



Science of Thought Group

This is a philosophical and psychological group. Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems, such as those connected with reality, existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind and even language. Our approach considers the only values which are stable and coherent, excluding all nonsense, as what we stand for must be real and proved.

Moderator: Philippe L. De Coster, B.Th., D.D.

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The God Spot or Module in your Brain

Research work by Philippe L. De Coster, B.Th., D.D.

Michael Persinger had a vision - the Almighty isn't dead, he's an energy field in the brain. And your mind is an electromagnetic map to your soul.

Let us take part in a vanguard experiment on the physical sources of spiritual consciousness, the the work of Michael Persinger, a neuropsychologist at Canada's Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. His theory is that the sensation described as "having a religious experience" is merely a side effect of our bicameral brain's feverish activities. Simplified considerably, the idea goes like so: When the right hemisphere of the brain, the seat of emotion, is stimulated in the cerebral region presumed to control notions of self, and then the left hemisphere, the seat of language, is called upon to make sense of this nonexistent entity, the mind generates a "sensed presence."

Persinger has tickled the temporal lobes of more than nine-hundred people and has concluded, among other things, that different subjects label this ghostly perception with the names that their cultures have trained them to use - Elijah, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, Mohammed, the Sky Spirit. Some subjects have emerged with Freudian interpretations - describing the presence as one's

grandfather, for instance - while others, agnostics with more than a passing faith in UFOs, tell something that sounds more like a standard alien-abduction story.

It may seem sacrilegious and presumptuous to reduce God or any other deity to a few ornery synapses, but modern neuroscience isn't shy about defining our most sacred notions - love, joy, altruism, pity - as nothing more than static from our impressively large cerebrums. Persinger goes one step further. His work practically constitutes a Grand Unified Theory of the Otherworldly: He believes cerebral fritzing is responsible for almost anything one might describe as paranormal - aliens, heavenly apparitions, past-life sensations, near-death experiences, awareness of the soul or Higher Self, you name it.

To those of us who prefer a little mystery in their lives, it all sounds like a letdown. And as I settle in for my mind trip, I'm starting to get apprehensive. I'm a lapsed Roman Catholic clinging to only a hazy sense of the divine, but I don't especially like the idea that whatever vestigial faith I ever had in the Almighty's existence might get clinically lobotomized by Persinger's demo. Do I really want God to be rendered as explicable and predictable as an endorphin rush after a 3-mile run?

The journey from my home in Ghent (Belgium) near the main station to the mining district in Charleroi (French part of Belgium) is, by modern standards, arduous. Given what's in store, it's also strangely fitting. When you think of people seeking divine visions, you imagine them trekking to some mountainous cloister. The pilgrimage to Persinger's lab is the clinical counterpart, leading me to state that religion, it is all in your head and nowhere else.

While looking into how the brain regulates behaviour, Vilayanur Ramashandran, M.D., thinks he may have found God. The neurologist believes that somewhere in the brain's temporal lobes there may be neural circuitry for religious experience; he points to the fact that about twenty-five percent of patients with temporal lobe epilepsy are obsessed with religion. "I have temporal lobe patients walking into my laboratory wearing a huge cross and carrying a 500-page tome on the nature of God," says Ramashandran, of the University of California in San Diego.

He thinks that these patients' seizures caused damage to the pathway that connects two areas of the brain: the one that recognizes sensory information and the one that gives such information emotional context. "Everything becomes very significant," he says. These patients are seeing depth in every little thing."

To support his theory that there is a specialized circuitry in the brain for religious experience, Ramashandran and his colleagues hooked up temporal-lobe patients and healthy controls to a machine that records the body's physical reactions to stimuli. Three groups of words were presented to the patients: neutral words; profane or sexually loaded words; and religious words.

Normal people set off the response meter when they read curses and sexually expressive words. There was no response to the neutral or religious words, even in normal volunteers who are devout. But some patients with epilepsy gave the monitor a jolt when they were presented with religious words -- and not when they heard curses or sexual words.

Ramashandran cautions that his findings are preliminary, and even if proven in the laboratory, don't invalidate religious experience. "On the contrary," he says, "they tell us what parts of the brain may be involved."

A question to ponder on:

"What are the causes and brain mechanisms involved in mystical experiences?" This one has the beginnings of a real answer from contemporary neuroscience. Below, I summarize information from my neurological research utilizing the book entitled "Neuropsychiatry, Neuropsychology, and Clinical Neuroscience" by Rhawn Joseph.

Only a portion of the article is evoked here:

G) SEXUALITY, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND TEMPORAL LOBE HYPERACTIVATION: SOME SPECULATIONS

A not uncommon characteristic of high levels of limbic system and inferior temporal lobe activity are changes in sexuality as well as a deepening of religious fervor. It is noteworthy that not just modern-day evangelists, but many ancient religious leaders, including Abraham and Muhammad, tended to be highly sexual and partook with many partners. Many also displayed evidence of the Kluver-Bucy syndrome, such as eating dung (Ezekiel), as well as temporal lobe hyperactivation and epilepsy.

Muhammad, God's alleged messenger, was apparently dyslexic and agraphic (loss, partial or total, of the ability to write) and was known to lose consciousness and enter into trance states. In fact, he had his first truly spiritual/religious conversion when, as the story goes, he was torn from his sleep by the archangel Gabriel.

Muhammad was basically a kind and considerate man, but he was also known to fly into extreme rages and to kill, or at least order killed, wealthy infidels and merchants and those who opposed him. These behaviors, when coupled with his increased sexuality, heightened religious fervor, trance states, mood swings, and possible auditory and visual hallucinations of a titanic angel, certainly point to the limbic system and inferior temporal lobe as the possible neurological foundation for these experiences.

(H) RELIGION, LIMBIC SYSTEM HYPERACTIVATION, AND TEMPORAL LOBE SEIZURES

Among a TINY MINORITY of humans, the nuclei of the limbic system have a tendency to periodically become over-activated. When this occurs, emotions may be perceived or expressed abnormally, and the sensory and emotional filtering that normally takes place in these nuclei is reduced or abolished. Moreover, instead of being merely overly sensitive, those affected may suddenly experience extreme anger, rage, paranoia, depression, sexual desire, or even religious ecstasy. And they may hallucinate the presence of threatening people, animals, or even religious figures. Deepening of emotions, hallucinations, alterations in sex drive, and the development of extreme religious beliefs (i.e., hyper religiousness) are not uncommon manifestations of limbic-temporal lobe seizures and hyper-activation.

In fact, certain individuals who develop temporal lobe epilepsy and, thus, limbic hyper-activation, may suddenly become hyper-religious and spend hours reading and talking about the Bible (or other culturally relevant scriptures) and other religious issues. Once this condition develops, they may spend hours every day preaching or writing out their mystical and/or religious thoughts, or engaging in certain actions they believe have religious significance. Many modern-day religious writers also happen to suffer from epilepsy are, in fact, exceedingly prolific, and those who feel impelled to preach tend to do just that.

People who suffer from periodic episodes of limbic and temporal lobe hyper-activation, such as those with temporal lobe epilepsy, typically have seizures. It is not uncommon for these seizures to be preceded by a hallucination.

The great existential author, Feodor Dostoevsky, apparently suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. Dostoevsky alleged, via one of his characters, that when he had a seizure the gates of Heaven would open and he could see row upon row of angels blowing on great golden trumpets. Then two great golden doors would open and he could see a golden stairway that would lead right up to the throne of God.

As noted above, there is some evidence that many religious and spiritual leaders have had similar temporal lobe, limbic-system-induced religious experiences. Moses, for example, may have suffered from temporal lobe seizures. Presumably, this was a consequence of being left, as an infant, for days to bake in the sun, after his mother abandoned him in a basket on a small stream. If that were the case, his brain could have become overheated and damaged by the scorching Egyptian sun.

If Moses subsequently developed temporal lobe epilepsy, this could explain his hyper-religious fervour, his rages, and the numerous murders he committed or ordered. His speech impediment, hyper-graphia (copious and obsessive writing with a neurological etiology), and hallucinations, such as hearing the voice of God speaking to him from a burning bush, are symptoms not uncommonly associated with temporal lobe seizures and limbic hyper-activation.

(I)SOLATION, LIMBIC HYPERACTIVATION, AND HALLUCINATIONS

It has been well established that even short-term social and sensory isolation lasting just a few days can induce emotionally and visually profound and complex hallucinations that can be so personally distressing that volunteers will refuse to discuss them.

John C. Lilly in 1972, combined LSD with prolonged water immersion and social and sensory isolation for about 7 hours on several occasions, and experienced and observed the presence of spiritual God-like beings who beckoned to him.

Isolation, as well as food and water deprivation, increased or decreased sexual activity, pain, drug use, self-mutilation, prayer, and meditation are common methods of attaining mystical states of religious and spiritual awareness, and have been employed world-wide, across time and culture. These states also activate the limbic system.

For example, not only can pain or a desirable food item or sex partner result in limbic arousal, but when the limbic system is denied normal modes of input, be it sensory, emotional, social, or nutritional, it can become hyperactive; stimuli normally deleted and/or subject to sensory filtering are instead perceived. That is, limbic sensory acuity is increased, and in some respects what is perceived is not always an "hallucination" in the sense that it really involves the perception of overlapping sensory qualities that are normally filtered out. Sensory filtering is quite common at the level of the amygdale, which contains neurons that are

multi-modally responsive as well as inhibitory via serotonin. However, when this filter is removed, hallucinations and/or the perception of unusual sensory qualities can result.

Mind, Body and Belief

To others who have thought deeply about religion as I did until 2010, that is a conclusion that far outstrips the evidence — a scientific leap of faith, if you will.

"They have isolated one small aspect of religious experience and they are identifying that with the whole of religion," says John F. Haught,¹ professor of theology at Georgetown University.

Religion "is not all meditative bliss. It also involves moments when you feel abandoned by God," says Haught. "It involves commitments and suffering and struggle.... Religion is visiting widows and orphans; it is symbolism and myth and story and much richer things."

Persinger says he is less concerned with trying to prove or disprove the existence of God than with understanding and documenting the experience. However, in his view, "if we have to draw conclusions now, based upon the data, the answer would be more on the fact **that there is no deity.**"

He is clear about an underlying motivation of his work — a fear that unscrupulous people might use techniques to provoke a spiritual experience to control people.

¹ **John F. Haught** is a Distinguished Research Professor at Georgetown University. He specializes in systematic theology, with a particular interest in issues pertaining to science, cosmology, evolution, ecology, and religion. He has authored numerous books and articles, including *Science and Faith: A New Introduction* (2012), *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and The Drama of Life* (2010), *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (2008), *Christianity and Science: Toward a Theology of Nature* (2007), *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (2006), *Purpose, Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (2004), *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (2000, 2nd ed. 2007), *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation* (1995), *The Promise of Nature: Ecology and Cosmic Purpose* (1993, 2nd ed. 2004), *What is Religion?* (1990), *What is God?* (1986), and *The Cosmic Adventure: Science, Religion and the Quest for Purpose* (1984). In 2002, Haught received the Owen Garrigan Award in Science and Religion, in 2004 the Sophia Award for Theological Excellence, and in 2008 a "Friend of Darwin Award" from the National Center for Science Education. He also testified for the plaintiffs in Harrisburg, PA "Intelligent Design Trial" (Kitzmiller et al. vs. Dover Board of Education).

But Persinger also acknowledges a more positive possibility: "If you look at the spontaneous cases of people who have God experiences and conversions, their health improves," he says. "So if we can understand the patterns of activity that generate this experience, we may also be able to understand how to have the brain — and hence the body — cure itself."

Finally just for now, science and the afterlife

Perhaps the most controversial of the group of researchers dedicated to studying the "God spot" in the brain, Gary E. Schwartz² explores the question of whether consciousness survives death with the help of mediums (people who demonstrate unusual accuracy in describing intimate attributes of the dead to those who knew them well).

His experiments compare the brain waves and heart rates of both the medium and the person for whom he or she is trying to contact the dead.

"One of the fundamental questions is, 'How does a medium receive this kind of information?'" he explains. "To what extent are they using specific regions of the brain which are purportedly associated with other kinds of mystical or religious experiences?"

Schwartz says his research "is actually a window or a doorway, if you will, to a much larger spiritual reality which integrates ancient wisdom with contemporary science."

He concludes that the human brain is wired to receive signals from what he calls a "Grand Organizing Design," or G.O.D.

"Survival of conscience tells us that consciousness does not require a brain, that our memories, our intentions, our intelligence, our dreams? all of that can exist

² **Gary E. Schwartz** is a professor of psychology, medicine, neurology, psychiatry, and surgery at the University of Arizona and director of its Laboratory for Advances in Consciousness and Health. He is also corporate director of development of energy healing for Canyon Ranch Resorts and the author of several books, including *The Afterlife Experiments*, *The G.O.D. Experiments*, *The Truth about Medium*, *The Energy Healing Experiments*, and the co-author of *The Living Energy Universe*. He has authored or co-authored more than 450 scientific papers including 6 in the journal *Science*, and has co-edited 11 academic books. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Society, the American Psychological Society, the Academy of Behavioural Medicine Research, and the Society of Behavioural Medicine. He has appeared on hundreds of television and radio programs including HBO, Discovery, Arts & Entertainment, and NPR.

outside of the physical body," says Schwartz. "Now, by the way, that's the same idea that we have about God — that something that is "invisible," that is "bigger than all of us," which we cannot see, can have intellect, creativity, intention, memory and can influence the universe."

About the Moderator:



Philippe L. De Coster, B.Th., D.D. joined Sundial House, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, UK team in 1971: Michael Eastcott and Nancy Magor. He represented together with Tilla Grenier (Brussels) the two French sections of the Meditation Group for the New Age, and Creative Meditation Group, also called the French Section. When Tilla Grenier died the two groups moved to Ghent, and was assisted by François Geldof for the distribution of the booklets of both groups. In 1970 De Coster was awarded with a certificate of Unity School

of Christianity, Lee's Summit, Missouri for his knowledge, the course being of a metaphysical character covering the fundamental principles of the teachings of Unity and their applications in redeeming the mind and healing the body. As the studies were "extra muros" it lasted almost ten years.

We may desire and will, but we shall do so vainly if we imagine or fear ourselves to be unable. Our imagination and our thought must tend in the same direction as our desire and will. Hypnosis has also uncovered much about the nature, capacity and depth of the unconscious in recent years, but this is not for the average seeker to pursue. We may need help occasionally in handling problems arising from the unconscious, but it remains our responsibility, our charge, and not to be handed over the dominance of others. The "I" should always remain the conscious director of its components parts

Unity School of Christianity

(Incorporated)

Lee's Summit, Missouri

Correspondence School Department

To whom it may concern Greeting:

The Unity School of Christianity hereby certifies that

Philippe De Coster

has completed the course of instruction required by the Unity School of Christianity in its Correspondence School Department and has passed all tests.

This course of study has been of a spiritual character. It covers fundamental principles in the teachings of Unity and their application in redeeming the mind and healing the body. We are satisfied that this student has an understanding of the Unity teaching.

In witness whereof we have hereunto set our hands and the seal of said School this 15th *day of* May *A.D. 19* 70

Unity School of Christianity

Lowell Fillmore President

Vera Dawson Tait Director

