

By **Dr. Mario Beauregard**  
Excerpt from [The Spiritual Brain](#)

*Science's biggest mystery is the nature of consciousness. It is not that we possess bad or imperfect theories of human awareness; we simply have no such theories at all. About all we know about consciousness is that it has something to do with the head, rather than the foot. — Physicist Nick Herbert*

When my doctoral student Vincent Paquette and I first began studying the spiritual experiences of Carmelite nuns at the Université de Montréal, we knew that our motives were quite likely to be misunderstood.

First, we had to convince the nuns that we were not trying to prove that their religious experiences did not actually occur, that they were delusions, or that a brain glitch explained them. Then we had to quiet both the hopes of professional atheists and the fears of clergy about the possibility that we were trying to reduce these experiences to some kind of “God switch” in the brain.

Many neuroscientists want to do just that. These scientists are materialists who believe that the physical world is the only reality. Absolutely everything

else — including thought, feeling, mind, and will — can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena, leaving no room for the possibility that religious and spiritual experiences are anything but illusions.

But I belong to a minority — nonmaterialist neuroscientists. I do not doubt in principle that a contemplative might contact a reality outside herself during a mystical experience. In fact, I went into neuroscience in part because I knew experientially that such things can indeed happen. I simply sought to study what the neural correlates — the activity of the neurons — during such an experience might be.

Of course, you may well ask, can neuroscience studies of contemplative nuns demonstrate that God exists? No, but they can — and did — demonstrate that the mystical state of consciousness really exists. In this state, the contemplative likely experiences aspects of reality that are not available in other states.

These findings rule out various materialist theses that the contemplative is faking or confabulating the experience. Our research also showed that mystical experiences are complex — a finding that challenges a vast variety of simplistic materialist explanations such as a “God gene,” “God spot,” or “God switch” in our brains.

Recently, materialistic explanations of religion and spirituality have gotten out of hand. Influenced by this materialistic prejudice, popular media jump

at stories about the violence gene, the fat gene, the monogamy gene, the infidelity gene, and now a God gene. The argument goes like this: evolutionary psychologists attempt to explain human spirituality and belief in God by insisting that cave dwellers in the remote past who believed in a supernatural reality were more likely to pass on their genes than cave dwellers who didn't.

Essentially, there is no God switch. As our studies with the Carmelite nuns have demonstrated, spiritual experiences are complex experiences, like our experiences of human relationships. They leave signatures in many parts of the brain. That fact is consistent with (though it does not by itself demonstrate) the notion that the experiencer contacts a reality outside herself.

Some think that the solution to the evidence against materialism is to continue to uphold materialism a bit more raucously than before. Currently, key materialist spokespersons have launched a heavily publicized and somewhat puzzling "anti-God" crusade. Antitheistic works such as *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Daniel Dennett), *The God Delusion* (Richard Dawkins), *God: The Failed Hypothesis — How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist* (Victor J. Stenger), *God Is Not Great* (Christopher Hitchens), and *Letters to a Christian Nation* (Sam Harris) are accompanied by conferences such as the Science Network's "Beyond Belief" and campaigns such as the YouTube Blasphemy Challenge.

The remarkable thing is that there isn't a single new idea in anything they have to say. Eighteenth-century philosophes said it all long ago, to as much or little purpose. Granted, recent works have been spiced with the questionable assumptions of evolutionary psychology — the attempt to

derive religion and spirituality from the practices that may have enabled a few of our Pleistocene ancestors to pass on their genes. But the Pleistocene ancestors are long gone, and not much can really be learned from a discipline that lacks a subject.

Materialists are quick to make assurance about the illusory nature of mind, consciousness and free will, and the uselessness or danger of spirituality. A variety of experts of the mid-twentieth century had predicted that spirituality would slowly but surely disappear. Once supplied with abundant material goods, people would just stop thinking about God.

But the experts were wrong. Spirituality today is more varied, but it is growing all over the world. Thus, its continuing vitality prompts speculations, fears and some pretty wild guesses — but most of all, a compelling curiosity, a desire to investigate.

But how can we investigate spirituality scientifically? To start with, we can rediscover our nonmaterialist inheritance. It has always been there, just widely ignored. Famous neuroscientists such as Charles Sherrington, Wilder Penfield and John Eccles, were not in fact reductive materialists, and they had good reasons for their position. Today, nonmaterialist neuroscience is thriving, despite the limitations imposed by widespread misunderstanding and, in a few cases, hostility. Readers are urged to approach all the questions and evidence presented with an open mind. This is a time for exploration, not dogma.

*Dr. Mario Beauregard's groundbreaking work on the neurobiology of mystical experience at the University of Montreal has received international attention. Because of his research into the neuroscience of consciousness, Beauregard was selected by the World Media Net to be among the "One Hundred Pioneers of the 21st Century." This article is an excerpt from the book [The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul](#)*

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