

25 STANDARD FEATURES OF THE RELIGIOUS BRAIN

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Introduction

Before we peruse the **25 standard features of our religious brains**, let's start with a bigger picture. Human brains are stocked with **religious (or spiritual) circuits**. We're religious because we have these kinds of systems, just as we see because we have **eyes and visual systems** and just as we run because we have **legs as well as sense and motor systems**. No amount of philosophical argument will quell these **nerve cell mechanics**. Imagine reading philosophical rants against vision or motor movement! Why not protest the circulatory system or go big and take on proteins or, what the heck, atoms. Once we've scientifically established the religious features of the human brain, arguments in the hope of eradication become pointless - and even silly. People are religious whether we like it or not, claim it or not. The **religious brain is a fact**, a plain truth about nerve cell equipment.

I also belong to a psychoanalytic institute and many of my colleagues are non-religious, agnostics or atheists. True to biology though, they exhibit **each and every standard feature of the religious brain**, the only difference being their refusal to call their own **performance of universal religious scripts** religious or spiritual, but other things like "passion", "dedication", depth and identity formation. They have lots of other names for

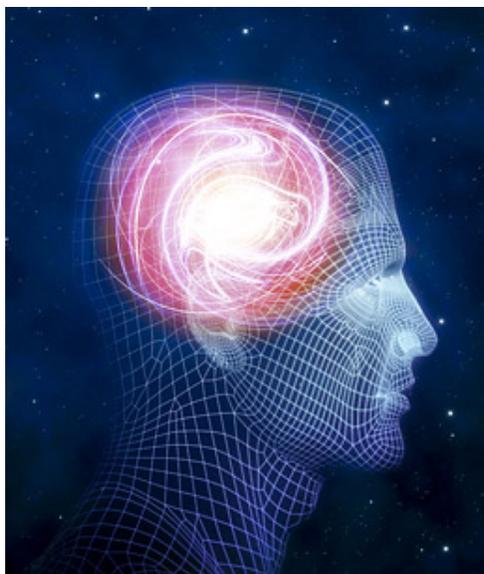
standard religious stuff too. I'm not above this clever renaming, mind you. I rename my uncomfortable traits all the time until I find the cozy sweet spot, O yeah. A rose by any other name...

Since we're all shipwrecked on the religious island with religious equipment I propose a ceasefire. Let's get to know some of the equipment. I'm going to restrict myself to 25 features. That's plenty for all of us. This is the alphabet all of us take to our religious homes. We bring the same alphabet to Jesus School. So our clear differences don't cancel out our common treasury of brain equipment.

By the way, I think science is a very good platform for a very deep ecumenism, an ecumenism that runs all the way down into billions and billions of cell circuits that we hold in common with fellow human travelers. This isn't shallow, bland or cowardly get-along-ism. It's **biology**, with a pedigree that goes back millions of years. Every religious tradition, including ours, is an infant in the vast ocean of life that is common to us all. Against the backdrop of biological time, Jesus is still a newborn and will be for millennia to come. Also the Buddha and Moses and Mohammed. **Not only is the vast expanse of biological history a home common to us all, our major religions are all babes in the nursery.** We're all just starting out in the human religion business and we've all got a lot of bugs to work out.

Science is not a serial killer of religion, stalking our traditions and hearts, ruthlessly silencing our anguished screams. **The brain doesn't invalidate or disqualify religion** any more than it invalidates or disqualifies vision or movement or speech. Our brains make all of our experience possible and personal. Having equipment to do things doesn't spoil the thing, no matter what it is. No one quits basketball when they learn that they have sensory and motor nerves. Neither do we blind ourselves when we learn we have visual nerves. Having nerves doesn't spoil vision. This brain equipment enables us and involuntarily steers us to perform some very cool and fancy tricks, including religion. Jesus School is our religious gym where we get to **build our religious muscles**. We learn more about our religious muscles with science.

***Natura gratiae sacramentum et gratia supponit et perfecit rationem* = Nature is a sacrament of grace and grace builds on and completes nature.** God gives Jesus to us in, with, through and by the mechanics of all living things: Biology. Every speck of us and of our world are portals where we intersect with Jesus. In biology we learn about the countless portals and flight paths available to us fliers. **Easter** shows us that God takes our personal physical lives and total physical deaths and reassembles them in an unimaginable masterpiece. We're always novice pilots flying off into the boundless horizon. So let's begin.



1 Psychological Essentialism

This standard feature involves the way our brain makes and uses categories, all at the speed of life. This means the brain does this stuff much too fast for conscious awareness. Remember, Jesus Scouts, a brain signal has to last for at least **half-a-second** to be conscious. Almost all of our brain signals are much too brief.

So our brain makes categories. Our brain also makes pictures or words for the stuff it puts in the categories. For instance, my wife Barbara has a category called 'idiot men' and guess who's on the top of that list? That's right, Ole Bill! The Bill-image gets put in the idiot-men-category.

These categories and the stuff we put in categories feel very real because they're tied into our emotion circuits in the middle of our brains. That's how stuff feels real: It's hooked into the emotions.

It gets more interesting still: These category-circuits and the stuff-circuits are not the same circuits. In fact, they're spread across the brain, even though they're each tied into the emotion circuits. Imagine separate balloons converging into one hand holding a whole bunch of them. So both the categories and the stuff feel independently real. Our categories feel like real things to us. They just somehow exist somewhere inside us or outside us in an invisible and intangible way. So we make race-categories, gender-categories, nation-categories, ethnic-categories and all kinds of other categories and they feel real to us. That's why racism, sexism, heterosexist, classism, nationalism, denominationalism and all the other **isms** or so stubborn. It comes from our brains.

So we separate categories and things automatically. They naturally drift apart for us. It's just how the brain innately works. We also *feel* them automatically. We perceive

essences of all kinds, floating around in us and around us. It takes years and years of science education to rope in our built-in spiritual-essence-perception and it doesn't take much stress, injury and disease to unleash this basic perceptual blueprint. Be patient with yourself and other peeps when we drift back to separating the physical and spiritual. It's the natural, effortless way to think, even when the science shows that's not how it secretly works behind the mushy brain curtains.¹

We perceive and think about a world of invisible and intangible structures that bring order to the world of specific experiences. This involves the material world we each inhabit and the folks we live with. This spiritual perception puts the world in its place. It doesn't simply feel real. It feels *crucial* to keeping the world in order. Spiritual feeling and thinking are basic, heartfelt and essential (pun intended) ingredients in our mental equipment. It's no accident that we've made a bazzillion spiritualities as a species. Not accidental at all. It's architectural! Because we perceive and think about essences we are and will continue to be spiritual-by-nature.



2 Mind-ism

One of the categories we automatically and instinctively perceive and think about is **the mind**. Like essences, we perceive minds as distinct from the stuff that we put into minds, like thoughts and feelings. We also feel minds are independently real from us and our specific bodies. We perceive and think that minds are invisible and intangible

¹ **Google Search:** Frank Kiel, Susan Gelman, Paul Bloom, Bruce Hood, VS Ramachandran, Jesse Bering

realities that exist independently from bodies. We're **innate dualists**, just like we're innate Platonists. So we perceive and think about **minds** (like **souls**) naturally and effortlessly. They're part of our built-in features.

We know that some of the circuits for mind-perception are in the **front parts** of the brain and some are in the **right side** of our brains. We know this because folks with brain damage to these parts have mind blindness, the inability to perceive or think about other folks' minds. People with autism have difficulty with this mental appreciation. So do folks who had surgery that severed the **bridge** that connects both sides of the brain.

The **right side** that contains circuits of mind perception can't successfully send signals to the **left language circuits**. They can't consciously think through and talk about the mental states that guide others' actions. We can also suppress these **right circuits** with **electrical stimulation** and **magnetic stimulation**. This is how we know conclusively that these aptitudes rely on brain circuits. We can turn them on and off. Pretty amazing, huh!

Because of these circuits we can practice psychology. We can imagine people's minds as parts of them. We can imagine their minds when they're not with us physically and we can still imagine their minds when they're dead! The very same circuits set the stage for psychology and for disembodied spirits. (Here psychologists hiss at the embarrassing pedigree. Harrumph!)

Now, notice how **essentialism** and **mind-ism** mix and mingle in our minds, producing a very rich and intricate world of invisible and intangible stuff. Once again, all this stuff is seen to be independent and separate from our bodies and the physical world. So we're built biologically to perceive and imagine a complex spiritual world. This changes how we view spiritual imagination.

Instead of being outdated and primitive thinking, spiritual thinking is actually baseline perception and thought. It's no wonder that spiritual thinking is universal and tenaciously persistent. It doesn't have its deepest roots in the stubbornly influential ancient world. No, it runs all the way into our brain floor plans. Again, it runs into the emotions circuits, the cell forests that make stuff feel real. Rigorous scientific training can temper and shape spiritual thinking but can't eliminate it. A little dementia or even emotional crisis will call spiritual thinking back to the frontlines of thinking and perception.

So we can look at the spiritual thinking of the Bible in a much more sympathetic light. Biblical figures are not religious Neanderthals we begrudgingly have to work with, but people with human brains. No wonder they think spiritually! It's true that they didn't know anything about modern science and its amazing results. Ignorance is not the root of spiritual thinking: The brain is the root of spiritual thinking. Our ancient friends saw

ghosts, spirits, essences and souls as well as gods, angels and demons because of their brains, the same brains we have!²



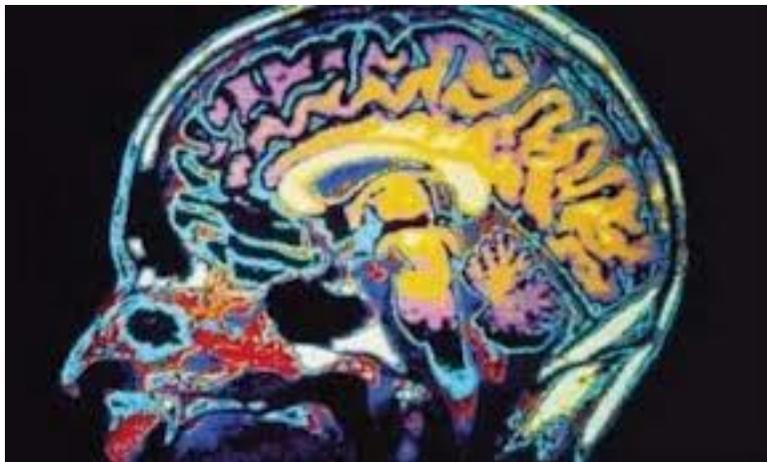
3 Agent-ism

Agent-ism refers to our innate, involuntary, and effortless search for agents, perception of and thoughts about them: **self-governing centers of activity** that do things to us, in us and around us. Because of this ability to perceive agents, we are sensitive to actions and events. As with **essences** and **minds**, **agent-circuits** are separate and independent from specific persons, animals and beings. We have **HAADD** (or **hyperactive agency detection devices**) spread across our brains, all the way down to our **emotion circuits** and to perceptual nerves in our eyeballs. We're built to perceive and react to doers all around us. This makes perfect biological sense. People and critters are crucial for our survival. We need them and yet we fear them because they can harm and kill us.

So let's add this one to **essentialism** and **mind-ism**: We scan for, perceive, and think about agents. It's a great help to think of actions, even when no visible doers are near. We can anticipate and plan. We can react long before the necessary food gallops over or the predator gets too close. We see a spiritual world that interacts with us and does stuff to us, whether beneficial or harmful. We're built to look for, sense, and imagine an

² **Google Search:** David Premack, Simon Baron-Cohen, Chris Frith, Peter Fonagy, Michael Gazzaniga, Jesse Bering, Rebecca Saxe

urgently relevant spiritual world. Our brains tell us that there's a spiritual world somewhere in us and around us, and our brain tells us this world really, really matters. The spiritual critters do things to us. Spirituality is part of our brain architecture. It's not just an old story that maddeningly won't just go away. It's a **brain story!** The Bible is filled with invisible and spiritual agents because the brain is filled with these circuits. The Bible reflects the human brain, its architecture and product-lines.³



4 Pattern-ism

We scan for, detect, sense and think about patterns. **Thought patterns** emerge, for almost all of us, from the **left side** of the brain. Whole **visual patterns** are represented on the **right side** of the brain, again for almost all of us. But patterns emerge from the vision centers, hearing center, and spatial centers of the brain, too. Our eye-balls interrogate the world in a patterned manner. Large amounts of our brain cells are involved in **pattern-search** and **pattern-making**. And if we raise or lower the chemical **dopamine**, our pattern-making increases or decreases. The human brain is a pattern-factory, with astonishing productivity - lion of industry! **Essentialism, mind-ism and agent-ism** are all specific forms of **pattern-ism**. We see, and even see-too-many, patterns all around us. This is our brain doing its thing. That's why type-one errors, apophenia and paranoia, are so common, if not universal and proliferating.

³ **Google Search:** Justin Barratt, Chris Frith, Gunnar Johansson, Bruce Hood, Paul Eckman, Florian Morman, J. Dubois, Alfred Yarbus

This pattern-proliferation produces, among other things, invisible and intangible patterns, detected only by our supersensitive minds. So spiritual patterns abound in the human imagination across every age and place. Once again, it's not the unfortunate vestige from pesky cavemen, stuck in culture. It's our brains. The human brain makes spiritual patterns that come, as we see, as **essences**, **minds**, and **agents**. We effortlessly and automatically draw deeply felt and rich spiritual worlds everywhere we turn and look. It's a brain specialty.

Because of **essentialism**, **mind-ism**, **agent-ism** and **pattern-ism** we also developed science. Science emerges from the same circuitry as religion! How coolly ironic. The difference lies in **testing and measurement**. In science we test our theories **(1)** in the world **(2)** through proven or tested means of measurement. In science, we tie our brain-products more tightly to the world, to proven laws of nature and proven measurement. Both science and spirituality emerge from the human brain. Once again, a chorus of boos emerge from the laboratory.



However, spirituality runs deeper than science into our emotions and therefore feels more personally relevant. Scientific tantrums won't change this, however. From the top: We are passionately spiritual critters, we human primates, and, I say, go for it! It's fun to be on the winning team, isn't it? And we get to feel superior. In this case, I also say, let's get greedy and claim science and religion both, as products of our human brains and products of the same nerve-cell-real-estate!⁴

5 Supernormal Stimulus

⁴ **Google Search:** Michael Gazzaniga, Eric Kandel, Simon Baron-Cohen, Jean Piaget, Jessica Saxe, Nate Silver



Our brains are drawn to exaggerated size, shape, color, and intensity. Our brains also get hooked on this stuff: The **Big Stuff** teaches our brain to search for itself and to ignore the other, lesser triggers that are ordinary and everyday. The human brain is **VERY** susceptible to **SNS (= Super Normal Stimulus)**. We look for- even crave - it to the point of foregoing normal and even morally superior stuff. Think about crack moms: they're hooked on crack cocaine, a super stimulant, and they will overlook and ignore their own children.

Food, sex, drugs, gambling, porn (and even ideas as well as goals) can become SNS. This last part is crucial for religion: Human beings can get hooked on their big ideas and their goals. **God** is a big idea. **Heaven** is a big idea, too. These are only two examples. But we go for other religious SNS. We get hooked on elaborate religious clothes, big churches, mosques and synagogues. We go for big figures, like the Pope, the Grand Ayatollah, and the Dali Llama.

Dopamine, oxytocin and internal **opiates** are essential chemical ingredients to the supernormal recipe. The **SNS circuits** are located in the **middle areas** of our brains. These circuits start in our **brain stems** and reach their endpoints in the **middle of border regions** and the **middle areas of the lower front parts** of the brain. These circuits are collectively known as the **Middle Pleasure Circuits** or **MPC**.

The science also tells us that **(1)** we're terrible predictors when it comes to temptation. We're much more susceptible to **MPC** temptation than we think, and **(2)** we overestimate our self-control when it comes to temptation. We're **much less in charge** than we suppose. Pulling the previous **standard features** together with **SNS**, we make and scan for categories, minds, and patterns. We get hooked on **supernormal patterns, agents, minds and categories**. So we're all double, triple and quadruple

agents. We're multiple hypocrites for this (and other reasons too). Hooray! The bottom line: **Our brains create passionate and complex spiritual worlds and our brains get hooked on this spiritual stuff along with other not-so-spiritual-stuff like sex, drugs and rock n' roll!**

One more thing: We share **essentialism, mind-ism, agent-ism and patternism** with every person on the planet. We have **billion of things in common with everyone**. What an incredible **ecumenical starting point** that is also a **biological hard fact**. Ecumenism runs deep: All the way down to our brain cells, molecules and physical elements!⁵

6 Thinking, Knowing, Believing and Disbelieving

We automatically and effortlessly (and most of the time without any awareness) construct deeply felt spiritual worlds. It's our brain doing its remarkable brain thing. Moreover, we think about our spiritual worlds. We feel like we know them and we believe them.



Our minds represent or imagine these spiritual landscapes and we mentally manipulate them. We do this with words and images, adding and subtracting as we wish. We can even step back and think about our **thoughts about our thoughts**. And we can think about our thoughts (and thoughts *about* our thoughts) from various vantage points. We can think about our religious thoughts as reflections of our current culture. Or we can think about our thoughts as messages from the Holy Spirit. These are only two examples. Our brains create **spiritual worlds**. Our brains think about these spiritual worlds and our brains also think about our **thoughts about our spiritual worlds, our**

⁵ **Google Search:** Niko Tinbergen, Deirdre Barratt, Read Montague, Ogi Ogas, Sai Goddam, Dan Ariely, Roy Baumeister

spiritual thoughts. We're also **innate theologians.** It is, once again, our natural manner of thinking. Theology doesn't represent cultural infections from long ago, which stubbornly hang on. Instead, theology is another kind of built-in or **natural thought process.** When we're performing theology we're not being backward. We're being human.

Along with spiritual thinking that is natural and innate, we are endowed to think **fast** and **slow** and to think in terms of the **short term** and the **long term.** Fast, slow, short term and long term pop up and down like mental whack-a-moles. And they also compete with each other for our attention. This means our spiritual thinking struggles against our others thought forms. They're all in the competitive mix, fighting for the mental spotlight and mixing and mingling. Because it runs all the way down to the basic floor plan, religious thinking holds its own just fine in the mental free-for-all.

The scientific research also illuminates the nerve-cell-circuits that form knowing. And we've learned an astonishing thing under the light of the research: **Knowing is the feeling of knowing.** Whether accurate or inaccurate, right or wrong, the biology is the same. The feeling circuits meet up with the thinking circuits and produce a **knowing circuit.** This is how outlandish thoughts can feel certain and why airtight facts feel like facts at all.



One tragic example of mismatch is **Capgras Syndrome:** You look exactly like my brother but I can't feel it so you must be an impeccable imposter! The visual circuits and visual memory-circuits don't connect up with feeling circuits and the **feeling of knowing** breaks down. The brain has to account for this crucial disconnect and concludes an imposter has replaced these known figures. **Feeling guides all of us into knowledge and truth.** From the perspective of our brain-compasses, **knowledge and truth are feelings.**

Think about this piece of knowing research: When people are quizzed on the stuff **they feel they know** it turns out that they possess very little accurate information. A question or two is all it takes to unmask us as impostors of knowledge. Fret not, however, we still we feel we know even when we're exposed. We skip along, happily deluded.

Brain science also tells us about the circuitry involving belief: Again **emotion-circuits** and the **control circuits of the lower middle front parts** form the **belief circuits**. Each and every human belief uses the same belief circuitry. This also gives us an additional window into belief: Our brains **impose control** over the overwhelming deluge of thoughts and ideas that swirl inside and around us. **Belief corals cognitive chaos**. The feeling circuits and the knowing circuits **sort and manage** the deluge of mental data. We're built to bring layers and layers of order to experience and we do this at superfast speed, much faster than the **speed of consciousness**. **Knowledge and belief** represent additional layers of brain organization that only human primates bring to the ocean of stimulation in which we swim constantly.

So too with disbelief: We use **additional control circuits around our emotion circuits** and we also use our **disgust circuits** to further control, weed out, and reject disruptive thoughts and beliefs. We control with **knowledge, belief and disbelief** circuits. Our nasty, messy brains layer control on top of control.

We hold all this circuitry in common with every other person. There is a **deep neurological ecumenism common to all of us**. We share billions of things in common. We also **feel our very small differences very strongly**. **The ecumenism of belief and difference are deeply biological**. The same goes for disbelief: We hold disbelief circuits in common. We're all **atheists minus one**. We have an astonishingly deep **nerve cell commonwealth of knowledge, belief and disbelief**. Even our differences and distinctions biologically unite us! This isn't a clever combination of words. It's a fact. Wow!⁶

7 Magical Thinking

Matthew Hutson organizes a bunch of research under the heading **The Seven Laws of Magical Thinking** which are as follows: **(1)** Objects Carry Essences; **(2)** Symbols Have Power; **(3)** Actions Have Distant Consequences; **(4)** The Mind Knows No Bounds; **(5)** The Soul Lives On; **(6)** The World is Alive; and **(7)** Everything Happens For a Reason. We've already covered a number of these innate processes, namely essences and minds. Hutson adds an important twist: Magical Thinking involves our innate

⁶ **Google Search:** VS Ramachandran, Bruce Hood, David Eagleton, Sam Harris, Ashley Curiel, Jonas Kaplan, Rosenblitt, Mario Iacoboni, David Desteno, Piercarlo Veldesola, Drew Westen

understanding of **cause and effect** and the nifty ways we combine the physical world and the spiritual world. In magical thinking we represent both worlds and we put them together in **causal combinations**.

For example, imagine me holding a handkerchief that wiped the brow of a saint. It's natural and baseline to think that the essence of the saint has left a trace on the cloth. Again, that's how we human primates think. But we go further: I can use this blessed handkerchief to help a sick friend. It can cure disease! This is the **causal part**: We combine our essentialism with physical effects. The same goes for symbols. We'll look more at symbols next, but here I want to point out that the symbol also has an effect. I make the sign of the cross, in the air and in your direction. You "catch the blessing" by blessing yourself and complete the transfer of spiritual benefits. The sign of the cross refers to Jesus' cross and it also casts an invisible and intangible spiritual goodie onto its recipient. It causes a spiritual effect. Isn't that cool!

Magical thinking is the standard model of causal thinking for us human primates but it becomes specifically *religious* thinking when it's shaped by religious traditions and religious communities. Scientific thinking shapes magical thinking by putting notions of cause-and-effect **to the test in the world** and by using measurements that have been **tested and proven**. But both **science and religion are the offspring of magical thinking**.



Once again, Jesus Scouts, religious thinking and magical thinking are not pesky, stubborn vestiges from days long gone by. Not at all! These kinds of thinking emerge from our current brains and these are the deepest, most enduring foundations of thinking. Magic has received a bum rap, and both **liberal religion** and **science** have forgotten their roots in magic. Magical thinking is the foundation to all causal thinking. I think we could all treat our cognitive mother with a wee bit more respect.

Religion is a form of magical thinking. Religions are shaped and guided by traditions and the folks who preserve and pass down these traditions. In other words, **religion is**

our beloved magic. We feel this magic and, remember, **feelings** tell us what we know and believe.

Science is also a form of magical thinking: Science is magical thinking forged in the fire of **testing and measuring our thinking about the world in the world with proven tests and measurements.** The reference points shift with science: We move from **proven in our hearts** to **proven in the world.** Science is very inefficient, from the perspective of the brain, and it doesn't feel nearly as real as magic. Magic is much more efficient and feels real, precisely because our magical thoughts link nicely to our feelings. Both science and religion arise from magic, however, and magic is the touchstone we return to again and again. We all believe and practice magic and we do so by heart. Magic is much, much less elective or less voluntary than some secular pundits imagine: Magic is akin to cognitive breathing.

Try a dialog between automatic magical thinking, our religious variations and scientific variations. Mix and match in the Episcopal Kitchen.⁷

8 Symbolism

In the previous section we itemized the laws of magical thinking, including the **second law** that **symbols have power.** So now I want to back up and discuss the science of symbols. Whenever **one thing refers to another thing** we have a symbol. The basic ingredients of symbols are at least **two things** and **reference.** We can have more **direct** symbols like when a photograph of a tree refers to a tree. We also can have more **indirect** symbols like when a series of numbers refers to a tree. All communication requires symbols, whether on the grand scale of international communiqués over the Internet or the communications between molecules and cells in all living thing. Symbols run all the way up and down the chain of life, reaching a crescendo in human thought and speech.

Our minds are constantly making combinations and relationships, and our minds do this automatically. So **religious symbols** are an inevitable form of combo and reference. Religions are assembled by symbols. Again, it's **neurological breathing.** Thinking about our symbols is **symbology, the study of symbols.** I recommend cooperation with our hard-wired brain structures. To fight them is exhausting, deeply frustrating and dispiriting as well as neurologically futile.

⁷ **Google Search:** Matthew Hutson, Bruce Hood, Paul Bloom, Susan Gelman, Jesse Bering



In Jesus School, we learn some pretty nifty symbols. First and foremost, **Jesus is our symbol for God par excellence**. Second, **everyone else is a symbol of Jesus**. The symbol patterns in Jesus School are rigged to draw us into this cascade where Jesus rolls into God and everyone else, over and over again. So God, Jesus and everyone else spin around each other like an expanding snowball.

Take a moment to appreciate the scope of symbols: **Every living thing is a symbol**. **Symbol proliferation (Including religious symbol proliferation)** is an inevitable, automatic, and involuntary feature of our brains. I think one of the very cool things about **Episcopal Jesus School** is the wide scope of our symbols. We have plenty of room for magic and we leave plenty of room for everything in between - all the way up to the peaks of science. We offer an amazing selection for every neurological taste.⁸

9 Intuition and Imagination

Intuition is **superfast thinking** that is linked to our emotions. Even though it's much faster than consciousness, intuition leaves us with a gut sense, a feeling we can't put our verbal fingers on. We're steered around by intuitions all the time. And we have religious intuitions or **spiritual gut feelings**. Our **spiritual thinking is both fast and slow**, conscious and unconscious. We have religious thinking in both the back and front of our minds whether or not we're professed believers. Wow! Complete atheism is neurologically impossible. Somewhere in the atheist heart a religious candle flickers. I just love the pesky irony of this!

⁸ **Google Search:** Wilma Bucci, VS Ramachandran, Michael Gazzaniga, George Lakoff, Pierre Paul Broca, Carl Wernike, Charles Sherrington, Eric Kandel, Daniel Bor



Zooming over to the far side of the spectrum, let's look at imagination. We humans have this unique ability to simulate scenes in our heads and to revise them over and over again. **This astonishing ability to simulate is called imagination.** Now let's back up: Scientists have discovered that language comes from this ability to simulate and **to combine mental simulations with sounds and written marks.** It's called the **Embodied Simulation Hypothesis** or **ESH.** Simulation produces language, imagination, and **religious imagination.** We cook religious scenarios in our heads because we're built to think spiritually!⁹

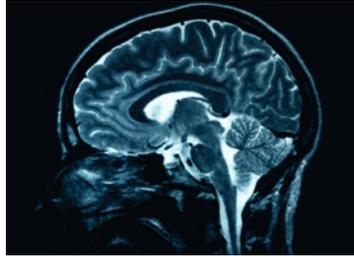
10 Dreams

Everyone has waking and sleeping forms of consciousness. And unconscious mental life dominates sleeping, too, just like waking. Dream figures or symbols can be traced to both conscious and unconscious reference points. Remember, fellow Jesus Scouts, this has been firmly established through many controlled scientific investigations. All the Freudians and Jungians can rightfully stick their tongues out at the naysayers.

Beyond gloating, I have another point here: Dreams are nightly forms of supernatural and sometimes supernormal experience. We fly in our dreams. We change locations in the blink of an eye. We **know** people in our dreams, even when they don't look like the

⁹ **Google Search:** David Premack, Michael Gazzaniga, Wilma Bucci, Chris Frith, Simon, Baron-Cohen, Rebecca Saxe, Eric Kandel

people we know in waking life. Our dream worlds **both resemble and transcend** our waking worlds. I'm thinking here about the Apostle Paul's passage on **spiritual bodies** in his First Letter to the Corinthians. Dreams give us great universal metaphors to reflect together on passages like this.



Just like wakefulness, dreams involve **(1) our brain stems; (2) the inner chamber of our middle brain - the thalamus; and (3) the outer bark-like-layers - the cortex.** Different circuits switch on and off, both in the brain stem and in the cortex, giving us the fantastic nightly odyssey where we live beyond the waking world in countless forms. It's no wonder that every religion draws from dreams.

Each one of us is given an alternative form of consciousness and an alternative world of experience each night. We've all been taught that waking consciousness is only one form of experience. This education comes from within and we all experience it personally. Now get your rest and buckle up: It's time to expand your consciousness!¹⁰

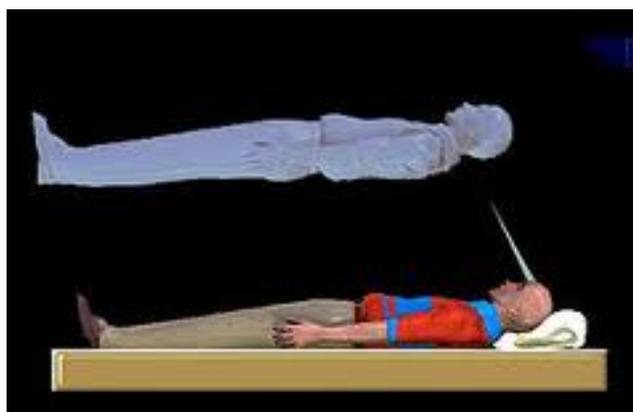
11 Extreme Consciousness

Extreme consciousness refers to **Near-Death Experiences (NDE's), Out-of-Body Experiences (OOBE's), Sensed Presence, and Autoscopy (watching ourselves from the outside).** So we already have this bundle of religious equipment loaded into our brains. And it gets bigger and more striking. Under great physical duress, our brains create extreme experiences using our sleep equipment and a few more tricks. These experiences are super-normal, they hook our brains and **reset our emotional thermostats**, changing us. Once again, they're part of our standard equipment, the base model and involve very deep structures common to all mammals, such as the **vagus nerve system, the brain stem, the thalamus** or inner chamber and our **visual**

¹⁰ **Google Search:** Allan Hobson, Mark Solmes, Alan Braun, Kevin Nelson, Robert Stickold, Antonio Zadra

circuits in the back of the brain. These peek experiences come from very low brain places. Maybe all animals have them - right now I'm imagining cow church!

Scientists have gathered multitudinous reports from people. They reproduce these experiences with direct stimulation of brain tissue and with magnetic fields. They've also found a connection between these experiences and the **brain stem switches** between waking consciousness and sleeping consciousness: **Partial or stuck-in-the-middle switching** blends the two forms of awareness. Along with dreams, these are another form of **explicit spiritual experience** brought to us by our brains. Wow! We have both secret or stealth spiritual mechanics and in-your-face-spiritual-mechanics. What a range!



Nature is kind to us with these structures. We pass into dire conditions and death with an astonishing grand finale, a great show. Those who live to talk about it and those who've had extreme experiences have been deeply moved and changed by their encounter. We have evolved with **spiritual air bags** and **spiritual anesthesia**. From the sublime to the extreme, we're spiritual critters.¹¹

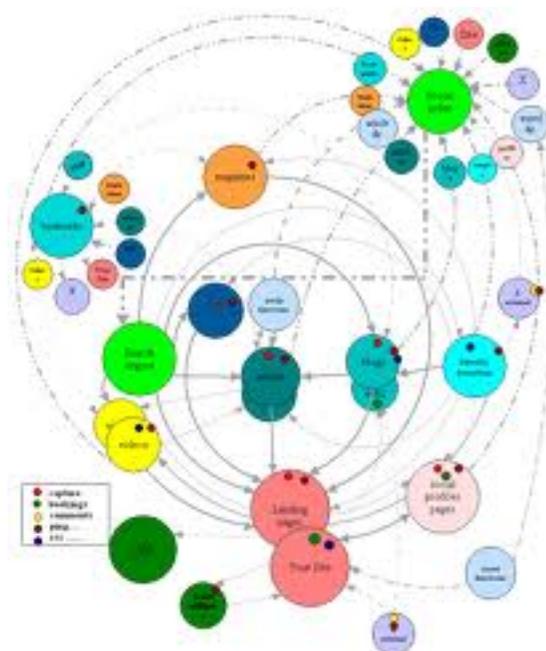
12 Social Categories

We've already seen that we human beings automatically and effortlessly make categories and that our categories feel real to us. By far our most popular categories are human categories. Second come animals. This makes perfect biological sense too: We live with other people and we share land with countless other animals. We need people and animals and these critters can represent our greatest threats.

¹¹ **Google Search:** Kevin Nelson, Andrew Newberg, Wilder Pennfield, Michael Persinger,, George Tyrell, Celia Green, Robert Monroe, Susan Blackmore, Olaf Balnke, Henrik Ehrsson

Scientists call these human forms **scripts, schemes, personifications, and objects**. How annoying it is that scientists spend all this time quibbling over the best terms. Ugh! But I digress: These forms are built-in and can be found on teeny-tiny scales, like single cells, and larger scales like circuits and little patches of brain called **areas** (a brilliant name - It just pops with originality) like the **face recognition area**, aka **fusiform gyrus**.

These superfast social and animal categories make puppetry, dolls, cartoons, stuffed animals, and ventriloquism possible - along with every day **social reading**. Without these circuits, we are quite literally **blind** to the social and psychological dynamics that swirl around inside us and around us. Folks with autism suffer because of this brain-based social blindness. We need our social categories to buzz around.



Well it turns out we're too good at this social category thing. We naturally get carried away with this aptitude. Like a toddler with scissors and tape, we cover everything - I mean everything - with social categories. When you mix this categorizing-gone-wild with all of the other religious circuits, it's no big surprise that we have a very, very busy **social spiritual imagination**.

People-like and animal-like spirits abound in our brainstorm. So it's too easy to sniff at the ancient Israelites who sacrificed animals or modern Muslims who still sacrifice animals: It's a variation of **animal and human spiritual circuits**. Before we get all superior here, remember we call Jesus the **Lamb of God** and we're the **Lost Sheep** and the **Good Sheep**. Let's restore a good reputation to animal spirituality. A futile and snobby pretension that we're Oh-So-Above animal spirituality is exposed by a teary-

eyed gaze at cows and sheep by the crèche. And who brought their rabbit to the blessing of the animals?

Because of this human-and-animal-categorization-run-amok we have social gods, interpersonal angels, psychopathic devils, and patron saints. The spiritual worlds we imagine are jam-packed with spiritual-folks and spiritual-animals. Christians run this social imagination all the way up a hierarchy of being and we spiritually relate to a specific individual person. Our top **spiritual category** is a **specific human: Jesus**. We're busy little social bees who follow **social & spiritual flight paths**.¹²

13 Transference or Parataxis

So let me go on a bit more about these social categories. We unabashedly spread our categories far and wide – extravagantly and even recklessly. We **transfer** or **import** categories from our social lives and stick them onto our **spiritual experience**. To look at it from another direction, we **vacuum and filter all experience, including spiritual experience**, through our social categories. This is where we get the fancy term **parataxis**: “taxi” refers to categories. This importation or filtering is automatic and involuntary, like so many other brain tools. This gives us a nice illustration of **brain efficiency: Automaticity is efficient and automatic reuse - repurposing is efficient**. Our brains are always reusing stuff on the fly. We're always making mental stew in brain-world. Religious stew is the chef's special!



¹² **Google Search:** Eliot Aronson, Timothy Wilson, Robin Akhart, Carol Dweck, Frank Keil,, Jean Piaget, Fritz Hedien, Mary Ann Simmel, John Bargh.

Now here's one of the contributions of Jesus School. We're taught to transfer the **Jesus Category** onto everyone. In other words, we're taught to filter everyone and everything through **Jesus and his story**. This is the way Christians come to their idea that everyone has an **absolute dignity: Everyone has a two-fold-dignity, as images of God and as representations of Jesus**. It's a one-two-dignity-punch! Let's face it, though: It's a very difficult job and we seldom live up to it.

It's very inefficient because it requires deliberate warfare with our **essentialist dark shadows**, like racism, sexism, and such nastiness. It also conflicts with our feelings. This heartfelt transfer of Jesus to everyone without exception is the hardest training in Jesus school. Never once have I completed this obstacle course. I collapse under the strain every time but I'm going to get over those hurdles one day, maybe with help of my classmates.¹³

14 Terrorist Management Theories

Terrorist Management Theories (TMT) draw from Ernest Becker's ideas concerning our **denial of death**. They test this stuff and the science tells us that people are scared to die; we put a lot of energy into ignoring our inevitable fates, our deaths. Not much news here but the science has spelled out our inability to satisfactorily **mentally simulate death** because **(1)** we can't compare our experiences with anyone else's (because they're dead, remember?) and **(2)** we do have encounters with human remains and their stunning complete disintegration. Again, check out the **death farms** on the Internet: only five hours stand between a living dude and plucked-clean-skeleton! Very humbling.

So we experience huge emotional pressures to **(1)** hide the dead; **(2)** counterbalance the staggering ignominy and obscenity of death with beauty and dignity; and **(3)** mutually comfort and reassure each other. We collectively plug our ears and close our eyes. Death is a bummer.

¹³ **Google Search:** Serena Chen, Susan Anderse, Grainne Fitzsimmons, S. Adil Saribay, Jeremy Safran, Lester Luborsky



TMT also teaches us that people get very testy when we challenge or threaten their terror-management-tools. They become very frightened and they attack, even kill. This might help explain why Jesus was so unceremoniously rounded up, beaten up and killed. When he threatened the Cootie-Protection-Plans of his countrymen, like washings and carefully choreographed butchery, they rose up and snuffed him out and quite quickly too. The same fate awaited his pupils -- Peter, Paul, and James, as well as Stephen. It seems as if Jesus and his best students collectively covered themselves in social gasoline and lit the match. In light of **TMT**, Jesus is supremely self-defeating which gives me great comfort because I see a striking family resemblance when I read these stories.

Jesus School provides an innovative form of terror management: **We desensitize ourselves to, or build up a tolerance for, death** because death and worse-than-death are the centerpiece of our story of Jesus. Aren't we fun! We have four Gospel versions of Jesus' death. Paul makes Jesus' death central as do the other New Testament authors. We go bobbing for death every Sunday around the Communion Table when we retell his Last Supper where he makes his death a perennial gift for his students, anywhere and everywhere. Jesus transfers his story onto death and dying. Death and dead people all become representative of Jesus. We pick up this very weird thread and see his face and heart in death. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where the sting? In Jesus School we learn to **manage, humanize, and symbolize** death. It's turbo-management. Another very cool Christian twist on these standard features of the religious brain.¹⁴

¹⁴ **Google Search:** Ernest Becker, Jeff Greenberg, Thomas Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon

15 The Story Teller

Most of us human earthlings use the **left sides and front parts** of our brains to listen to and to tell stories. The left parts, roughly over our ears, whip stories together at superfast speeds, improvising with the deluge of incoming signals; the front parts put some additional order to the story lines. Even with the tight leash of the frontal parts, these **narrative circuits** are wildly improvisational. We all tell a whale of a tale at superfast speeds and we do it behind our own backs in complete secrecy! We don't feel one bit of the machinery.



We sure feel the stories, though, because they're plugged into the **emotion sockets** in the **limbic** or border region. They're compelling but mostly fiction, leaving out huge swaths of input each and every moment. It's very humbling to know that we're each really full of baloney because our brain's a squishy and gooey baloney factory. When the Apostle Paul wrote that **we see dimly through smoky glass**, he might have been too generous with his words. How's this: **Our stories stink**. They need constant correction and editing.

Besides teaching us **Christian humility**, I see another lesson from stories: **Transcendence. Reality constantly goes beyond or transcends our stories**. That doesn't mean we shouldn't tell any stories, even if our brains allowed this. It does mean we should add the **corrective story** that every story disintegrates to dust when put to God's test. Let's remember, Jesus Sprouts, that **only Jesus** and **Jesus alone** is the

final standard of truth. Each and every moment of life is an opportunity to stand before Jesus, unravel the narrative sweaters we wear, and hand him the yarn to knit.¹⁵

16 Natural Transcendence

97% (maybe more) of our inner lives and outer lives **swirls around outside of awareness.** Things operate too fast and in forms we cannot grasp, influence, manipulate or control. We **don't know** and we **don't know what we don't know.** Our very personal lives, which urgently matter to us, are beyond us. Our **lives** are **transcendent to us.**

Just to be clear: This is the stuff we live. This is the stuff right in our face. This is the stuff we're made of. This is the stuff we are. We're all **bobbing in transcendence, swimming in transcendence, marinated in transcendence.** Transcendence isn't some strange medieval term for intellectual sissies that sticks, like gum, to our modern shoes. No, silly Jesus Scouts! Transcendence is a fact, the result of being a conscious and tool-making **animal extraordinaire.** We've got some pretty impressive mental engineered equipment: just enough to dangle us over the expanse of the unknown and uncontrolled.



¹⁵ **Google Search:** Roger Sperry, Michael Gazzaniga, George Lakoff, Stephen Johnson, Lera Boroditsky, Benjamin Bergen

We've got a fleeting and flickering awareness and control that moves the tip of the iceberg. But this ocean of beyond-ness engulfs us, from inside us and outside us. And just like a spaceship hurtling through space at thousands of miles per hour, we don't have very much control. Do they serve drinks on this flight?

As you know by now, I see no reason for panic or distress here: The automaticity of human life, from an itty-bitty-scale to a galactic-view, has brought us to this very point, requiring **not one bit** from either our awareness or our control. **Autopilot rules!** Our conscious assent to (or protest or even rejection of) autopilot has no effect on autopilot but **it does affect our experience**. In Jesus School we learn to see a personal form take shape as the rapids of living and dying sweep us along. This form meets us and draws us in. **He's Got the Whole World In His Hands**.

Our faith is a mental picture we take as we cascade along our existence. In the face of this awesome unfulfilled mystery, we double and triple down with our **personal embrace of a personal mystery**: I'm sticking with Jesus! Who's with me?¹⁶

17 Mental Creation



We make everything up in our heads as we go along. There's a constant **discrepancy** between our impressive mental approximations and the **actual** stuff in us and in the world. How the heck can we drive cars around without crashing into each other? First, it's **not a total discrepancy** and, second, autopilot works great. Remember: We have NASCAR brains, where the computations occur at superfast speed. We're amazing vehicles, we humans!

¹⁶ **Google Search:** John Bargh, Tanya Chartrand, Drew Westen, David Eagleton, Christopher Chabris, Daniel Simons, Charles Duhigg, Eric Kandel, Benjamin Libet, Daniel Wegner

Charles Sherrington was an early dissectionist dude who carefully sorted out the peripheral nerves in our body. He noticed this amazing thing: We sense our hands but we don't feel all the mechanical stuff that's pushing and pulling in there. Remember Ramachandran? He's the neurologist who figured out phantom limbs experienced by folks who have had amputations. The brain keeps telling the story that we have arms or legs even when we don't and it secretly recruits sense nerves to keep the input coming. We're all living in the brain theater, whether we're **believers**, **nonbelievers**, **don't-know-for-sure-ers** or **whatevers**.

No one has a brain-free view, though I've sometimes been accused of a brainless approach. So on this level playing field I heartily recommend **Jesus-O-Rama** where everyone has **absolute dignity**, increasingly **implemented** in this world and **imagined forever through him, with him and in him**.¹⁷

18 Moral Guidance Systems



Our moral perceptions are secretly steered by **moral emotional signals**. Once again, emotions are secretly driving us around, even though we think we're conscious and controlling captains of the ship. We're really playing with the toddler wheel in the child seat. Very humbling. Now the scientists have learned a number of things about moral guidance. Here's a sampling.

(1) People constantly scan for approval and appraisal from others. (2) We use our reason and our speech to spin things in our favor. We have a built-in press secretary. (3) People hide their lying and cheating, especially from themselves, using a whole bunch of mental tricks to cloud their own vision of themselves. (4) Reason works for our

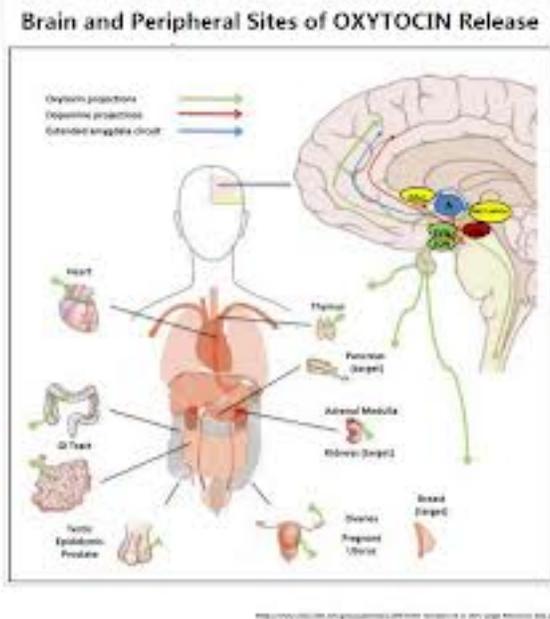
¹⁷ **Google Search:** Charles Sherrington, Chris Frith, VS Ramachandran, Oliver Sacks

emotions and bias-to-ourselves like a lawyer. Similar to the inner press secretary, the inner lawyer adds force: We spin and we spin hard to get and keep approval and good ratings. **(5)** We're groupies in moral, political and religious ideas: **Like seeks like**. Not only are people **innately spiritual**, people are innately **religious** and we fight hard to be **right and righteous**, both as individuals and as a group.

Scientists have also established **5 universal moral taste buds: (1) Care/ Harm; (2) Fairness/ Cheating; (3) Loyalty/ Betrayal; (4) Authority/ Subversion; (5) Sanctity/ Degradation**. On top of these White, Educated, Industrial, Rich and Democratic individuals (**WEIRDo's**) exhibit an additional taste bud: **Liberty/ Oppression**. Like **seven universal emotions**, the **moral emotions are also universal** and the WEIRD moral emotions are universal among we WEIRDo's. There are moral biological taste buds, **natural moral laws**. Like our other senses, these point outward. We're not so good at directing these instruments into ourselves. In fact we completely stink at moral self-policing. We walk around with planks in our eyes.

And our moral emotions share the brain-stage with all the other emotions, thoughts and perceptions we have. So we contradict ourselves spectacularly. Hooray! Hypocrisy is a universal byproduct of having so many different tools for so many situations. It's very adaptive to be an **human all-terrain vehicle** but it makes us pull our moral hair out, until of course we begin combing through our own contradictions. We tend to quiet down then. In Jesus School we learn two very difficult stretches of our moral muscles. First, **we learn to put a muzzle on our moralism**, which is a lifelong fight. Again, we're fighting with our brain here. Second, **we learn to fiercely focus on our own thoughts, feelings and actions, under the firm conviction that we're wrong**. Jesus School provides grueling **moral training**.

So let's wind up **moral guidance** with a brief shout-out to **Oxytocin**, the amazing moral molecule! This little chemical stimulates care and concern. It's so important they give it to premature infants and their mothers in the hospital nursery. Researchers are also exploring its effects on autistic persons, so far with pretty impressive results. This teeny-tiny molecule packs a huge punch!



This power also has a shadow side: Oxytocin stimulates testosterone in men, producing keen sexual interest and the drive towards dominance. I think this sheds very important light on the ugly thread of sexual, financial and political shenanigans that winds through the entire history of church history. Jesus School is an **Oxytocin Irrigation System**: We're in the business of spreading care and, **unbeknownst to us, the care bone is connected to the lust and dominance bones**. Whoops! We truly never saw that coming. We have to anticipate and manage **the adverse side effects of Jesus School**.¹⁸

19 Conflict and Contradiction

The ongoing tug-of-war between different standard features waged inside us shows that the contradiction or mismatch of these standard features is itself a standard feature. Let's remember that a **greater number of tools for the widest variety of settings is optimal for survival**. While contradiction drives philosophers and theologians nuts, it's a very, very solid biological formula. **Our religious SNS's coexist with nonreligious and anti-religious SNS's. Our moral compasses coexist with our selfish pleasure compasses. Our short-term thinking coexists with our long-term thinking. Our magical thinking coexists with our coolly scientific thinking.** All this sits together on the brain-bus. And this stuff is always in contention, vying for prominence. There is astonishing diversity in our heads.

¹⁸ **Google Search:** Wilhelm Wundt, Robert Zajonc, David Eagleton, Jonathan Haidt, Paul Zak, John Reich



Our brains house an astonishing repertoire of tools that get used with seamless finesse. Or rather, there are lots of seams - namely conflict and other difficult feelings - but it's just amazing, the range of features we display and use on the road of life, switching a spectrum of gears automatically, depending on the internal and external conditions. Our brains have a bazzillion tricks up their sleeves and they don't care one bit about **Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction**.

So hypocrisy and psychological conflict are natural, even architectural features of us. In Jesus School we learn which dogs to pick and support in the melee that is our heads. Our inevitable psychological fight gets spelled out and coached. Take note: **This is not an inner peace trajectory because the human nervous system is organized around competing and contradicting parts**. It's a good thing that Jesus brought a sword and not peace because our brains are all about sword fighting. Nerve circuits just don't do peace. I know, I know our inner hippie boos at this fact. You can still wear the tie-dye shirt and sandals to class.¹⁹

¹⁹ **Google Search:** Leon Festinger, David Desteno, Piercarlo Valdesola, Drew Westen, Eliot Aronson, Timothy Wilson, Jonathan Haidt, David Linden, Carol Trevarthan, Lawrence Squire, Charles Duhigg Robert Kerzban

20 Escalated Commitment



When it comes to our firm convictions, the stuff we really push for, we don't change our minds when we crash into disconfirming facts or disproof. No, we human hard-hats put our heads down and we escalate, accelerate and double down on our beliefs. We change just enough pieces of our stories as we begrudgingly have to. And our brains strongly encourage us to stay the course, changing only enough to quell the disturbance in our heads. It's a very efficient recipe.

Let's think about the Jehovah's Witnesses for a moment. These folks have predicted Jesus' Second Coming a number of times with precise dates. But the continuation of the world did not daunt them. They just tweaked the prediction a bit: He came **spiritually**. George Bush didn't apologize and confess a mistake when the WMD's were nowhere to be found in Iraq. No, he just shifted the reasons for his really good idea. It really hurts to stop, pull back and feel **the searing truth** that we were wrong.

Even though our fellow Anglican NT Wright sniffs at this research and then distorts it as regards to the Resurrection, I'm going to argue for the standing of **escalated commitment**, both in the science and as a plausible explanation in our religion. First, **three thousand controlled experiments** on the theory show that it holds up really, really well. Second, the research points to just enough change to keep the momentum going. We saw that the Jehovah Witnesses changed the nature of Jesus' return into an invisible spiritual return, and that President Bush changed the principal reason for going to war. It's very consistent with the **theory of escalated commitment or cognitive**

dissonance to argue that the disciples changed the meaning of Jesus' mission in light of his brutal and quick demise. They were right to follow Jesus and to keep the school going and growing because **God had raised and revealed Jesus from the dead**. It certainly fits the theory.

So I think it's a good thing to simulate our way behind the four collections of **Easter vignettes** found in the Bible and detail the natural mechanics that may have produced the missionary movement. (For you sticklers, it's five if we count Paul's list of apparitions in First Corinthians.) Let's try to remember, no matter how satisfied we may feel, we're simulating. **The line of knowledge stops at the stories. The rest is unknown and uncontrolled.** Easter is personal, between us and Jesus, and this is **lived from the inside and acted on the outside**. Get personal and intimate and talk with these stories. Bring all of **the standard features of the religious brain** and jump in.

It's our natural tendency to **separate the physical and the spiritual lines of thinking**. It's in our brain architecture, so be patient with yourself and others. We need both production lines. Nudge them back together. **Conflict** is also part of our architecture. Though painful, it's natural. Take a big deep breath and practice two mantras: **Both Physical and Spiritual** and **The Spiritual works through the Physical**.

Lastly, let's exhume Thomas Aquinas and Richard Hooker from their graves to advance the **classical** and **Episcopal** principle that **God works through the natural mechanisms to meet us**. The natural world, from top to bottom, backwards and forwards, is a sacrament, an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Nature is the vehicle that drives us to God. So there, upstart naturalists!²⁰

21 Habits

From deep inside our cells to the itty-bitty spaces between cells to productive cell clusters, called **circuits**, to wider and wider bands - spread throughout the whole brain - we learn stuff. One of the kinds of memory we have is **procedural or habit memory**. **Repetition** leads to **automatic performance**. This is very, very efficient and much less costly to our busy brains.

²⁰ **Google Search:** Leon Festinger, Eliot Aronson, Carol Trevarthan, Timothy Wilson, Drew Westen, John Reich



In addition, we automatically make **associations**: Our brains link stuff together to form **complex and automatic procedures**, again a very efficient brain trick we share with animals like mice and reptiles. This habit and association-learning takes place deep inside the **middle of our brains** in a region known as the **basal ganglia**. We can't observe or feel any of these widgets and pulleys in our heads. They secretly do their thing when we rehearse stuff.

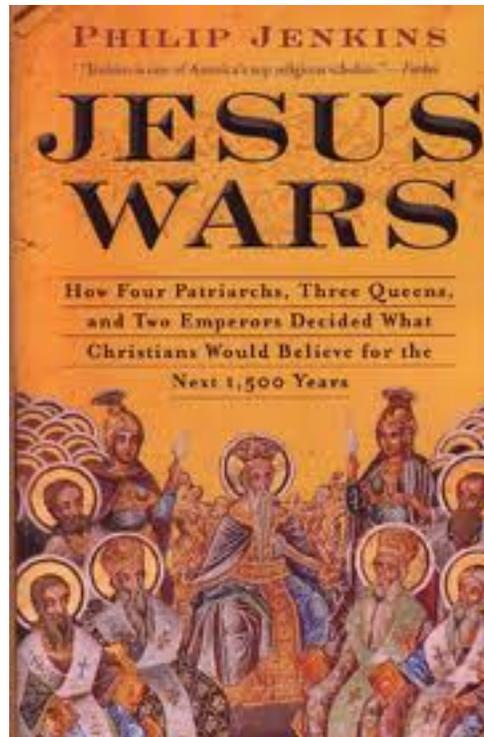
Virtue is built on top of **habit circuits** in our middle brain. Let's restore the good reputation of practice and rehearsal. It's how brains learn. Another form of repetition is **memorization**. It really has its place. It's not the end but it's a good beginning. That's how we all learned to read and write. Without memorization you couldn't read my brilliant, awe-inspiring and whimsically magical as well as dazzling and nimble essays. This is also a plug for **memorizing the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer**. It's a really good foundation for theological reflection. Get those flash cards out and start rehearsing.

Along with these cognitive habits, **going to church, giving to the church, and prayer** are additional habits I heartily recommend. It's part of **basic religious hygiene**. The more **automatic and routinized the better**. This doesn't make it less authentic because it's habitual. Showering isn't inauthentic because you do it automatically. All I'm saying is give habit a chance.²¹

22 Grand Memory

²¹ **Google Search:** Elizabeth Loftus, Brenda Milner, Lawrence Squire, Eric Kandel, David Rubin, Jennifer Talario, Robert Doty, George Miller, Alfonso Pilzecher

Our **autobiographical memories** and **widely shared memories or traditions** are also spread across our brain for **storage and retrieval**. The science teaches us that our memories are like silly putty, secretly molded by current and subsequent input and information, whether that information is **our emotions** or whether that information comes in the form of **environmental cues and suggestions**. Even **traumatic memories** are secretly molded and changed behind our backs. Memories are very, very fallible.

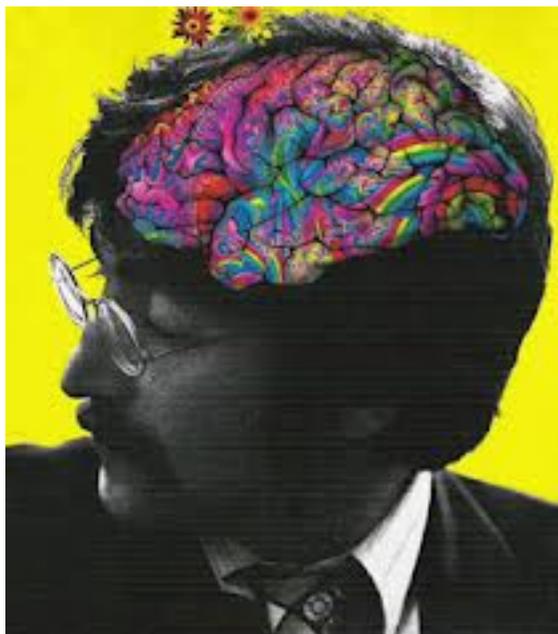


This has big ramifications for the **Jesus wars** that boil between theologians and faith communities. The gospels used the historical gold standard of antiquity: **Eyewitness Testimonies**, gathered into **scripted story forms for edification and memorization**. This was the pinnacle of history in the ancient world and these stories were bequeathed to the Church and maintain their place of prominence to this very day.

Our **quest for knowledge** stops at the **cliff of eyewitness testimony and the fog of a lost age**. That's as far as any of us can go. The rest is speculation, whether informed by knowledge of ancient languages or by archeological competence. We all share the same Bible and the same **ruthless restraints on our wish to know**. Audio and video records didn't exist, nor did **embedded journalism** and **anthropology**. We just have our **biblical treasury**. It's not an X-ray into antiquity, no matter how we twist it. It's just

an exhausting storm over an **impossible mission**. Jesus School is not and never has been the Academy of Scientific Historiography. Shouting won't change that either.²²

23 Tools Made Just For Me



So just like our other built-in thinking arrangements, this type of thinking is found all over the globe in children, uneducated adults, and adults with dementia, folks who have lost their learning. Children think **the tree was made so they can have shade. The world was made so they could have a place to live**. This is the secret script we're all starting from, which means we're all **innate creationists**. No wonder science education gets such a frosty reception. The **conflict** between our innate creationism and our incremental science education is guaranteed. Everybody needs help knitting very personal and self-centered thinking together with the **impersonal and indifferent** forces of nature and the universe.

We're also **innate believers in personal providence**. We automatically and naturally think that events have personal messages, meaning and guidance for us. We share these **basic scripts for thinking, creationism and providence**, with the Ancient Israelites, the Apostle Paul, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Billy Graham as well as Richard Hooker and the Book of Common Prayer. Just like

²² **Google Search:** Elizabeth Loftus, Eric Kandel, Brenda Milner, Jennifer Talario, David Rubin

essentialism, agent-ism and magic etc, Jesus School uses and harnesses these **natural aptitudes** and builds on them, constructing a bridge to Jesus.²³

24 The Secret Inner Drug Pusher and Teacher



When we talked about **supernormal stimulus, SNS**, I emphasized the big stuff that hijacks and doesn't let go of our **middle pleasure circuits**: big religious ideas, big religious buildings, flashy ritual clothing and exotic rituals and music. This **religious SNS** secretly grabs our brains and leads us astray, including we sheep in Jesus School. In this section, I'm highlighting the **middle pleasure circuits themselves** because this stuff tells us **what's important, what to aim for and pursue**.

The MPC teaches all of us what to live for. The MPC is very powerful: all of us underestimate its strength and all of us overestimate our self-control. The MPC steers addicts to neglect everything else. The MPC steers the gambler to risk everything he owns. The MPC steers clergy to endanger children. The MPC is a roaring lion, even when it roars silently and invisibly. **The MPC is an essential piece of equipment but we have to prepare for its side effects and have the antidotes right on hand.**

The MPC also enables us to get hooked on Jesus and the other big ideas in Jesus School, like absolute and extreme dignity. The **middle pleasure circuits teach in Jesus School, too**. Without this **Sunday school teacher in our brain**, our lessons wouldn't have a hook to hang on, or inner wind to blow the educational sails. We need the MPC and we need the **big ideas of Jesus School** as well as the **big trappings** to

²³ **Google Search:** Krista Castler, Debora Keleman, Tim German, Clark Barrat, Jesse Bering

recruit the inner Sunday school teacher. This is a plug for passionate and colorful and musical as well as emotionally touching Jesus School. Pump up the jam and get some energy going! Don't worry, we've got the antidotes at Redeemer.

25 Mysticism and Mystical Wonders

We can practice meditation techniques and forms of prayer, producing powerful experiences of oneness and divine presence. We can even hear the voice of God and see supernatural and supernormal things. Isn't this amazing! We really can produce **explicit, graphic and precise religious experiences**. Religious teachers have handed down these practices for centuries, even millennia. We can even trigger and measure these experiences in the laboratory, whether recording data from praying nuns or placing teeny-tiny filaments in folks' brains during surgery or even using cool magnet gadgets on anyone who's willing. Our brains even have circuits that can perform **high-octane religious experience**. The human brain is stuffed with religious bells and whistles, covering an astonishing **spectrum of spiritual and religious forms**.

From the religious bunny trails to the steep and glassy slopes, our brain secretly and deftly takes us along a **micro-morphing-spiritual-odyssey**. It's the base model, standard equipment, how we are assembled, all of us human squirmers. Universal, built-in **grace**. Here I tip my theological hat to Henri De Lubac and Karl Rahner, grateful for human life in the world and my small cameo in the great drama.²⁴



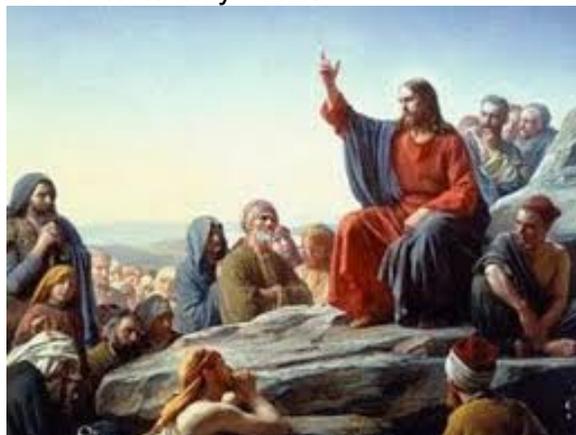
²⁴ **Google Search:** Andrew Newberg, Robert Persinger, Kevin Nelson, TL Luhrmann, Oliver Sacks

Closing Thoughts

We have very adaptive religious brains. Like a Swiss army knife we have these tools at our disposal: we employ and combine these nifty little gadgets with stunning agility. We're religious virtuosos and we come by it naturally, innately. I say if Kindergartners can have graduation ceremonies, then we can celebrate our **innate, automatic and involuntary religiosity**. We're all religious all-purpose gadgets and religious all-terrain vehicles. Not only will we human critters adapt and survive, but so will our religious equipment. Religion-Is-Us.

The researchers have discovered that socially alienating fringe religions draw from an un-churched believer pool. The moral of the story: Quitting religion doesn't protect us (or our children) from religion because we can't quit our brain, just like we can't quit our senses. Ironically, quitting established religion leaves us susceptible to **rogue religion, predatory religion and fringe religion**. These religious outliers isolate us from our peers, foreclosing opportunities. We can't quit religion and, when we futilely try, we run the risk of being marginalized and hurt by stealth religion. But this doesn't make things easy because conventional religions can be infested with troubled and harmful members, all the way up the institutional hierarchy. Given our robust religious natures, I heartily recommend **smart and informed religion** as well as **civilizing and dignifying religion**.

Christianity is the largest and largest expanding religion on the planet. That's a demographic fact, even though the west has changed from the Christian main street to the impoverished back streets of the movement. Globally, Jesus School is on fire and spreading fast. Seeds of civilization will sprout and take root along its paths. I would argue that this shows the ever-so-secret-movement-of-the-Holy-Spirit amidst the ingredients of civilization as a whole, such as absolute human rights and dignity as well as truth as an absolute value. No doubt these trends take decades and centuries. This is Christian DNA, though. Can we have a coolly biological account of these demographic facts? Let me propose a couple of ideas, currently untested. Swirl them around in your mouth and see how they taste.



The brain is a super-efficient-all-in-one-religious-device. I think Jesus School provides a super-efficient-religious-prosthetic: Each and every standard feature of the religious brain has a link to Jesus and his story. Jesus School is one-stop-shopping for the religious brain. We can switch from magic to transcendence to person-to-person-intimacy to dream residue in the blink of an eye. We have **broad spectrum and efficiency effortlessly combined in Jesus School**. Jesus School fits like a tailor made helmet and permits us the use of all our religious brain features in one setting. It's a mega gym!

I also think Jesus School has **high-value inefficiencies**: Extreme generosity, care and dignity as well as respect and advocacy. We keep opening the tent wider and wider too! This, over long swaths of time, creates cultures that folks clamor and connive to enter and join. Nursing care protected the Christian groups from extinction over centuries of epidemic in Europe because only Christians advocated care for the poor and infirm. This inefficiency proved highly adaptive amidst disease, and it also produced medical and nursing science.

Jesus School places great value on **truth, another beneficial inefficiency**. It's truth that has produced science, the free press, modern biography and modern history as well as the human sciences: psychology, sociology, political science and economics. These disciplines have transformed the world. Though painful and surely turtle-like, these inefficiencies incrementally domesticate the world.

Two final high-value inefficiencies. The first is **Love**. Read the Thirteenth Chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Meticulous, civilized loving behavior becomes the standard and ultimate purpose for every follower of Jesus. When everything else has withered, faded and blown away, **love endures**. The same is true of **Prohibition against judgment, which is reserved to God**. Though painfully slow education programs, for us and for the world, **these two inefficiencies are transformative**. Far from pointless inefficiencies, Jesus School provides productive and beneficial inefficiencies, good for survival of the Christian Faith and good for the world. Ever so quiet, this wide spectrum of automatic and available features mixed with difficult-but-valuable features preserves and expands the Christian organism. **This mix of effortless and hard features produces an unparalleled adaptive religion in the marketplace**. Even though I don't have a shred of scientific evidence to support this hypothesis, this is Bill's two cents on the **secret biological game plan that underlies our adaptive success**.

So let me take my **biological hypothesis** a bit further here and use it as a **theological recipe: Respect the full range of innate religious equipment** in Jesus School. From magic to terror management to dreams to mysticism, respect these correspondent religious forms. **Practice religious addition instead of religious subtraction**. The Bible contains the entire spectrum of religious features. The creeds provide more still.

Offer a personal relationship to Jesus. In this way Jesus School fits hand-in-glove with our Swiss Army Brain, stretching to the outer limits of civilized and humane relationships the escalation and proliferation of dignity. **I recommend theological extravagance and theological promiscuity: It's so neurological.**

Ending full circle where I started, this amazing hodgepodge of religious standard features in our brains and the many, many resulting religious forms are **an arsenal of sacraments, an engulfing cloud of portals through which we meet Jesus, heart to heart.** I close with timeless **Augustine: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts won't rest until they rest in you.**



P.S. I would like to thank Susan Emanuel for editing the text and finding the pictures.

