" to the precedents, something superimposed, superintending, supervening on what went before; there is more where once there was less. The "super" for scientists is "cybernetic." For the philosophers, what is added is "telos." For the theologians, what is added to matter-energy is "logos"' (*Three Big Bangs*, 44).

Christian belief and scientific inquiry, is basically preaching to the choir at a time when much of the world at large has no interest in what's on the songsheet.

Considered in isolation, a Christian defence of the notion of soul or spirit might therefore simply be considered business as usual, a noble but futile effort to stem the materialist, secularizing tide. What I would like to argue, however, is that closer inspection of issues of contemporary science and spirituality suggests that something is in the process of changing radically within science itself (as the brilliant French polymath Jean Staune pointed out at length to us in a memorable lecture on March 8). It may be easy to get depressed over the current state of science-faith dialogue if all that is considered is the distasteful and ultimately extremely uninteresting slanging-match over evolution between fundamentalist creationists on one hand and the New Atheists on the other. I would however contend that if we allow ourselves to be distracted by this pseudo-debate we may miss far more promising developments elsewhere.

As I hope we shall see, a potentially revolutionary paradigm shift is occurring in the way that we understand, or rather admit that we do not yet understand human consciousness. The notion that the latter is a mere by-product of brain activity is collapsing, not out of the efforts of Christian apologists to combat scientific materialism, but rather on account of the sheer weight of empirical data to the contrary. This is a shift which the Church has not initiated, but from which it certainly stands to benefit if (and this is a big if) we are prepared to open ourselves to the idea that the Holy Spirit not only acts within but also outside institutional Christianity in some places where we might least expect it.

This morning I can do no more than offer the briefest of sketches of what is a rapidly morphing landscape, but I would like to point to a number of factors which seem to be precipitating this change and identify some of the key researchers – few if any of whom, it should be noted, are professing Christians, although they are all characterized by a genuine openness to spiritual questions and a sincere quest for truth. Paradoxically, it might well be just this fact that gives the new emerging

paradigm real traction and prevents it from being dismissed as religious propaganda.

### **Beauregard's 'Brain Wars'**

As a framework for what follows, I will be referring to a recently published book by neuroscientist Mario Beauregard of the Université de Montréal entitled *Brain Wars: The Scientific Battle Over the Existence of the Mind and the Proof That Will Change the Way We Live Our Lives*. This book caused something of an internet firestorm when excerpts from it were posted on the much-read website [www.salon.com](http://www.salon.com).<sup>5</sup> Beauregard's work is significant not only because the author has emerged as one of the pioneers of a new discipline that is sometimes termed 'neurotheology' (the scientific exploration of the neural correlates of spiritual experience), but also because *Brain Wars* presents an excellent overview of the reasons why the reductionist view of consciousness has broken down.

Beauregard's arguments are perhaps the strongest statement yet of what might be termed an anti-materialist rebellion within science which is not motivated by a prior adherence to a defined religious framework:

'Along with an increasing number of scientists, I believe vehemently that *the materialist framework is not science*. A growing body of solid scientific research shows this view to be not only limited, but wrong. In fact, few mainstream scientists operating within the paradigm of scientific materialism realize that it is based on a number of philosophical assumptions – that is, *beliefs without proof*.<sup>6</sup>

Beauregard identifies these as *physicalism* ('life, mind, and consciousness are simply accidental by-products of complex arrangements of matter (and energy)'), *reductionism* ('the notion that complex things can be understood by reducing them to the interactions of their parts') and *objectivism* ('the thesis that scientists should investigate empirical facts in an objective manner'<sup>7</sup>). Beauregard takes issue with three positions that he sees as having failed to solve what Australian philosopher

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.salon.com/2012/05/01/near\\_death\\_rehashed/](http://www.salon.com/2012/05/01/near_death_rehashed/)

<sup>6</sup> Mario Beauregard, *Brain Wars: The Scientific Battle Over the Existence of the Mind and the Proof That Will Change the Way We Live Our Lives* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid..

David Chalmers famously called the “hard problem” of how subjective experience can arise from physical processes: *mind-brain identity*, *eliminativism* (the simple denial of the reality of mental events (Patricia and Paul Churchland, Daniel Dennett)) and *emergent mentalism* (Nobel Laureate Roger Sperry (1913-1994)). This last position – which has some prominent advocates within Christian theology – is not a simple reductivism in that it accepts that mental events are ‘emergent properties’ which cannot be reduced to neuronal firing, but sees such events as impossible to divorce from the brain.<sup>8</sup>

A purely materialist outlook, Beauregard points out, is unable to account for a number of anomalies that are now well-established within mainstream science and which are strong indicators of the reality of a mind that is more than simply the sum of brain activity and is able to act on the body in ways hitherto unsuspected by Western science:

- The **placebo/nocebo effect**, i.e. the evidence from pharmacology that healing often occurs in double-blind drug trials among participants receiving no active substance, purely on the basis of their belief in the efficacy of the treatment.
- **Neurofeedback**, a therapeutic practice consisting of training patients to produce various types of brain waves via the use of EEG and more recently real-time fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) technology. Some examples of applications given by Beauregard include the treatment of chronic alcoholics, children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children and Vietnam Vets with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The implication of this ‘top-down causation’ is that the mind can control the brain (as well as various other bodily processes, as Beauregard argues later in the book).

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<sup>8</sup> Crick describes two basic variants of emergentism, one which has ‘mystical overtones’ (i.e. the contention that emergent properties are fundamentally inexplicable by reductionism) and one which is compatible with materialism when expanded to include whole-part interaction : ‘[t]he scientific meaning of emergent, or at least the one I use, assumes that, while the whole may not be the simple sum of the separate parts, its behavior can, at least in principle, be *understood* from the nature and behavior of its parts *plus* the knowledge of how all these parts interact’ (*The Astonishing Hypothesis*, 11).

- **Neuroplasticity** : to quote Beauregard: ‘until the 1970s it had been a central dogma of neuroscience that the adult brain was a static “hardwired” machine, with no ability to change and produce new neurons. Yet the scientific studies that led to the revolutionary discovery of neuroplasticity and other landmark studies have shown just the reverse: the adult human brain is continually changing its structure and function by creating new neurons and synaptic connections, and reorganizing existing neuronal networks or elaborating novel networks. We are not stuck with the brains we were born with.’<sup>9</sup> Beauregard’s example is the enlarged posterior hippocampi (associated with our capacity for spatial navigation) of London taxi drivers compared to control subjects who were not taxi drivers detected in a 2000 study at University College London led by Dr Eleanor Maguire. Beauregard then goes on to assert on the basis of recent studies that meditational practices ‘can indeed lead to important plastic changes in the brain’<sup>10</sup>, affirming the stance of the Dalai Lama (whose acquaintance with science has included personal friendships with Karl Popper, Carl von Weizsäcker and David Bohm<sup>11</sup>) when he states that ‘it is a fundamental Buddhist principle that the human mind has a tremendous potential for transformation[...] Buddhist practitioners familiar with the workings of the mind have long been aware that it can be transformed through training.’<sup>12</sup>

Here we are clearly entering the heady territory of *neurotheology*, a term first found in Aldous Huxley’s late novel *Island* (1962) but now primarily associated with the ground-breaking work of Dr Andrew Newberg, a researcher from a Reformed Jewish background who holds posts both at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Newberg, who like Beauregard has done brain-imaging of people in prayer and meditation from various religious traditions, is notably the author of the recent *Principles of*

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<sup>9</sup> Beauregard, *Brain Wars*, 67-68.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>11</sup> For a brief consideration of the 14th Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) in relation to neuroscience, see Appendix.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in *Brain Wars*, 74.

*Neurotheology*, a book which constitutes a manifesto for a new discipline combining research into spirituality with cutting-edge neuroscience.<sup>13</sup>

### **Spirit molecules?**

The phenomena mentioned so far (the placebo effect, neurofeedback and neuroplasticity) are – while rich in philosophical implications – relatively uncontroversial. Indeed, it might be said that, of the three reductive positions described at the outset, they may pose a challenge for ‘mind-brain identity’ and ‘eliminativism’ but can still be accommodated by ‘emergent mentalism’. Beauregard however radicalizes his case by referring to phenomena which not only suggest that the mind can exert a causal influence on the brain but that in dramatically altered states (such as mystical and psychedelic experience which, as scholars of comparative religion such as Huston Smith have argued since the 1960s, are historically and culturally intertwined) an expansion of consciousness is possible, an awareness of a greater reality which is neither simply hallucination nor explicable as an ‘emergent property’ of neural networks. Beauregard’s thesis is that, as philosophers such as William James, Henri Bergson and Aldous Huxley have all variously suggested, our brain does not generate consciousness but rather acts as a transceiver, picking up signals from elsewhere, whose reception frequency can be alterations in our brain chemistry (occurring *both* when induced by entheogens – the current preferred term for hallucinogens - and in non-entheogenic mystical states).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Neurotheology has sometimes been perceived as nothing but the latest form of reductionism, but it would be unfair to see Newberg’s enterprise as an attempt to ‘explain away’ religion; his methodological basis is strictly phenomenological and therefore neutral towards the question of the existence of God. The Buddhist-scientific dialogue has given rise to research similar to Newberg’s, but generally termed ‘contemplative neuroscience’ rather than neurotheology given that Buddhism is not officially theistic. See for example <http://contemplativeneurosciences.com/> for details of the ‘Cognitive, Affective, and Contemplative Neuroscience Research’ project currently being led by Dr David Vago in the Functional Neuroimaging Laboratory at Brigham and Women’s Hospital/Harvard Medical School.

<sup>14</sup> William James (1842-1910) sees the brain as having a “transmissive function” analogous to that of a prism transmitting light or the keys of a pipe organ controlling the transmission of air (‘Human Immortality: Two Supposed Objections to the Doctrine’ in *Essays in Religion and Morality*, vol. 9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 75-101). Henri Bergson (1859-1941) regarded the brain’s action as a filtering mechanism: ‘everything is obscure and even incomprehensible in perception if we regard the cerebral centres as organs capable of transforming material vibrations into conscious states: while on the contrary, all becomes clear if we see in those centres [...] instruments of selection charged with choosing, in the immense field of our virtual perceptions, those which are to be actualized’. Bergson therefore suggests the possibility that ‘we perceive virtually many more things than we perceive actually [...] the part that our body plays is that of

In this Beauregard concurs not only with Smith (an ordained Methodist minister and a leading scholar of world religions who took part in fully legal psychedelic research at Harvard in the early 1960s), but also with the extraordinary work of Dr Rick Strassman at the University of New Mexico chronicled in the book – and now film – entitled *The Spirit Molecule*.<sup>15</sup> Strassman's research in the 1990s consisted of observing patient reactions under clinically-controlled conditions to large doses of di-methyl-tryptamine (DMT), a compound occurring naturally in the human body and used sacramentally in the form of *ayahuasca* by the syncretistic Brazilian Santo Daime church with government approval.<sup>16</sup> The result was that Strassman's volunteers underwent profound out-of-body experiences of a frequently interactive nature, an outcome so surprising to Strassman that he subsequently abandoned his long-standing commitment to Zen Buddhism (which had led him to expect experience of a more 'unitive' mystical variety). Returning to his own Jewish heritage out of the conviction that the Hebrew Scriptures provide a more adequate moral and ethical context than Asian religion/philosophy or Amerindian shamanism for

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shutting out from consciousness all that is of no practical interest to us, all that does not lend itself to our action' (*Mind-Energy*, trans. H. Carr (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 95-96). Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) (in)famously took up Bergson's idea in his reflections on the experience of taking mescaline, arguing that 'Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system' (*The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 24).

<sup>15</sup> Given that some might be tempted to dismiss it as an irresponsible fringe project, it is important to stress the full legality and scientific seriousness of Strassman's DMT research, the only authorized study of psychedelic substances at a time of understandably restrictive legal controls in the wake of the drug excesses of the late 1960s (although research has now been restarted in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at John Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, where the States of Consciousness Research Project has been exploring both possible clinical applications of entheogens and issues connected with the field of neurotheology). Extensive interview material connected with the making of the film *The Spirit Molecule* can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/user/dmttsm/videos?view=1> ; interviewees include Andrew Newberg and Huston Smith.

<sup>16</sup> DMT is a schedule 1 drug under Chapter 13 of the US Controlled Substances act. The ritual use of ayahuasca has however raised complex issues of how to resolve potential conflicts between drug legislation and freedom of religious expression. In 2006 the US Supreme Court unanimously overturned a ruling that a Brazilian new religious movement, the O Centro Espirita Beneficente União do Vegetal, could not use hoasca tea sacramentally in its services in the United States. The União's supporters included the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Presbyterian Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals. Prominent individual defenders of the rights of Brazilian Santo Daime church members arrested for ayahuasca possession in Spain in 2000 included Catholic Bishop Mauro Morelli and the theologian Leonardo Boff: [http://www.santodaime.it/Library/LAW/Spagna/boff00\\_espanol.pdf](http://www.santodaime.it/Library/LAW/Spagna/boff00_espanol.pdf) , with a letter of support also being provided by the Brazilian Assembly of Catholic Bishops. The subject of entheogens and their historical relationship to spirituality remains an area in serious need of responsible and informed discussion.

assessing the implications of his DMT research, Strassman is now doing scholarly work on the experiential basis of the prophetic visions of the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup>

### **The challenge of the near-death experience**

The *coup de grâce* for reductionism, including materialist versions of emergentism, comes in the reflections of Beauregard on near-death experiences (NDEs). This is the part of *Brain Wars* which provoked the ire of the skeptical community, led by radical atheist blogger PZ Myers. The argument put forward by Beauregard is that there is now overwhelming cumulative evidence that conscious, indeed *hyper-conscious* experience is possible *without* a functioning brain (among patients with a flat EEG during cardiac arrest). The contention is that there have been documented instances of cardiac arrest survivors who were able to give accurate reports not only of events in the operating theatre while they were unconscious, but also information concerning objects and persons whom they could not have seen from the operating table.

Compelling evidence for the reality of non-bodily consciousness has been compiled by a number of researchers including the Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel, whose study of 344 cardiac arrest survivors in the Netherlands was published in a

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<sup>17</sup> 'Prophecy is a spiritual experience which takes into account the apparently external, free-standing nature of the DMT "worlds," in which one's sense of self is highly preserved and interactive. The Old Testament concept of prophecy provides an alternative to other models that borrow more heavily from Eastern religious systems, and those of Latin American shamanism. The notion of prophecy also deals directly with ethical and moral concerns, adding a crucial element to our ability to understand and integrate the content of the psychedelic experience' (Dr Rick Strassman, [www.rickstrassman.com](http://www.rickstrassman.com)). It should be emphasized that Strassman is not suggesting that Biblical prophetic visions are reducible to hallucinogenic or psychological factors. In his presentation 'Old Testament Prophecy: A Western Model of the Psychedelic Experience' given at the HORIZONS conference hosted by Judson Memorial Church/New York University (<http://vimeo.com/16298958he>), Strassman introduces the notion of a top-down, 'theoneurological' model in which brain chemistry does not *produce* spiritual experience but rather facilitates it. Nancy Evans Bush, theologically-trained president emerita of the International Association of Near-Death Studies, has recently been pursuing related research into the comparison between Biblical visions and the near-death experience; her 2010 IANDS conference presentation 'Mystery and Ancient Voices: What Biblical Visions and NDEs have in common' can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tb2eab4N6bA>. Bush's model is more ambivalent as to whether the model of contact with a free-standing greater reality is viable, preferring a framework of Jungian archetypes which she attempts to reconcile with a Christian perspective in her thoughtful and sensitively-written recent book *Dancing Past the Dark: Distressing Near-Death Experiences*. Space in the present context unfortunately does not permit the substantive consideration merited by Nancy Evans Bush's work and the methodological problems associated with an appropriation of Jungian categories by Christian theology and counselling.

landmark article in the prestigious British journal *The Lancet* in 2001,<sup>18</sup> and who subsequently wrote a 450-page book entitled *Consciousness beyond Life* on the basis of his research which sold 100,000 copies and was nominated for Book of the Year when first published in the Netherlands. Van Lommel was recently a panelist at a conference focusing on near-death experiences at the 2012 Bioethics Forum hosted by the BioPharmaceutical Technology Center Institute in Madison, Wisconsin, where he was joined by Dr Eben Alexander III, a neurosurgeon whose former reductionist view of the mind-brain relationship was radically altered by his own NDE during a coma due to an extremely rare case of spontaneous e.coli meningitis in 2008.<sup>19</sup> Dr Alexander has now joined the ranks of those who, like Beauregard, are openly calling for precisely the type of reconciliation between science and spirituality which figures such as PZ Myers seem determined to thwart at all costs. NDEs thus seem to have become the focal point of the debate between materialist skeptics and believers in the reality of spirit; what is remarkable is that the latter now not only include traditional theists, New Age crystal-gazers and superannuated hippies with a nostalgia for the 1960s, but research scientists with impeccable professional credentials. Having spent several years as associate professor of neurosurgery at Harvard Medical School (1994-2001) and boasting a list of scientific publications standing at 150+, Eben Alexander can scarcely be dismissed as a typical 'woo-monger'; his forthcoming book scheduled for publication by Simon & Schuster in early 2013 is awaited with considerable expectation.

It is of course no secret that the general public has long been captivated by NDE reports of alleged glimpses of heaven (and hell) and encounters with an all-loving Being of Light in a transcendent reality beyond our physical world. Three particularly arresting NDE accounts to have appeared recently from an explicitly Christian perspective are those of the children Colton Burpo (*Heaven is for real*) and Alex Malarkey (*The boy who came back from heaven*) as well *My Descent into Death* by the UCC minister and former atheist Howard Storm, all of which have attracted considerable public attention. However, it has been possible for critics to sidestep

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<sup>18</sup> Available on-line at [www.ini.uzh.ch/~kiper/Van\\_Lommel.pdf](http://www.ini.uzh.ch/~kiper/Van_Lommel.pdf) .

<sup>19</sup> See 'My Experience in Coma' in *AANS Neurosurgeon*, vol. 21/2, 2012, available online at <http://www.aansneurosurgeon.org/210212/6/1611> . Extensive video from the Madison 2012 Bioethics Forum, including NPR reporter's Steve Paulson's interview with Eben Alexander, can be viewed at <http://www.btc.org/bioethics/2012/videos2012/default.html> .

the issue of content analysis of such reports as long as the scientific community has been able to relegate them to the area dismissively termed 'the paranormal'. Indications are that this is in the process of changing because of the challenge to a materialist view of consciousness that Beauregard, Van Lommel and others have issued on scientific grounds.

### **A contemporary 'return of Spirit'**

It is my conviction that these developments, taken together, constitute a wholly unexpected but tantalizing 'return of Spirit' that will once again allow Christian faith to dialogue creatively with contemporary science without having to be shy about employing terms such as 'the soul' or 'life after death'. However, what is both puzzling and frustrating is that Christian theologians and church leaders have been largely conspicuous by their absence from what I see as a thrillingly open discussion of consciousness. There are several possible reasons for this; one is that theologians trained in the humanities may feel intimidated by the hard-boiled discourse of scientists, while a second is that it is oddly convenient for some brands of theology to avoid the whole question of whether faith has any correlates whatever in physical reality.<sup>20</sup> This attitude makes something of a bargain with science – we'll let it handle the physical world as long as it leaves us able to retain the grammar of our private religious language, which we understand even if nobody else does. A third possibility is that some theologians may fear for their academic credibility if seen to be conversing with researchers whom the scientific materialist establishment has attempted to discredit.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> This can for example be seen in a Protestant context in Karl Barth's relative lack of dialogue with the natural sciences (the object of particularly extensive methodological criticism on the part of Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann beginning in the 1960s). More recently it has been a tendency within the 'Yale School' of theology, whose model, exemplified by George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1984), is predominantly 'cultural-linguistic', tending to bracket the question of the correlation between theology and science. For a responsible recent critique of this approach, see Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology – Reality* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), 39-54. Himself scientifically-trained, McGrath regards post-liberalism as 'productive ethically' (acknowledging the 'massive achievement' of Stanley Hauerwas) but relatively sterile theologically' (ibid., 40).

<sup>21</sup> Here the recent débâcle over Intelligent Design may well have left some Christian intellectuals feeling chastened at having allowed themselves to be drawn (and in some cases deliberately inveigled by bodies such as the Seattle-based Discovery Institute) into support for a movement which has not been able to produce any significant peer-reviewed research and whose scientific credibility is extremely low. It is regrettably the case that Beauregard's collaborator on his previous book *The Spiritual Brain*, Canadian journalist Denyse O'Leary, has allied herself with ID theorist William Dembski as a vociferous critic of the 'theistic evolution' promoted by organizations such as

Engagement with NDE research poses specific additional theological problems for some Christian traditions: one example is the Lutheran adherence to the notion of 'soul-sleep' after death),<sup>22</sup> while another reason for reticence towards with NDE research in more socially 'progressive' theological circles may be nervousness about excessive concentration on questions of the after-life. Here the concern seems to be that the notion of the 'immortality of the soul' (frequently viewed as an illegitimate imposition of Greek metaphysics on Hebraic thought) has historically tended to lead to a 'disembodied' Christianity which disengages with issues of this-worldly transformation and social justice. These causes, it can be argued, are better served by an emphasis on Christian hope for the resurrection of the *body* and the transfiguration of material reality in an ultimate New Heaven and New Earth (a theme treated at length by Jürgen Moltmann<sup>23</sup> and at a more popular level by N.T. Wright in *Surprised by Hope*). This is certainly an understandable concern, but it can be countered that this is a specifically Protestant problem related to the *a priori* theological rejection of the idea of an 'intermediate state' after death which would allow for a reconciliation of the reports of conscious non-bodily experience (and the strong suggestion of something approaching purgatory contained in accounts such as those of Howard Storm) and affirmation of an *ultimate* bodily resurrection and the restoration of all things beyond any preliminary glimpses of an afterlife offered by NDErs.<sup>24</sup>

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BioLogos and the Faraday Institute. This fact has predictably been used as evidence against Beauregard by his critics in the *Salon* controversy, but it should be pointed out that *Brain Wars* makes no reference to Intelligent Design nor assembles any argument resembling that of ID theory. In his April 29, 2012 response to PZ Myers Beauregard explicitly stated that 'I am not involved in the Intelligent Design debate and I am not affiliated with any religious organization' ([http://www.salon.com/writer/mario\\_beauregard/](http://www.salon.com/writer/mario_beauregard/)).

<sup>22</sup> For an interesting sample of a negative reaction to Colton Burpo's *Heaven is for Real* viewed from this perspective, see <http://lutherantheologystudygroup.blogspot.fr/2011/04/near-death-experience-lutheran-response.html>. The notion of 'soul-sleep' has also been invoked by neuroscientist and Anglican minister Dr Alasdair Coles, one of the main contributors to the *Test of Faith* DVD, who like Nancey Murphy (Fuller Seminary) tends to hold to a non-reductive physicalist view of mind that is dismissive of the near-death experience.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God : Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Augsburg Fortress : Minneapolis, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that the most promising theological response to contemporary NDE research that I have found to date comes from a Catholic perspective: the impressive and balanced chapter on near-death experience in *Death and Afterlife: a Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010) by Terence Nichols, professor of theology at the University of St Thomas in St Paul, Minnesota.

However, I suspect that a more widespread reason for the reluctance of Christian theology to join the discussion is that for those who are wedded to an exclusivist vision of a heaven reserved for the theologically 'sound' the similarities in content of the near-death experience across religious boundaries are profoundly unsettling.<sup>25</sup> Those looking to the near-death experience in search of ammunition for an apologetical defence of a narrowly-defined theological agenda are likely to be left feeling disappointed if not threatened. I personally find nothing in the NDE reports (leaving aside those which have clear hallmarks of having been fabricated or embellished for theological reasons<sup>26</sup>) which contradicts the Gospel message that the meaning of ultimate reality is bound up with the self-giving love incarnated in Jesus Christ. What I do however think is that the near-death experience accounts of literally thousands of people across boundaries of time and culture will, if authenticated, prove devastating for views which see religion primarily in terms of adherence to the dogmatic statements of a particular tribe.

This last statement should not be misunderstood as implying that near-death experience is entirely non-judgmental; contrary to what is popularly believed, it is not the case that NDEs contain no element of ethical judgment on the lives of near-death experiencers. Restricting consideration to explicitly Christian accounts, Howard Storm's *Descent into Death* is one of the most compelling instances of an NDE report which contains just such a judgment in the form of a (highly uncomfortable) 'life review' consisting not only of re-living the events of the past from one's own perspective *but also from the perspective of the feelings of others*

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<sup>25</sup> Here Nichols' evaluation is pertinent and arguably provides a constructive model for an open-minded approach on the part of Christian theology. He acknowledges that in the NDE reports 'the being of light does not, unexpectedly, identify itself as Jesus Christ even to Christians. This is not what Christians expect, and it raises problems for some Christians', but Nichols does not see this as a cause to dismiss such accounts. On the contrary, 'if NDEs simply reflected cultural or religious expectations, that would be a strong argument that they were simply occurring in the minds of the experiencers. But they don't. People tend to explain them in the terms of their cultures, but many of the elements are not at all what we would expect if they were simply cultural projections. *And that, also, is an argument for their veridicality*' (*Death and Afterlife*, 112 (emphasis mine)).

<sup>26</sup> This paper should not be construed as promoting an uncritical acceptance of each and every NDE report; there are undoubtedly instances of confabulation and *a posteriori* re-formulation of experience (whether involving deliberate falsification, faulty memory or simply on account of the inherent difficulty of trying to communicate such liminal experiences in human language). To argue with the skeptics, however, that *all* NDE reports should therefore be treated as confabulations is an obvious logical fallacy.

*and the effect of our actions on them.*<sup>27</sup> In other words, the measuring-stick of our lives and our relationship to God is not our intellectual acceptance or non-acceptance of doctrinal propositions, but whether we have shown compassion to others.

This should not be news to us if we have read the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, or Jesus's words in Matthew 25: 31-46 at the separation of the sheep and the goats: 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'. This is the truth into which the Holy Spirit will guide us, as we read in John 16:13 – a truth which is not so much a matter of doctrinal correctness as rather the living truth of love.

*Veni sancte Spiritus, tui amoris ignem accende ...  
Come Holy Spirit, light the fire of your love*

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<sup>27</sup> One of the most intriguing topics of current research with important implications for 'neurotheology' or 'contemplative science' is the role and function played in human beings (and other animals) by 'mirror neurons' that scientists such as V.S. Ramachandran at the University of California regard as providing the condition of possibility for empathy. He for example describes the discovery by researchers at the University of Toronto that sensory pain neurons which react to physical pain *also* react when watching the pain of others. 'I like calling these cells "Gandhi neurons" because they blur the boundary between self and others – not just metaphorically, but quite literally, since the neuron can't tell the difference.' (V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 124. Ramachandran theorizes that if we do not literally feel others' pain most of the time, it maybe because the signal from the neurons is neutralized by null signals ("I am not being touched") by skin and joint receptors, although a role in toning down the consequences for consciousness of mirror neuron activity may also be played by inhibitory circuits in our frontal cortex: 'it is the dynamic interplay of signals from frontal inhibitory circuits, mirror neurons (both frontal and parietal), and null signals from receptors that allow you to enjoy reciprocity with others while simultaneously preserving your individuality' (ibid., 125). I am obviously not in any way competent to evaluate the science behind Ramachandran's views, but it seems evident that they are extremely rich in possible philosophical and ethical implications. A fascinating exchange between Ramachandran and the Dalai Lama concerning mirror neurons recently occurred at the University of California in San Diego in the context of a discussion entitled 'Neuroscience and the Emerging Mind: A Conversation on Human Consciousness and Compassion': <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgtz4RuH7II>

Reading Ramachandran's remarks concerning 'null signals' and 'inhibitory circuits' in conjunction with Bergson's and Huxley's view of the filtering role of the brain, it might be contended that our present inability to feel the *qualia*, the subjective experience of others is not because we are isolated monads by nature but that the structuring of our brain/nervous system effectively filters out or at least attenuates such broader consciousness. Our body thereby prevents us to a greater or lesser degree – we all know that some individuals can be extraordinarily empathetic - from sensing the inter-connectedness of reality (which can nonetheless be intuited in various forms of 'ecstatic' experience). A possible interpretation of the NDE 'life review' in which past experience is re-lived from the viewpoint of others might be that with the disappearance of the bodily filter at death, the veil on this inter-connectedness is lifted, allowing us to experience the feelings of others.

## **Appendix: The 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (Tenzin Gyatso) and neuroscience**

It may come as a surprise to some to know that the Dalai Lama has emerged as one of the key players in this whole debate; his engagement with neuroscience – which was recently given spectacular acknowledgement in the form of the 2012 \$1.7 million Templeton Prize – is long-standing and worth pondering.<sup>28</sup> It dates back at least to his meeting with Chilean-born neuroscientist Francisco Varela in 1983 at the Alpbach Symposium on Consciousness, which led to the establishment of the Mind & Life Institute, which first met in Dharamsala in 1987. In the subsequent decade the Dalai Lama began to send experienced Tibetan Buddhist monks to take part in brain-imaging studies at American Universities; it is interesting to note that when he later invited to lecture in Washington DC on the “Neuroscience of Meditation” by the Society of Neuroscience, this aroused fierce protests both from various academic scientists – several of them Chinese – and from a NIH researcher who remarked: “We don’t want to mix science and religion in our children’s classrooms, and we don’t want it at a scientific meeting”, a sentiment echoed by another protester who asked “Who’s coming next year? The Pope?” This reaction merits reflection in that it nicely demonstrates the way in which the difficulties in the dialogue between science and religion are not restricted to the Christian tradition but are indicative of a more general clash of worldviews occurring at present in terms of a perceived threat to the materialist scientific establishment. For many of us, the convergence of developments within different faith traditions should also be seen as striking evidence that something radical is indeed going on in our world on a spiritual plane which includes Christianity but is not limited to it. An acknowledgement that significant developments are happening outside the Church is not in my view at all incompatible with the framework of Christian orthodoxy: as the great Methodist theologian John B. Cobb Jr. recently put it (at the Emergent Village Theological Conversation held at Claremont in February 2012), ‘if Jesus Christ is the center, there is no boundary’. By this I take it to mean that whatever truth can be found in other religious traditions (which is of course a matter of discernment rather than blanket acceptance) can be embraced by Christians without necessarily being perceived as a threat to the centrality of Christ.

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<sup>28</sup> A chronological summary of Tenzin Gyatso’s scientific engagement can be downloaded from the Templeton Foundation website at [http://www.templetonprize.org/pdfs/2012\\_prize/factsheet.pdf](http://www.templetonprize.org/pdfs/2012_prize/factsheet.pdf)