

Is God 'all in the mind'?

Peter Hampson

Psychology and Theology in conversation

To ask 'Is God all in the mind?' implies, if we're not careful, that the answer can be provided definitively and authoritatively by those who are supposed to know about the principles of mind, human behaviour, emotion, and social interaction, namely psychologists, using primarily *psychological* theories and data. Psychology, in other words is assumed to have the final say. But I want to question this.

Without wishing to bite the hand that has paid my mortgage for the past 30 years - psychology has been good to me as a profession - I have to begin by being disloyal to my first discipline, psychology, and say, right at the start, that it is only through a conversation between psychology and *theology* - Christian theology in our case - that we might get anywhere near an answer. Hence, a better starting title might be 'Is God all in the mind: psychology and theology in conversation?'

I also need to acknowledge some spectres at our feast. Since the attack on the World Trade Center on September 9th 2001, and for various other important cultural and geo-political reasons, including the fall of the former Soviet Union, and the increase in fundamentalism worldwide, we have witnessed a resurgence in interest in matters religious, and the rise of the so called 'new' atheists - Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, Sam Harris, the late Christopher Hitchens ...and to some extent Stephen Hawking, and other science popularisers.¹

Now I am not going to address all their arguments one by one. Others have already done so with greater skill than I can muster: theologians Joanna and Alister McGrath, John Cornwell, Denys Turner, and literary critic and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton to name but a few.² But what I do want to note is that the new atheists have typically approached the question of God from what we call a *naturalistic* perspective.

This means they try to answer the question of God's existence and the nature of religion starting from one or more scientific discipline, physics, evolutionary biology, psychology and so on, which is fine as far as it goes, but then draw from their science (or sciences) usually unwarranted philosophical and theological conclusions, without - and this is the important bit - seriously considering what theology or philosophy themselves really have to say on the matter.

Taken as a whole, their critiques assume that there is a royal road from *over-extended* science to answer the question, 'Is God all in the mind - or genes, or upbringing, or society or whatever?' So how can we tackle the question? Well, if we need theology *as well as* psychology, perhaps I should begin by saying briefly what I mean by 'psychology' and 'theology', and what these are not.

My experience of speaking and writing on topics like this is that not everyone in a mixed audience knows or can easily define what these disciplines are. Certainly, not many psychologists in Anglo-American culture can coherently say what Christian theology is, and many otherwise sophisticated religious thinkers and talented theologians frequently have a hazy, outmoded, or simply incorrect view of psychology. So please let me indulge in a few pedestrian definitions before we start the engine: psychology first, then theology.

Psychology is the science of human (and sometimes animal) behaviour, mental activity and experience, social interaction, development, and individual variation (personality). Some of its main areas are cognitive psychology (the study of mind and mental processes, the branch with which I am most familiar), social psychology (the study of people in interaction) and developmental psychology (the emergence, growth and change of psychological activities, processes and systems over time), personality and other 'individual differences', and abnormal psychology (the study of the mentally ill, those with some psychopathology and the mentally handicapped). Now I need to emphasise the scientific bit. Psychologists conduct experiments and collect data, or at least use the data of others, they do not simply theorise.

Here are just some of the general issues that psychologists study: how memory works; the nature of human reasoning; emotions and their effects on thought; personality; intelligence; how we relate socially to one another; how children learn to think; abnormal psychology; the dependence of psychological activities on the brain; the effects of human ageing. More recent important developments include, for example, the growth of cognitive neuroscience. And here are some specific topics we study. How best should we present information in an aircraft cockpit? How do we learn to read? What is wrong – so to speak – with autistic children? How does depression affect our ability to remember happy things?

Theology, *Christian* theology, on the other hand, is the rational and imaginative exploration and explication of the Christian faith. It has been defined by St Anselm and others as 'faith-seeking-understanding'. Its primary subject matter is God, but it also involves an area known as 'theological anthropology' – the account of persons and their nature and of how people interact with the divine. Theology relies on sacred scripture, of course, but also on philosophical reasoning, experience, tradition based understanding and, sometimes – as in the Roman case - authoritative teaching.

Some areas of theology important for us tonight are: What is the nature of God? How are divine and natural processes related? Is God a super being or rather more mysterious than that? And as humans who worship God: what can we reliably say about the Divine? How are faith and reason related? What does it mean to say that we experience God?

It is important to note too that the relation between these two areas of research and scholarship, theology and psychology, is not straightforward. There have been times when they have quite antagonistic or distant or are simply 'not speaking'. Psychology, a secular discipline, is really a child of modern (post-Cartesian) philosophy which in turn grew out of an earlier split - divorce if you like - between philosophy and theology.

Yet once, as theologian John Milbank says, 'there was no secular'¹³; there was only the God-given and theology. As philosopher Charles Taylor reminds us in his magisterial work, *A Secular Age*, before 1500 AD, when theology was already going strong, the majority of the population in western Europe had the working assumption that God exists. In contrast nowadays the majority of the population in western Europe has the background working assumption that God does not exist, and is implicitly atheist or simply 'indifferent' to the matter. Thus, while theology (naturally) assumes God, psychology does not.

So is God is 'all in the mind'?

Psychology, or more accurately the psychology of religion, doesn't ask so blunt a

question, but it does raise questions which could *too easily* lead us to think of God – and religion in general – as *nothing but* products of our minds, emotions, upbringing, evolutionary heritage and so on. And it's that phrase 'nothing but' that we need to be careful about whenever it crops up.

To give you the flavour of some of these discussions I will look briefly at three issues:

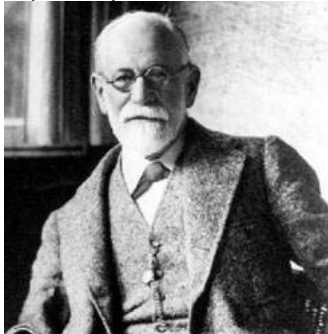
- Concepts, images or ideas of God
- Religious experience
- The evolution of religion and religious behaviour

In each case, I'll raise a potential challenge that could be drawn from over extending work in psychology that is often uncontroversial in itself, then briefly indicate a more nuanced theological reply.

Concepts of God

The core notion here is whether the ways in which people think about God are really due to certain psychological tendencies which make them think in the way they do and have nothing to do with the way God actually is – or, for that matter, whether God even exists. Indeed these accounts can be taken to suggest that God is actually 'nothing but' a psychological tendency or way of thinking.

So, for example, one influential idea is that people 'project' their ideas and, more importantly, their wishes of what they would like God to be, rather as we might project



Sigmund Freud

an image on to a screen. Sigmund Freud's views on religion developed over a number of years and were communicated in various books⁴. But a core idea was that religion offers a source of illusory comfort for the securities that we have lost after childhood, especially a desire for the strength and protection of our human father, and so God simply becomes – in the jargon of psychoanalysis – **a projected father figure**. Religion is then a form of infantile regression. Theologians and philosophers were, unsurprisingly, not too impressed! Albert Outler, for one, remarked sardonically: "If religious faith reflects an infantile regression, so

[Freud's] naturalistic faith looks a good deal like the adolescent rejection of the father"⁵

In fact, there is far less confidence in Freud's overall approach to psychology these days, and so we might think we can simply reject these ideas lock stock and barrel, but we should be careful. Therapists and counsellors assure us that projection frequently does happen in many situations – between family members, or between lovers, or between subordinates and bosses for example.

First, though, let me tell you about some more recent, related ideas. God concepts have been approached in a more developed way by my Oxford colleague Justin Barrett and his collaborators.⁶ They show, with some very careful experiments published in the world-class scientific journal *Cognitive Psychology*, that people, even theologically sophisticated people, slip into thinking about God as a being – a super creature if you like – subject to the same sorts of constraints as ourselves. The important thing to note is that Barrett *et al.* set up careful experiments to test this idea.

It's nearly inevitable, they find, that we humans think in three-dimensional, spatial terms, and that we invariably anthropomorphise. We think of non-human entities in human terms. Our ideas of God do not escape this tendency of ours. God too easily becomes a super-being for us - whether He is or not, or whether He exists or not.

And then there's Lee Kirkpatrick with his work on attachment and development.⁷

Kirkpatrick has examined two main ideas or hypotheses regarding our relationships with God. The first of these is called **the correspondence hypothesis**. Those with secure and loving attachments with parents and care givers will, he claims, enjoy similar warm and loving feelings of attachment with God, whereas those with insecure, cold or even ambivalent relationships in childhood will have equally unsatisfactory relationships with God. The second is the **compensation hypothesis**: those who have suffered unsatisfactory relationships in early life compensate by turning to God and religion.

Are these two ideas in conflict? Can we have our cake and eat it? Kirkpatrick thinks there are two things at work here. 1) The *formation* of our concepts and models of God – as shown by the correspondence idea (early attachments do shape how we think and feel about God), and 2) the subsequent *need* for some people– typically those with poor attachments – to seek substitute attachment figures.

There are different levels of theological response to all this. To begin with, theology is willing to accept that projection does occur, but is unwilling to accept that this is the end of the matter. Of course God is not a big creature or surrogate father figure or super-Superman says the theologian. God is 'father' in the tradition, for sure, but there is a host of other analogies for God in Sacred Scripture: mother, rock, lover, even a worm that burrows into our flesh or the sharp sword of the Word.

Where I think there may still be some theological learning to do, however, is with respect to Kirkpatrick's attachment findings. I have to confess to being unsure as to how widely these are known by the theological community. Again, an obvious response will be to reject a reductionist ('nothing but') account. Just because people have certain sorts of images and feelings of God says nothing in itself about God's existence or nature.

But we need to understand how we and others 'tick', to acknowledge our own strengths and weaknesses and those of our fellow Christians, in order to know ourselves more fully and to lead and teach others and help them to grow in the faith. We can learn from psychology, in other words, as a 'handmaid' of theology, but not allow God to be dissolved away by it.

Religious experience

What do I mean by religious experience? Well, extreme and well known cases would be, for example, St Paul's event on the road to Damascus or Bernadette of Lourdes' visions, but more generally I mean any reported experience of the divine or transcendent. William James provides many examples of these in his famous 1902 monograph, the *Varieties of Religious Experience*⁸, and more recently the zoologist Alister Hardy and colleagues have devoted considerable energy to collecting testimonies from ordinary people who report some sense of presence, or feeling of the transcendent, the divine or otherwise.

Here are two examples from their archive:

000227: "In utter disillusionment with self and church, I came to the 'end of my

tether'. In a state of intense, inner wretchedness, of such intensity, that my mind seemed on the point of breaking, I got up at 4am and began wandering aimlessly in the wooded hillside. This went on for some time until, unexpectedly, the words of Psalm 130 sounded clearly in my mind... '*And plenteous redemption is ever found in Him; and, all his iniquities, He Israel shall redeem.*' With those words light seemed to envelop me, and there flowed into my desolate heart such a flood of Love and compassion that I was overwhelmed by the weight of it. It was stricken by such wonder and amazement that I burst into tears of joy; it seemed to flow through my whole being with a cleansing and healing virtue. From that moment I knew that Love was the nature of reality. I was fit and well again."

000673: "My experience happened some years ago.....it happened during a period of prayer that I found myself going through a tense physical struggle somewhat similar to childbirth. I became suddenly aware of light rays about me. "It frightened me, thinking that I had entered a forbidden realm by mistake. "But what happened to me was most wonderful. I actually felt that I was in tune with the entire universe. I became imbued with a feeling of unity toward all mankind. That feeling to a certain extent has stayed with me. It was a startling experience and I honestly felt that I had made a new discovery.....there is no doubt in my mind that God is a reality."

There are hundreds of such reports. The question is whether experiences like these are nothing but the results of unusual, perhaps abnormal psychological states, or even result from an underlying brain malfunction. To what extent, in addition, are they simply socially accepted ways of talking when we are in such states? Our psychology or neurology is in an unusual state; our culture then provides the acceptable language to express what seems to be happening to us. Or is God behind all this?

Reductive accounts of experiences such as these are possible, of course, but again I should emphasise that these are not inevitable. Theology's riposte is that a neurological or psychological account of religious experience does not commit us to a reductionist understanding of it. The fact that there may be distinctive neurological signatures or psychological states associated with experiences commonly dubbed religious, 'spiritual' or 'transcendent' is interesting, but tells us little or nothing about their meaning and even less about their *veridicality* (their truth value).

Nor should we allow ourselves to be side-tracked by the discovery that states resembling heightened religious awareness can be associated with certain types of brain malfunction, such as temporal lobe epilepsy. Not all types of religious experience correlate with epilepsy, in fact the majority do not. Nor do all epileptics report these sorts of phenomena.

Theology may also be politely interested in the notion that such experiences are also often 'mediated' by culture, or by intellectual, historical and religious traditions. It hasn't escaped our notice that Catholic peasant cultures produce visions of the Madonna, not of the Prophet or the god Vishnu for example. Again, as a discipline, theology is comfortable that all our human knowing is shaped by our background, and is fallible and human at the point of reception and delivery.⁹

Evolution

I need to start by saying that as a scientist and a theologian I see no intrinsic conflict between the Christian tradition and the theory of evolution by natural selection and its

modern synthesis with genetics and molecular biology. I don't want to be distracted here by what I see as an essentially naïve and dated (nineteenth century) debate between Dawkinsian fundamentalism on the one hand and equally fundamentalist religious accounts of *special* (7-day) creationism.

More crucial, however, are philosophical overextensions of the theory which some thinkers then use to argue that it is foolish and simple-minded to raise questions of value, meaning or purpose. This is because, they claim, evolution shows life in general to have no ultimate inevitability, and, therefore, they infer, no final aim, meaning or ultimate purpose.

More relevant for us tonight are arguments from evolutionary *psychology*, that God concepts, religious attachments, experiences, and religious behaviours in general are simply the results of normal evolutionary processes, and have nothing to do with God or the divine. Earlier, simpler forms of thought, forms which once gave our species adaptations which helped it survive, still remain with us, or at least with those of us unsophisticated enough to be religious. What we now have, some have suggested, are the superstitious remnants of these early behaviours and ways of thinking, inappropriately deployed.

For instance, our idea of God as creator, and as a powerful agent, is – some would argue – simply the overextension of our naturally occurring ability to see causes and movement in the world and to look for deeper and deeper reasons for these, so that we eventually 'invent' God¹⁰. Or perhaps as a species we have evolved to take all sorts of converging sources of information into account. We are good at putting things together. This will obviously have helped our ancestors survive and so, again, the brain systems needed to do this were naturally selected.

Though maybe instead of stopping with $2+2=4$ we now make $2+2=5$, or 6, or 7, and look for 'higher order' accounts, holistic explanations, and generally seek solace in the ineffable, the numinous and transcendent, when we are really nothing but creatures with powerful association areas in our brains, too powerful for our own good perhaps. As you've guessed, this too easily leads some to claim that there is no transcendent, there is no 'spiritual', there is no God behind the gentle breeze on Elijah's mountain¹¹; there is only our vivid imagination working overtime.

Against all this, (*sed contra*), theology reminds us that to account for the beginnings of a process is not to explain its mature form. All human behaviours and activities have some sort of evolutionary past but they are not to be reduced to this. It's a bad pun to use here, I know, but to adopt this argument strategy is to commit what scholars call the 'genetic fallacy'! Of course we are animals, but we are rational and imaginative animals too. At best we can be angelic, at worst bestial, but we are to be reduced and simplified neither to beast nor to angel.

Having said all this, I should add, perhaps by way of a footnote, that although evolution in general does not pose a problem for most religious thinkers these days, it does raise questions for our understanding of some specific doctrines such as the Fall and Original Sin, and some accounts of the incarnation as Jack Mahoney, SJ explains so well and so honestly in his recent *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration*.¹²

Respondeo and conclusions

Standing back from all this: in all these cases I suggest we have a situation where

theology can help *contextualise* psychology. It puts it into a wider, a more meaningful framework. In fact it is this wider context that suggests an interesting answer to tonight's question. According to the pre-modern, sophisticated theological tradition shared by us all, the one going back to the church Fathers, including Pseudo-Dionysius and St Augustine, we are making a serious mistake if we think of creation as set over and against God as a large and powerful Being that we can then 'have in mind' with our human concepts.

God is not an entity to be trapped by our conceptual nets at all. For this – as I've been intimating all along – is really to make God into an idolatrous Super-Man or Super-Creature; Richard Dawkins does this as, incidentally, do those Bible belt fundamentalists. And it has taken the painstaking scholarship initially of mid-20th century French, *nouvelle théologie* – I'm thinking of Henri de Lubac¹³ in particular here – to remind ourselves of this mistake, and, of course, more recently, the anglo-catholic, Radical Orthodox movement.

To repeat: God is not a being among beings. Not a *thing* to be thought, or represented, or held in mind as a prisoner of our concepts at all. Why is this? It's simply because God is *that which holds all being in being*. God is not another *member* of the class of created beings to be designated by our language, but rather the guarantor of everything that is, including our language and concepts – its Creator and Redeemer. As Terry Eagleton likes to put it, God is not another article of furniture in the universe.

Now creation, *all* creation, according to this view, is *gifted* into existence by God. It has no independent existence of its own. God creates for sheer delight and love, and as Turner elsewhere wonderfully states 'laughs the world into being'. The technical word that Aquinas uses for this – drawing from Plato in part incidentally – is that creation 'participates' in Divine being, in existence, gracefully and giftedly – it has being 'on loan' if you like -- whereas God's existence is his essence. He simply 'is'.

Think of what Paul is reported saying to the Greeks in Luke-Acts 17:28:

'For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said, for we are also his offspring.'

In this way, as the tradition of *theosis* has it, we become '*partakers in the Divine nature*', (2 Peter 1:4), in its fullest sense through Christ of course. The orthodox (small 'o') theological tradition in Christianity *really* means this. Scary ideas!

Now although it's arrogant in the extreme to add a gloss on what Paul says, I think it is informative to do so. I hope he forgives me since it provides a neat answer to our original question. Suppose one of the philosophers listening to Paul in the market place had asked what do you mean by 'live and move and have our being'? Here's how St Paul might have replied: '*For in Him we live, and move, and think, and feel, and develop, and grow, and love – and in this way we have all our being*'.

So 'is God *all* in the mind?' asks the new atheist these days. No, of course not! For that would be impossible! But all of our minds - and hearts and wills and everything else for that matter – are, in a non-pantheistic sense, 'in' God, the God in whom we live and move, and in whom *all* Truth, Being, Beauty and Goodness reside.

A version of this article was originally delivered as a talk to the North Gloucestershire Circle on December 6th, 2011.

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Notes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Black Swan 2006; Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin 2007; Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, Simon & Schuster 2005; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: The Case Against Religion*, Atlantic Books 2007; Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life*, Transworld Publishers 2010.
2. Alister and Joanna McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, SPCK, 2007; John Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel: A Seraphic Response to the God Delusion*, Profile Books 2007; Denys Turner, *How to be an Atheist in Faith Seeking*, SCM Press 2002; Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, Yale 2009.
3. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford Blackwell 1990; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard Belknap 2007.
4. See for example, Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, Norton 1961; *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Penguin 2002; *Moses and Monotheism*, Random House 1996; *Totem and Taboo*, Taylor & Francis 2002.
5. Albert Outler, *Psychotherapy and the Christian Message*, Harper 1954, p 252.
6. Justin L. Barrett and Frank C. Keil, *Conceptualising a Non-Natural Entity: Anthropomorphism in God Concepts*, *Cognitive Psychology* 31 1996; Justin Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, *AltaMira* 2004.
7. Lee Kirkpatrick, *Attachment, Evolution and the Psychology of Religion*, Guildford 2005.
8. William James, *The Psychology of Religious Experience*, Collier 1961.
9. For a full discussion see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge 1995.
10. Stuart Guthrie, *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*, Oxford 1993.
11. 1 Kings 19: 11-24.
12. Jack Mahoney, *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration*, Georgetown U.P. 2011.
13. Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes Historiques*, Lethielleux 2010.

Concerning Circles

New Members

We welcome the following new members who have been elected at recent Council meetings. They are attached to Circles as shown:

Prof. P.M. and Mrs J. M. Alderton (Surrey Hills), Mr M. Bridson (Surrey Hills), Mr A. and Mrs J. J. Brooks (Wimbledon), Mrs C. Chicken-Usher (Tyneside), Mr J. Coverdale (Worcester), Mrs P. M. Keeler (Rainham), Mrs M. F. Luetkens (Wimbledon), Mrs G. O'Mahony (Surrey Hills), Dr W. and Dr B. Russell (Wimbledon), Miss D. Waddington (Surrey Hills).

Requiescant in Pace

Your prayers are asked for the following members who have died recently:

Mrs M. E. Argo (Aberdeen), Mrs P. J. Byrne (Wrexham), Miss M. Cope (London), Mrs P. J. Havard (Manchester & N. Cheshire), Dr K. M. McCartie (North Staffs), Mrs A. Samuelson (Wrexham).

Mary Cope had been a Newman member for 50 years and was a previous secretary of the London Newman Circle.

New Circles

Two new circles, Wimbledon and Surrey Hills (Oxted), have been established. They are now recruiting members and organising their 2012/2013 programmes.

Further details for these two Circles are available from the Newman Membership Secretary – 0208 319 3261