

New spirituality as an example of emergence in Christian religion

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Identifying foundational contexts: what on earth is happening?

One of the consequences of the situational alliance between Newtonian science, general trends in modernism and the Lutheran Reformation was a shift away from esoteric spiritual and mystical orientations to more systematic and objectivist interpretations of Christian faith and practice. Notwithstanding the merits of sound analytical and critical scholarship, 'inward' spirituality and mysticism were gradually de-prioritised in favour of more cerebral and affective expressions of faith. The perpetuation of this trend resulted positively, for a time, in the credibility and legitimacy of theology in modern academia, but negatively in at least two major respects: Firstly, it produced a theoretical density which in some respects made the conceptual terrain of theology too turgid and abstruse as Christianity meandered into the so-called postmodern age. In consequence there now appears to be a 'general' trend away from heavily theoretical and doctrinaire renderings of faith to more subjective and experientially vital spiritualities. Secondly, and concurrently, the exponential rise of scientific epistemologies alienated science from theology, particularly with regard to the dissemination of evolutionary models increasingly applied to most academic disciplines, from physics and biology to psychology, sociology and the arts. Theology alone seemed stuck in spatio-temporal timeframes delimited by creationism and divine causation.

More to the point, early Darwinian notions have multiplied in acuity to the extent that their implications now reach into all descriptions of emergence. The primary scientific causes eroding traditional and modernist religious mindsets pertain particularly to evolutionary theories applied to the emerging complexity of the human brain. In sweeping brevity, this process persuasively explains humanity's early ability to innovate technology (stone-age), then to symbolise, and then to organise socio-cultural, linguistic and abstracted or subjective renderings of existence. This evolutionary process indicates that the human brain develops increasing capacity to expand and deepen consciousness, to be conscious of its own consciousness and to embark on heuristic adventures to speculate about the nature and meaning of its own existence. An obvious by-product of this theory, which is scientifically undisputed in principle, is that religious consciousness is a product of this evolutionary process. Ironically, the expansion of science into consciousness studies is now increasingly responsible for the devolution of religious truth-claims. Davis (1998:130) claims the following in similar vein:

Neuroscientists, psycho-pharmacologists, and geneticists are now off-roading into the wilderness of the human mind, mapping every step of the way. The most cherished images and experiences of the self are being colonized by authoritative scientific languages that threaten to educe our minds and personalities to complex mechanisms – Rube Goldberg assemblages of genetic codes, mammalian habits, and bubbling vats of neuro-chemicals. Modern psychology can barely keep its hoary old tales alive ...²

Walsh (1995) likewise generalises that while modern evolutionary theory correctly demythologised the physical operations of matter, it went too far in its elevation of reason and reduced Christian narrative and theology to fable in the process. Contemporary integral philosopher, Ken Wilber (1983:75), makes a similar point; "... sociologists since Weber have been interested in the increasing trend towards secularisation, individualism, and rationalism. In the face of the increasingly purposive-rational worldview, the older mythological worldviews, based primarily on exoteric mythic-membership and traditional conformity, began slowly but inevitably to lose their cogency, and the very process of legitimisation began to shift, in every sector, to rational adjudication and humanistic-secular appropriation ...". In the wake of this estrangement, Wilber maintains that science denied

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² Davis (1998:131) expands his argument with almost evangelical zeal: "With the continued ideological dominance of reductionist science and the socio-cultural dominance of its technological spawn, the once glorious isle of humanism is melting into a silicon sea. We find ourselves trapped on a cyborg sandbank, caught between the old, smouldering campfire stories and the new networks of programming and control. As we lose our faith in free will or the coherence of personality, we glimpse androids in the bathroom mirror, their eyes black with nihilism - the meaningless void that Nietzsche pegged over a century ago as the Achilles' heel of modern civilization."

validity to religion to the extent that the "... standard empirical and positivist approach became, in numerous guises, the dominant mood of modernity ...” (Wilber 1983:15).

A qualification: is there more to this story?

Walsh, Davis and Wilber may be justified in their observations and concerns, but perhaps the causes behind these trends have supplementary and subtler qualifications. There has indeed been a strong orientation towards Physicalist explanations for all human existence and experience since modern and postmodern scientific worldviews, in the broadest sense, have assumed intellectual primacy. The consequent loss of personal and socio-cultural definition may also coincide with the apparent dilution of clear definitions of spirituality within general academic discourse. The discontent of the alienated and disempowered human 'spirit' has effected subscription to all the world's major faith movements, with the notable exception of more extreme fundamentalist responses to globalisation, secularism, and politico-economic and ethnic transformations. In some instances fundamentalism has also reacted to the rising tide of inter-faith dialogue and cooperation.

Thus acknowledged, it is by no means clear that modern and postmodern Physicalism is exclusively responsible for the shallow spirituality of the church or the excoriation of the sense of personal meaning and purpose in the world (Jacobs 2009:286). The exponential rate at which human consciousness is expanding has made the ways in which humanity interprets divinity highly mutable in much shorter time-frames, and the protean nature of the postmodern mind has dislodged the assumed authority of traditional religious beliefs and conventions.³ It is therefore reasonable to assume that these evolutionary variables and God-concepts are consciously integrated and mutually causal at deep psychic levels. Notwithstanding the sensitivity of demographic variables, the dilemma facing Christianity now is how to assimilate the resurgence of interest in spirituality with the emergence of multiple and highly integrated fields of science. Moreover, we must ask whether this initiative is at all possible, or perhaps even desirable? Perhaps the implicit resistance of Essentialists (those who maintain belief in a quality or trans-elemental property like consciousness, mind or spirit as inherent to physicality) to Physicalist renderings of human existence and experience is unnecessarily defensive. I will develop this argument shortly, but its situation within the context of prevailing theories of emergence as they pertain to spirituality must first be established.

What is emergence in this context?

A definitional distinction must first be drawn between a generalised understanding of emergence as it may refer to any new form of thinking that is somewhat extrapolated from its antecedents which cobbles in ideas from other disciplines, and emergence in the strict scientific sense of the word. For example, in the case of the first general understanding, is a form of Christian spirituality which perceives and includes the value of Zen meditation emergent in the true sense or not? In the stricter scientific sense of the word, Peter Corning (2002:2) of the Institute for the Study of Complex Systems explains that the term 'emergent' was coined by the pioneer psychologist GH Lewes in his multivolume *Problems of life and mind* (1874-1879). He continues by clarifying that, "... like many postDarwinian scientists of that period, Lewes viewed the evolution of the human mind as a formidable conundrum. Some evolutionists, like Alfred Russel Wallace (the co-discoverer of natural selection), opted for a dualistic explanation. The mind is the product of a supernatural agency, he claimed. But Lewes, following the lead of the philosopher John Stuart Mill, argued that, to the contrary, certain phenomena in nature produce what he called 'qualitative novelty' – material changes that cannot be expressed in simple quantitative terms; they are *emergents* rather than resultants" [*my italics*]. In Lewes's own words (1874-1879:413):

Every resultant is either a sum or a difference of the co-operant forces; their sum, when their directions are the same – their difference, when their directions are contrary. Further, every resultant is clearly traceable in its components, because these are homogeneous and commensurable. It is otherwise with emergents, when, instead of adding measurable motion to measurable motion, or things of one kind to other individuals of their kind, there is a co-operation of things of unlike kinds. The emergent is unlike its components insofar as these are incommensurable, and it cannot be reduced to their sum or their difference.

³ By way of example, Alexander (2002:52) notes: "After 1905 church adherence [in the United Kingdom] went into gentle decline for the first half of the twentieth century, a decline that became steep only after the 1950s, reaching a level of about 14 per cent of the adult population, together with a further 2.5 per cent attached to other major world religions, by the end of the century." There is, however, a noteworthy counterpoint to this global trend. Alexander goes on to say: "In stark contrast to this pattern, church adherence in the USA rose steadily from about 33 per cent of the population in 1890 to more than 60 per cent by 1970, thereafter remaining at a level of 50 per cent or higher for the remainder of the century. Therefore the country that is currently the world leader in terms of its contribution to the scientific enterprise, possessing a culture which is most 'modern' in terms of its production and use of technology, also has one of the highest levels of (voluntary) religious commitment of any country of the world." Economic and foreign policy in the United States of America is significantly influenced by imperialist Christian ideologies and such manifestations in any religion poses a significant threat to global security.

Inasmuch as Lewes is aligned with Darwinism and positivism, he railed against the theoretical viability of metaphysics. In other words, there is no generally applicable theory of emergence that will support both Essentialist and Physicalist perspectives satisfactorily. However, in the present debate we must breach some interdisciplinary boundaries if we hope to make any progress. In current theories of emergence, which are now multi-layered and variously interpreted in interdisciplinary contexts, the problem of metaphysics continues to confront religion and spirituality, particularly when it attempts resolution of the mind-body problem.⁴ More generally, emergence may now legitimately brace any discipline to the extent that it explains how complexity arises from multiple interacting facets or elements of simpler substrates or components. It is understood, for example, that a single brain cell cannot cause complex consciousness, but that the whole brain can. In terms of the present argument the problem addresses the brain's emergent capacity for abstracted states of religious consciousness.

There are now a multitude of differing proponents of emergence theory, but within the context of this argument only four authors proffering alternative views are briefly considered: Stuart Kaufmann, Philip Clayton, David Ray Griffin, and John Searle. An important question needs to be held up to all four authors as a measure of assessment: Is an emergent property purely the product of the interactions, be they random or directional, of its antecedent parts; or is an emergent property not fully accounted for only in terms of the interaction of its antecedent parts? More simply, is the complexity and novelty of an emergent property exclusively the product of its antecedents? If the answer is no, how would emergent complexity and novelty be accounted for without the input of a 'magical' third force? This view typically appeals to Essentialists. If the answer is yes, then it must be proven that antecedents have innate interactive potentials to reduce novel complexes. This view is more typical of Physicalists, but it can be variously explained. As a pretext to the following arguments, it is understood that this conundrum has not yet been fully resolved by either Essentialists, Physicalists or, to invent a word, 'conflationists'. The field thus embodies a heuristic quality which is currently highly fertile and prone to epistemological inconsistency, but nonetheless interesting.

The first author to consider is Stuart Kauffman (1939–), an American theoretical biologist and researcher in complex systems and evolution. While his interest remains focused on biology, he also extends his hypotheses to the mind and consciousness. At this point his views become pertinent to religion to the extent that religion, as we have noted, is likewise a construct of the mind in evolution. In brief, Kauffman argues that complexity in biological systems and organisms might result as much from self-organising dynamics (which may be in dis-equilibrium) as from Darwinian natural selection. He comments that "... the largest convictions of contemporary science remain based on reductionism. I would like to begin a discussion about the first glimmerings of a new scientific world view – beyond reductionism to emergence and radical creativity in the biosphere and human world" (Kaufmann 2006).

Kauffman's theory imbues the universe with complex creative qualities which have the capacity to elevate modes of existence to higher levels of integration. This is in keeping with Aristotelian notions endorsed by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead (in *Principia Mathematica* 1910-1913) and means that both actuality and potentiality may be considered ontologically real and distinct. This implies an Essentialist notion, a dualism, but Kauffman is careful not to separate them substantially. He prefers to frame them either in terms of the real potentials of quantum mechanics or the actuals of classical mechanics. Kauffman (2010) believes that "... there are TWO new realms of reality: *Res Potentia*, real possibilities, along with *Res Extensa* – quantum and classical, possible and actual, and a Poised Realm between fully quantum and 'fully' classical behaviour where the possibles of the quantum world can reversibly 'become actual' over a real passage of time". Kauffman (2006) endorses this with an almost religious phrase: "In my mind and heart, the overwhelming answer is that the truth as best we know it, that all arose with no Creator agent, all on its wondrous own, is so awesome and stunning that it is God enough for me and I hope much of humankind." Although Kauffman has been criticised by some theorists, notably Roger Sansom (*Ingenious genes: how gene regulation networks evolve to control development*, 2011), the poignancy of the mind-body problem nonetheless comes to the fore again. This is inevitably the point at which Physicalist and Essentialist arguments find their asymptotic limit and, somewhat like Kauffman, I will propose an alternative non-reductive or 'qualified' Physicalism in the closing second part of this paper.

The next proponent of emergence approaches the subject from a rather different angle. Philip Clayton (1955–) maintains a panentheistic worldview which, he claims, legitimises God's immanence without compromising the distinction of either God or matter. However this hypothesis is framed, it definitively remains an Essentialist supposition which Clayton tries to circumvent. He does so by asserting that beings come into existence and continue to exist owing to the presence of divine Being. The concept of participation often

⁴ The term 'metaphysics', says Davies (1992:19), "... came to mean *theories about theories* of physics. Suddenly it was respectable to discuss 'classes of laws' instead of the actual laws of our universe." The implication here is that metaphysics does not qualify for the same type or degree of scientific veracity as pure physics. The question of provability therefore raises the primary difference between the purely physical and metaphysical disciplines.

includes the understanding that the world comes into being and continues to exist through taking part in God's Being (Clayton 2008:118-119). John Culp, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2013), explains that:

... Clayton begins with contemporary scientific understandings of the world and combines them with theological concepts drawn from a variety of sources, including process theology. He describes God's relationship with the world as an internal rather than an external relationship. Understanding God's relationship as internal to the world recognizes the validity of modern scientific understandings that do not require any external source in order to account for the order in the world. At the same time, God's internal presence provides the order and regularity that the world manifests (2001:208-210)... The world does constitute God's relational aspect but not the totality of God (2005:250-254). The best way to describe the interdependence between God and the world for Clayton is through the concept of emergence ...

In this way Clayton maintains that all existence comprises only one type of being, namely the energy-matter continuum, but that this physicality is inherently able to educe properties which do not exist in its prior aspects or parts. This constitutes a fairly standard version of emergence theory. In turn these new properties emerge in more complex layerings of causal relations, which enable downward causation of the emergent level upon prior levels. Up to this point Clayton is in step with scientific exemplars, but his inclusion of God as that which is *in* and *of* emergence yet not confined *to* or *by* the matter-energy continuum, necessarily nuances a dualistic model and, for all its philosophical ingenuity, fails the tests of consistency and coherence required of scientific epistemologies.

David Ray Griffin (1939–), also a panentheist, refers his theory through process theology to suggest that the epistemological primacy of science, which he also endorses, does not adequately resolve the mind-body problem (Griffin 2004:40-41). With reference to the problem of evil, Griffin (2004:37) likewise dismisses the adequacy of transcendentalist theism. Culp (2013) explains that Griffin's process panentheism "... provides a way to avoid the problems of both traditional theism and materialistic naturalism [by] substituting pan-experientialism for materialism and a doctrine of perception that bases sensory perception on a non-sensory mode of perception in order to explain both the mind-body interaction and the God-world interaction." Precisely how 'sensory perception' can be simultaneously 'non-sensory' is unclear and, in colloquial terms, a case of epistemological over-reach! Griffin further maintains that God's ontological co-substantiation with the energy-matter continuum does not include God's '[numeric] distinction' from the world (Culp 2013). In this way Griffin claims to circumvent dualism and supernaturalism. Moreover, Griffin is satisfied that God thus has only influential rather than directive authority *in* and *over* creation and that this process happens non-sensorially (Griffin 2004:44-45). This particular flavour of panentheism is both theologically and epistemologically weak. If God is absolute, infinite and immutable, as traditional notions of God maintain, then how can God be 'influenced' – particularly if God is simultaneously 'one' *with* and *as* the fractured and uncertain unfolding of evolutionary variables? Moreover, there is seemingly no place in this scheme for God's omnipotence and omniscience. And how exactly can God be 'numerical' without reduction? Griffin's God is too trimmed and tailored to have any transcendent power, and faith in such a God still requires the unsubstantiated belief that *it is so* since it all happens imperceptibly.

Finally, John Searle (1932–), a Physicalist, is another well-known proponent of a stylised version of emergence. Searle proposes a non-dual causal approach to consciousness as an irreducible physical phenomenon, but qualifies that consciousness is 'caused' by brain states. He argues that consciousness is essentially a first-person subjective phenomenon which cannot be reduced to third-person or neural correlates. Despite Searle's disclaimer, the idea that objectivity causes subjectivity may still be epistemologically capricious and again refers the dilemma to the mind-body problem. Searle explains the centrality of intentional states in terms of their directional functionality which can be either world-to-mind, mind-to-world, or null. There is, in other words, a differentially causal relationship between the brain and that which it responsorially experiences and acts upon. However, the brain must have a mechanism by which it mediates these relationships and Searle calls this capacity 'The Background'. This 'Background' is described by Searle as sets of predispositions, abilities and presuppositions which are not in themselves conscious agencies, but enable all the representational content of consciousness. The subtle presence of a pre-sentient 'set of instructions' is clearly implied and while these pre- or unconscious operational guidelines may be inherently physiological, Searle is unable to prove them as such (Jacobs 2009:294). Intentionality as a necessary pretext for definitions of consciousness may therefore not be required. Freeman (2000:24) notes: "The fact that consciousness need not enter into the description of intentionality opens a new vista. Consciousness is not a good place to start a theory of brain function, because there is no biological test to prove whether consciousness is present in a supine subject."

How can we know whom to believe?

Having considered four significant contributors to the emergence debate, it is clear that Physicalists, Essentialists and those who attempt a middle path are still vulnerable to epistemological incoherence and inconsistency. Why so? Very simply because epistemology is complicated to the extent that it implies ontology (Lorimer 2001:28).

Disparate ontologies (matter and mind, brain and consciousness, God and creation) cannot be synthesised without contravening epistemological protocols unless the disparity is purely idiomatic and accepted as such in interdisciplinary contexts. Similarly, if emergent properties are deemed ontologically distinct from their antecedents, then the risk of epistemological incommensurability, which forecloses the possibility of a single 'right' answer, is virtually assured – at least for now. That said, the global tendency seems to be oriented towards Physicalist rather than Essentialist options.

Like Richard Dawkins and an ever-increasing number of Physicalists, Daniel Dennett argues that evolutionary evidence sufficiently dismisses the necessity of a 'First Mover' as a causal explanation for the existence of consciousness (Alexander 2001:351). Dennett justifies this by explaining that the regular vigilance of accidental mutation in the processes of natural selection "... gradually turned into regular exploration, and a new behavioural strategy began to evolve: the strategy of acquiring information 'for its own sake' ..." (Dennett 1993:180-181; 2004:247&305). Dennett (2006:120) subsequently explains that "[e]volution is all about processes that almost never happen. Every birth in every lineage is a potential speciation event, but speciation almost never happens, not once in a million births. Mutation in DNA almost never happens – not once in a trillion copyings – but evolution depends on it." The statistical implications are staggering given that such rare accidents have enabled evolution to the point of self-consciousness. The acquisition of information as a life sustaining and life propagating strategy is now finding some experimental validation in genetic and bio-archaeological research. Davies (1992:210) eloquently concurs that the "... intrinsically statistical character of atomic events and the instability of many physical systems to minute fluctuations, ensures that the future remains open and undetermined by the present. This makes possible the emergence of new forms and systems, so that the universe is endowed with a sort of freedom to explore genuine novelty". Earlier in the same text Davies (1992:117) maintains that it is therefore possible for evolutionary systems to become "... complex enough to engage in self-reference".

These illustrations serve only to expose the importance of realising that within the astonishing interconnectedness and interdependence of everything in the universe, and given statistical and numerical probabilities, divine intervention seems less and less necessary to explain the existence of consciousness, particularly since it is now generally accepted that consciousness, a very recent emergence on the evolutionary spectrum, developed the ability to imagine or simulate ontologies peculiar to its own material foundations, like mind and God. By evolutionary and mathematical inference, consciousness is surely not as accidentally implausible as creationists and some pantheists would have us believe. That said, it must also be admitted that the discourse in Physicalism in all of its disciplinary manifestations subsists in ontologically closed systems. Davies (1992:252) uses Kurt Gödel's famous *Incompleteness theorem* (1931) to demonstrate the point wherein he reminds us that "... the axiomatic method of making logical deductions from given assumptions cannot in general provide a system which is both provably complete and consistent ... The search for a closed logical scheme that provides a complete and self-consistent explanation for everything is doomed to failure". Whilst Gödel's inconvenient discovery forestalls Physicalist attempts to fully validate self-referencing systems, it unfortunately relegates Essentialist attempts to the same fate because Essentialists are no more able to prove their foundational premises (God, consciousness, mind). On the basis of this observation, the risk of self-referential inconsistency becomes a pitfall for both Physicalist *and* Essentialist discourses since language mediates the agency of both approaches.

It is for such confounding reasons that a guiding maxim must be secured applied equally to emergent properties and their antecedents. Superficially such a maxim may seem impossible and fruitless, but if its only requirement is that the intellectual integrity of ontological definitions must be epistemologically consistent and coherent with its foundational axioms, then there might be room for movement which may satisfy adherents with differing views. Any theory which therefore maintains dual or multiple ontologies will fall short of this maxim's minimum requirement. Of course this may depend somewhat on the definitions of ontology applied to different categories of existence, but if such ontologies are incommensurable, then any applied epistemology becomes incoherent if it claims to measure ontologies other than those within its own categories. Does this mean that we are forever trapped in liminalities between multiple asymptotic ontologies, that the reality of different modes of being are truly incommensurable and that a true sense of wholeness will always be out of reach? Might there be another option?

What is the current status of Christian spirituality?

Before this option is tendered, a consideration of current trends in Christian faith and practice offers itself as a fertile platform for new ideas. Postmodernism appears lately to have become a philosophical repository for

almost any fashionable political, social, aesthetic, cultural, religious or scientific transcendence of modernism. Everything in the nature of postmodern consciousness appears multi-layered and variable; nothing is certain and possibility has become the hallmark of the postmodern hope (Jacobs 2009:185). The central refrain in this historical saga has consistently been the exponential infiltration of science, in the broadest multidisciplinary sense, as the canon of all that is considered true and real. How can the proclaimed certainties of a faith system succeed in this environment? The response of the church has generally been fourfold. In no specific order, some Christian communities have regressed into the apparent safety of religious absolutism and fundamentalism; others, particularly (but not exclusively) in developed economies defined by Western value systems, are gradually abandoning adherence to Christian beliefs and practices. A third group, mostly mainline churches, are blithely going about their ordinary business as they always have, either choosing not to pay attention to global trends in emergent consciousness or simply ignorant of them. And finally, there are some churches that are courageously, if tentatively, considering a re-framing of God-concepts in ways that radically retranslate the meaning of Christianity. This last group are in the minority and they are the most interesting.

By way of explanatory background, renewed interest in spirituality gained impetus in the latter half of the last century and is indicative of (late) postmodern predilections for more contextually meaningful, liberating and transforming approaches to life and religion. Schneiders (1989:31) substantiates the view by suggesting that spirituality; "... is not only religious experience in the technical sense, but those analogous experiences of ultimate meaning and value which have transcendent and life-integrating power for individuals". Further reasons for this resurgence of interest are many and sometimes complex, but broadly hinge on depersonalising trends in modernism and loss of definition in the wake of postmodern pluralism and relativism. The institutions of religion adapt or react to these trends in various ways, but evidence suggests that the functional efficacy of formal religions is losing currency to more esoteric approaches to spirituality. The broader spiritual initiative of Christianity now favours inclusivity and deeper experiential engagement over the structural and conceptual constraints of politicised Christendom. Moreover, spirituality and mysticism as subjects of legitimate research have recently found their way into the academy. As is often the case, this trend is indicative of an orientation in the wider community. Kevin Ward's research indicates that in 1947 the vast majority of the population believed in a personal God, whereas the majority in 1993 preferred the idea of God as an impersonal Spirit (Ward 2004:5). This shift need not be perceived as a movement against God, but as a plea for deeper, trans-dogmatic experience of a God less territorialised by institutionalised religious framing. Wade Roof's research among baby boomers also found that 73% preferred to use the language of spirituality rather than religion. Religion, according to these findings, "... connotes rigid, authoritarian, oppressive institutions; dogmatism and a lack of openness to alternative perspectives, and cold formalism or ritualism. Spirituality, by contrast, suggests flexibility and creativity; tolerance and respect for alternative insights from others; room for doubt and searching; and an emphasis upon personal experience" (Roof 1993). This statistics would since have changed, but the impetus is clear: the fact that religious apperceptions are in a state of flux is undeniable.

What are some of the emergent trends in Christian spirituality?

In consequence of these trends, the Christian Church, particularly in the West, is losing primacy as the agency of ultimate meaning and vitalising spiritual experience. The first variable to notice is that within the fourth response (people considering new ways of being Christian), there are two orientations: those who subscribe to the generally termed emerging or future church conversation, and those who are broaching God-concepts more directly. The former group often has roots in neo-charismatic or evangelical traditions and their general purpose is to rephrase dated religious idioms as more contemporary expressions, some of which are quite creative.⁵ The latter group consists mostly of academics from varying disciplines who have interests in the relationship between religion and the sciences.

For the remainder of this paper I focus on this latter group. Christianity as a constellation of faith systems subscribing to truth-claims around a personified historico-literal deity, Jesus, is falling into the shadows of more

⁵ Among the more popular proponents of these initiatives are: **Brian McLaren**, the person most commonly associated with the movement. He is a former English professor who is now a pastor, travelling speaker and author of several books, and has been recognised by *TIME Magazine* as one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America. His book, *A new kind of Christian*, won an award of merit from *Christianity Today* in 2002. See also *A generous orthodoxy*, which has achieved something akin to Scripture status in the Emerging Church movement (available at <http://www.brianmclaren.net>). **Tony Jones**, national coordinator of Emergent, an organised network of cooperating emerging ministries (see <http://www.emergentvillage.com/Site/index.htm>). He is a doctoral fellow and senior research fellow in practical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. His books have been highly influential in the movement. **Dan Kimball**, the author of several books, including *The emerging church: vintage Christianity for new generations* (see http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith). **Stanley Hauerwas**, Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School. He was named America's best theologian in 2001 by *TIME Magazine*. Hauerwas has been influenced by postmodern philosophers and in turn he has had a profound effect on the Emerging Church movement. He is known for peppering his talks with swearing. **Rob Bell**, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church, in Grandville, Michigan. He is the author of *Velvet Elvis: repainting the Christian faith* (see <http://www.mhbcmi.org/findex.html>). See also <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/291-emergent-church-teachings>.

philosophically subjective approaches to spirituality.⁶ In view of this trend, diminishing patterns of church attendance may indicate the end of the Christian church as an organisation defined by strictly demarcated beliefs and practices. Furthermore, emergent global consciousness is beginning to reveal a post-ideological society, and since religious institutionalism is ideological by nature, it follows that its social and conceptual credibility will be degraded. One of the key variables defining the emerging shape of the *Emperor's new clothes*; the critical ways in which humans are assessing the validity of faith-based truth-claims therefore clearly relate to the meaning and value of truth. Varieties of relativism and pluralism are endemic to post-ideological society, and postmodern vogues have made too many versions of truth synonymously available. Consequently, the rising tide of interest in spirituality appears to be increasingly disassociated from religious truth-claims, and doctrine is gradually being replaced by the vitality of more functionally viable knowledge systems which must not be in conflict with the sciences. It is at this juncture that the pertinence of emergent spirituality comes to the fore, and this is an opportune moment to introduce a radical option, in fact, an inflammatory recommendation.

An inflammatory recommendation

The most sensible, if not the most popular route to resolution of the mind-body and the God-creation problem is simply to dis-equate notions of existence from notions of God – in brief, to say that God is not an existing thing. If it is accepted that God does not exist as an absolute and ultimate transcendent ontology, particularly not one absurdly melded with a miracle-working human sacrifice, then the duality between matter and spirit collapses and the guiding maxim I proposed earlier may bring us to a point of epistemological coherence. But what then becomes of God?

By way of introductory explanation let us permit that Kantian strictures on epistemology do consign religious experiences to fabrications of consciousness, as do most Physicalist renderings, but allow a qualification: rather than deciding that religious experience is an anomalous quirk, a case of contrived or mistaken perception of a particular brain state or conscious experience, suppose that the transforming vitality of religious experience is possible without reduction of the phenomenon as such. Religious experience is not that difficult to explain neurologically, but consciousness or religious experience as something *other* than just the brain is impossible to explain. This is the mind-body problem.⁷ In simple terms, Physicalism is unconcerned with the mind-body problem because it maintains that consciousness is simply the brain doing what the brain does within its immediate and extended environments (Kosslyn 2005:154). How this happens is another and far more complex matter, but that it 'is' so means that there is no duality for Physicalists to resolve. This is the critical difference: for Essentialists something is lost when Physicalists explain a conscious phenomenon physiologically, even when the phenomenon itself is identically acknowledged. The Essentialist's meta-narrative imbues the ontology behind the narrative with causal reality or intentionality, an 'otherness' which cannot be reduced to the phenomenon itself. But Essentialists cannot prove that this is so, they must believe that it is so. Physicalists criticise the notion because meta-narratives cannot construct epistemologies to authenticate the ontology of that which is being narrated, but there might be a back door to this dilemma.

In brief, recent advances in Physicalism, particularly in neurology and the science of consciousness, have led scientists to attempt descriptions of consciousness in terms of interactive material processes, although they acknowledge that some of these can be extremely complex and subtle to the point of permitting phenomena like religious experience. If this is feasibly so, why should the proposal be reductionistic if all subjective phenomena, like spiritual experiences, can be included in the explanation? The issue for these Physicalist interpretations is therefore not to reduce subjectivity to all known information about the objective efficacy of the brain, but simply to suggest that all inner experience can be accounted for *by* the brain within its extended contexts. The fact that we do not yet fully know how this happens should not foreclose its theoretical viability. More importantly, such arguments comply with my guiding maxim because they remain scientific in the strict sense of the epistemological protocols which empiricism permits. Arguments of this nature have recently gained impetus and significant research, albeit hypothetical, has increased exponentially in the last decade. If researchers in both the science of consciousness and spirituality recognise and authenticate religious experience as real experience, then the only difference between the two views is the ontology ascribed to the origin and nature of the experience itself. Sufficient research has now been conducted in electromagnetic and chemical syntheses of spiritual-type experiences to realise that an ontological Other is not necessary as an agent for transcendent experiences. For this reason, recourse to God as a causal agent must always defer to belief rather than evidence,

⁶ However, this Western, postmodern trend is not reflected globally. There are isolated examples of a massive rise in fundamentalist and military forms of religion. In Christianity this is particularly evident in some central African countries, the southern part of the United States of America and parts of South America.

⁷ Pickover (2005:111-112) explains that this "... seemingly materialistic approach to mind does not diminish the hope of an afterlife, of transcendence, of communion with entities from parallel universes, or of God Himself. Even Tinkertoy minds can dream, seek salvation and bliss – and pray".

whereas physical explanations are edging ever closer to understandings of how physiology, the extraordinary complexities of the human brain, can educe highly subjective transcendent experiences.

The mind-body problem is in essence the same problem confronting the God-creation bifurcation. Dennett (2006) refers to this problem when he tenders his view of this proposal with such lyrical, almost religious poignancy that it warrants quoting at length. He describes himself as a scientist, a Physicalist who has discovered, or made a free choice to realise and accept, that he is not or does not have a *self*:

What these people have realised is one of the best secrets of life: let yourself go. If you can approach the world's complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to proper size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay centred, and engaged, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural (Dennett 2006:303).⁸

This summary proposes that consciousness is not a differentiated unity of spirit and matter, a pantheism, but a multi-skilled, highly complex, integrated, adaptive and non-dual physical process wherein consciousness *is* the brain experiencing. There is no physiological reason why that which is subjectively described as spiritual experience, under certain circumstantial and volitional conditions, cannot also be a brain process instilling all the phenomenal qualities associated with spiritual experience – oneness with the universe, equanimity, inner peace, wisdom and effective value-based life-transforming experiences. For long-standing historically imbedded reasons, thanks to very early religious prejudices, religionists have always felt and believed that matter is crude and base, – that the flesh is ontologically inferior, perhaps even abhorrent to God. To dis-inculturate these old mind-sets is no easy task, but for reasons not associated with primitive religious morality, it is now increasingly understood and accepted that the evolutionary and emergent capacities of the ‘flesh’ in the human mind is nothing short of astonishing; it is staggeringly majestic to the extent that one might legitimately think of it as awe inspiring. It is beauty and creativity beyond imagining. Somehow the brutalisations and discriminations of Old Testament narratives and the expiatory sufferings imposed by New Testament guilt seem less endearing. Evidently the world is beginning to hanker for happier options – opportunities which invite creative engagement and integration with the wider spectrums of possibility and potential within the strange appeal of emergent uncertainty.

Consequently, postmodern predilections seem increasingly disinclined to subscribe to traditional Essentialist metaphors and increasingly tend towards well-informed, verifiable, practicable, liberal, transformatively effective and freeing life paradigms. The legitimacy and authority of inherited religious paragons are consequently eroded as those in this new age of enlightenment seek out more intellectually feasible ideals. Most importantly, advances in the science of consciousness are increasingly able to explain not only what consciousness is, but also how consciousness is the brain, why it evolved to do what it does, and why it uses simulation and abstraction as a means of self-reflection, self-understanding and even self-propagation. This does not necessarily mean that consciousness is a simulation, although some maintain that it is, but at least it means that the brain has the ability *to* simulate scenarios as a means of assessing experience and hypothesising possible responses. Clark (1997:141) explains as follows:

[S]ince 1970 there has been a move away from the metaphors of linear information processing, and the concept of self-organising systems has had a huge impact on the way neurobiologists and philosophers speak of consciousness. There has been a shift from symbols to connectivity, from local rules to global coherence, from information processing to emergent properties of a complex self-organising system of neural networks. Unlike a computer, the nervous system interacts with its environment by continually modulating its own structure ... This combination of decentralisation, recurrence, ecological sensitivity, and distributed multi-dimensional representation constitutes an image of the representing brain that is far removed from the old idea of a single, symbolic inner code ...

⁸ Dennett (2006:251) even goes so far as to concur that; ‘It is surely no accident that the language of romantic love and the language of religious devotion are all but indistinguishable.’

What recourse does the church have within this complex milieu of emergent proposals? What does it mean to be human and spiritual in the 21st century? It may be possible to subdue the attrition from Christian adherence if the church is willing to deepen its current interpretation of Christ; that is, to transcend its historical-literal renditions in favour of the intimacy, narrative vitality and transforming power of myth. Myth is used here in its true sense rather than its colloquially loaded reference to 'that which is not true'. Exploring a deeper revelation of God as the iconic 'image and likeness' (Genesis 1:26) of our own potential releases God from expiatory and salvific responsibility. It returns the responsibility for our individual and corporate salvation to us. In this way the narrative power of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, rather than an alleged event in distant time and space, becomes our own life-narrative, the deaths and resurrections of our own life stories as we 'grope for him and find him' as our own true form, the One in whom 'we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:27).

This means that the old spirituality of deference, of relinquishing responsibility for our lives to God, is reintegrated as an incarnational spirituality: a Christ-consciousness that mandates us to personal honesty and authenticity in our quest for Christ-likeness. This form of spirituality requires of us the courage and grace to assume personal responsibility for our own spirituality to the extent that we 'are' Christ. Jesus is thus wrenched from doctrinal and dogmatic distances associated with irrational beliefs and becomes the whole fabric of our own existence *as* and *in* the existence of all that is. The religious life of servility is surrendered in favour of a spiritual coming into the supreme archetype, namely Jesus Christ. As with all archetypes, notes Davis (1998:101) "... the mythic patterns associated with *gnosis* are ambiguous, multivalent, and contradictory". Nonetheless, the veracity of religious experience need not be physiologically or rationally anomalous on condition that the subject of experience, God, is afforded symbolic rather than literal status. If it is understood that myth functions as an allegorical purveyor of that which pure analysis cannot describe aesthetically or affectively, then there is no reason for rationality to exclude the usefulness of myth.⁹ This is not an ontology beyond the physical matter of our own complex universe, but an expression of its extraordinary capacity to symbolise narratives, myths and metaphors as emergent agencies employed to reflect on the nature and meaning of its own existence – and we have the capacity to determine it. May this not be the freedom which Jesus claimed for us (John 8:36 "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed")?

Traditional Christian paradigms may disclaim this proposal as a form of atheistic Christianity, a blasphemous self-styled system utilising (or abusing) Christianity merely as an idiomatic and mythological archetype for the purposes of self-reflection and transcendence. Indeed it is, but on what basis is it proven wrong or bad unless such judgement comes from religious prejudice itself? Is Jesus as the mythological archetype of my own best self phenomenologically inferior to the God-man of faith? On the contrary, he may be even more intimate and experientially real to the extent that he is myself coming into Christ-likeness; and there is no vicarious agency in whom I need to believe or trust to mediate it.

The social and phenomenal manifestations of this kind of Christianity, which may be categorically classified as a form of Christian spiritual-humanism, is interesting and its expressions are slowly beginning to emerge in church and society. In addition to the features formally mentioned, this kind of spirituality implicitly accepts that the theory of evolution, despite hypothetical variances, is no longer moot. In this sense it is likewise accepted that the edifice of religion is a product of evolutionary principles. This also permits, indeed encourages a spirituality which is necessarily mutable and adaptive. Consequently notions pertaining to creation, omnipotence, omniscience, immutability and problems associated with natural evil, original sin, salvation and redemption assume only narrative status to the extent that they are personally effective or meaningful.

In addition to these central themes, emerging spirituality is by nature open and creative, and thus resists subscription to creedal or catechetical legislations. It is intentional in its efforts to re-integrate science and biology as foundational to the cultivation of holistic spirituality. It relishes spontaneity and unpredictability over rigidity and certainty, and seeks out complex synchronicities rather than compromised pluralities. In essence, it savours the benefits of the heuristic process. With these nuances it values mutual benefit over individual reward (a reaction against postmodern individualism) and engages wide-reaching righteousness, justice and ecological issues rather than personal moralism and entitlement. It is informationally acquisitive, curious, and open to emergence.

If personal Christ-likeness as a means of self-definition and lifestyle is indeed the central purpose of Christianity, then there is no reason to assume that only truth-claims associated with traditional theological precepts, doctrines and dogmas can mediate its efficacy. Clearly Christianity, like all religions, has accrued a great deal of additional scripting which can obscure its central purpose, but religion nonetheless preserves its inherent value if it is shown to facilitate authentic transformation to versions of self-realisation or transcendence. It seems we need to legitimise the co-substantial validity of personal consciousness, including spiritual

⁹ Newberg and D'Aquili (2001:62) explain that "... all myths can be reduced to a simple framework. First, they focus upon a crucial existential concern - the creation of the world, for example, or how evil came to be. Next, they frame that concern as a pair of apparently irreconcilable opposites - heroes and monsters, gods and humans, life and death, heaven and hell. Finally, and most importantly, myths reconcile those opposites often through the actions of gods or other spiritual powers, in a way that relieves our existential concerns".

experience, with the idiomatic viability of myth and the epistemological primacy of science as the new currency of knowledge and experience. Moreover, we need to accept that such coherence will only be established through adherence to existence as a single substance, one marvellous *ontos* which has evolved the amazing capacity to yearn, imagine and create itself in ways of being which, ironically, we cannot yet imagine. To forestall this adventure by retaining it within the strictures of dogma may be our greatest sin.

Conclusion

The postmodern dynamism and flux of our present realities have left the institutions of certainty, of religion, either extracted and enclaved within fundamentalist paradigms, or floundering for new identity as the worlds of science and evolution dislocate the conceptual viability of religious truth-claims. In whichever way it is couched, concealed or disguised, Christian pantheism preserves ontological distinction on the basis of the irreducibility of spirit. It is precisely the problem of irreducibility which now forecloses progress in spiritual transformation. Ontological delimitations in theology are understood as imbedded traditions, but if religious consciousness can be viewed as an evolutionary and contextually adaptive physical process, then is it not time to amend theologically prescribed bifurcations of matter and spirit in order to accommodate an authentic non-dual perspective which stands up to scientific scrutiny? A Physicalist interpretation which accommodates the functional viability of myth and experiences of spiritual transcendence as emergent properties of the experiencing brain, implicitly resolves the mind-body/God-creation problem. The problem of reductionism is likewise disempowered. This is not an argument against the experiential and transforming efficacy of *ideas* of God and its associated myths and metaphors, it is merely an invitation to extract the idea of God from trans-physical ontologies. It suggests that creatively conceptualised Physicalist renderings can accommodate highly subjective conscious phenomena, spiritual experiences and also narratives *about* God, but not the ontology *of* God as other. And it must do all this by adhering to methodological and ontological protocols inherent to scientific epistemologies, at the very least those prescribed by a guiding maxim which claims that the intellectual integrity of ontological definitions must be epistemologically consistent and coherent with its foundational axioms. To this extent, mystery and paradox are idiomatically permitted, indeed vital, but not ontologically distinct from the biology from which it emerges.

This proposal indeed raises questions about the current legitimacy and authority of religion. In short, at the tail end of the postmodern age, religion needs a new face. Radical conceptual reconfiguration is fundamental to its survival. A Physicalist spirituality as the agency of personal and social transformation is the most vitally engaging option. The suggestion is potentially inflammatory, but if it is carefully navigated it may re-legitimise and revitalise fatigued religious definitions. Contemporary evidence suggests that it is not the structure and expression of religion that are losing potency since the power of symbolism is well recognised. It is rather the outmoded or insipid ideas of God that are losing potency. In today's global environment it may be more useful to ask what the word 'God' conjures in the minds of its hearers, and then to measure the response against the Church's ability to equal their needs and expectations. If inherited religious mind-sets foreclose the ability to engage new learning vigorously, even if that learning that may fundamentally change the nature of primary beliefs, then the death of God may indeed be imminent; it may even be necessary in the Nietzschean sense of the concepts which mediate spiritual experience and definition. Surely the astonishing advances in science and consciousness studies can add value and intellectual credibility to the emergence of new paradigms of spirituality? The heuristic endeavour is pregnant with possibility and enticing enough to pursue.

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