

ONE LIFE

I was in a Cambridge bookshop, looking for a book called “Phantoms in the Brain,” by Professor Ramachandran, one of the world’s leading brain experts. This book, I had been told, explores the ways in which our behaviour, our thought processes, our ambitions, our gifts, everything about us is governed by the physical mechanics in our brain. Amongst other things, Ramachandran was trying to locate what scientists call the “god-spot” in the brain, to find out whether or not belief in God is purely the result of our chemical make-up.

Scientists are quite keen on this at the moment. If they are not trying to prove, like Richard Dawkins, that religious belief is the result of abusive indoctrination, they are trying to prove that belief in God comes from the over-stimulation of a certain part of your brain. So believing in God is a bit like enjoying golf. There is something in your brain which tells you that what you want in your life is God or golf or maybe both. I don’t think the two are mutually exclusive although some people may disagree with me..... And of course then, if one could only remove the god chemical or the golf chemical, there would be no golf clubs and no churches. The mind boggles.

Where was I? In the Cambridge bookshop. I asked for this book and quickly developed a super-ego when I was told that I would find it in the neuro-science department. On my way there I very loudly asked several assistants *“the way to the neuro-science department, please?”*

When I got there and found the book I was less happy to see it described on the cover as “gloriously accessible to the layman,” or in other words, “brain science for wallies.” I hid it under a more impressive tome as I went to the cash desk.

It was a very interesting work. Ramachandran had a lot to explain about how different parts of the brain function, how they affect our behaviour and personality, and he did seem determined to prove that the person we are in essence, is no more than the sum of the components of our brains.

Until the very last page; the very last paragraph of the very last page. He quoted another scientist, Paul Davies, who was highlighting the fact that human beings alone of all living creatures, have the power to understand themselves and their world, to ask questions as to why they are here. Davies said that maybe this is proof that we are meant to be here, that we are the product of some greater power.

And are we? asks Ramachandran. *“I don’t think brain science alone, despite all its triumphs, will ever answer that question. But that we can ask the question at all is, to me, the most puzzling aspect of our existence.”* The End. Cue one scream of fury.

I had struggled through this book on neuro-science, even if it was for wallies, only to be told right at the end that the author could not answer the question he had started out with. The book was described as “pushing back medicine’s last great frontier- the human mind” but the author had then discovered yet another frontier still to go: that of faith and self-awareness. We ask, “Why are we here?” and “Is there a God?” Why do we ask these things? *“I don’t think brain science alone... will ever answer that question.”* Thanks for nothing.

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These questions, who am I or why am I here often don’t puzzle us until something drastic happens in our lives. We are all brought up to live a certain life; to take on

Having said this though, the process of change is never easy or straightforward. Television programmes about people who make radical changes in their lives always show a time of tears, when men and women have got to the point when everything they once were is breaking down and everything they will be has not yet happened. They have to face the fact that maybe they never will achieve everything they want; that despite their choices, life will trip them up again and again; that they will let themselves down again and again; that other people will tell them consistently that they are mad, bad or dangerous to know.

And at this point they want to give up and go back to the well-programmed life they started out with.

I am not meant to be a warrior, I should have stayed a farmer.

I am not meant to be a preacher, I should go down the pub and drown my sorrows like everyone else with a horrible life.

I am not meant to be a rebel. I am upsetting my father and losing my family.

We make choices and then wonder if they were the right ones after all. We make changes and then wonder if we have what it takes to see them through. We ask ourselves if we were deluded. Are we inescapably programmed to be as we are and to remain as we are? Is everything laid out for us in our genes? Are we wasting our time when we struggle and strive, hope and dream, take up our freedom to choose?

The Christmas message says “No.”

It tells us that we are of God and not purely physical beings. It shows us that there is something divine, something creative and something eternal in us which cannot be destroyed. The Christmas Message is all about Incarnation: God in a human life. Jesus Christ showing that divinity and humanity can and do exist together. The Word, the living power, the essential life of God, became flesh and lived among us. And we saw his glory. And to those who saw and believed he restored the right to be called children of God. Those were the words of our reading from St John.

When we are tempted to give up on ourselves and sink back into a state of animal resignation, Jesus gives us back our right to make choices. And when we struggle with mistakes and failures, he gives us the power to see those choices through. We can know good and evil. We can choose between good and evil. And by the grace of God we are saved from being destroyed by the wrong choices because we can be given the chance to start again, over and over again.

We are not programmed and set off like a clockwork train to run along tracks which are laid down for us. We are free, living beings.

And we are loved. Not only do we have the ability to make our own choices. We have a loving power to guide us, save us and restore us.

Professor Ramachandran was honest enough to admit that even brain science cannot fully explain who we are or why we are here. The Christmas story, which so people now dismiss as ancient and irrelevant mythology does at least offer an answer: we are here because we are children of God, created out of his love, given a life which is born not of flesh and blood, genetics and chemicals but of God. The light of God-said St John- that is, the spirit, the presence of God- keeps shining in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. Overcome it or understand it? The Greek word can mean both here and I think you can take it in both ways. The spirit of God in us is not something we can ever fully understand but neither is it something which can ever be

destroyed. We are children of the earth-physical beings- and at the same time children of God- with his eternal spirit. And that is what can make each human life extraordinary.

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And so to the Holy Communion service which celebrates the divine and the human coming together in Jesus Christ and coming together in us.

It is about the mingling of the physical and the spiritual. We eat and drink together and our eating and drinking become a means of knowing God, of receiving him, of realising his divinity in our lives.

It is an affirmation of what we are: creatures of flesh and blood, of genetic programming, of variously balanced chemicals and also children of the living God.

It is a message of salvation- that we are not doomed to sink into the slavery of our animal instincts because the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will always restore to us our freedom.

It is a message that death has no dominion over us: what we are does not die with the body because it does not wholly depend on the body.

It is a coming together of heaven and earth, a communion with Jesus Christ and with all God's people, past, present and to come.

The Word becomes flesh and lives among us. We see his glory. And through him we see that glory in ourselves.

One Life: the life which comes from God.

Amen.