God in the Brain Gallery

(<http://rd825.github.io/THEO108>)

By Rahul Desai

For my Theology-108 Final, I decided to create a virtual art gallery and then design and curate works to fill that gallery. These works are postmodern, and therefore somewhat derivative, as per the appropriation school of art. My hope with this project was to create works that would encourage viewers to think about a concept of God in the following way:

The conventional human belief in god(s) holds that humanity was created by a superior being or force in the image of that superior entity. For example, in the biblical Book of Genesis, the Biblical authors state that “God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them” (Coogan, Genesis 27). These beliefs of creation appear almost universally across cultures. In fact, Pedro Mendia-Landa of Yale University argues that “every culture at its foundation had its own interpretation of how the world came about and why things were the way they were. However, many similarities do exist… A psychological view of mythology believes myths are products of the human psyche and therefore universal to all human beings” (Mendia-Landa). With this in mind, one can turn the conventional wisdom on its head and argue that humanity has created theistic god(s) in its own image rather than the other way around. In order to critically examine and validate this argument, multiple images were framed under the lenses of neurotheology, cognitive science of religion, and nonreductive physicalism.

I’ve inserted the text from the title cards from the gallery into this document to further detail how this project truly explores the connections between God and the brain:

**Scanning for God**: This work is meant to recall the SPECT scans run by Newberg and d'Aquili. It combines a brain scan with an overlay of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* where the brain should be. The contrast of the scientific and religious imagery should evoke a sense of both partnership and warfare between the two disciplines. Moreover, it should create visual symbolism that might help illustrate the Fransciscan nuns' *via positiva* in the SPECT scans.

**We Created God in Our Image**: Beliefs of creation appear almost universally across cultures. In fact, Pedro Mendia-Landa of Yale University argues that “a psychological view of mythology believes myths are products of the human psyche and therefore universal to all human beings” (Mendia-Landa). With this in mind, one can turn the conventional wisdom on its head and argue that humanity has created theistic god(s) in its own image rather than the other way around.

**Silence**: This work was influenced by Raimon Panikkar's conception of God. Mainly, the piece is meant to convey that the word "God" and any idols or depictions of "God" are merely symbols, and fail to capture God's reality. My hope for this image is that it encourages both believers and atheists to reflect on their concept of God.

**It's All In Your Head**: In *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, Justin Barrett states that “urban settings contribute to atheism in at least two ways” (116). Cities allow connections between those of different backgrounds and perspectives, so that people can reconsider their own views and reflectively make conclusions about the world. Second, urbanites tend to have Hyperactive Agency Detection Devices that recognize human instead of divine agency. Even Barrett acknowledges that reflective beliefs in our increasingly scientific world can disrupt traditional religious belief.

**Heaven Admission: A Mission** (April 22, 2014 by Sel Thomson): This work was not designed by me, but I decided to curate it as part of this exhibit; I feel that it expresses the common view of the soul as immortal and disembodied. This image, furthermore, seems to capture a view of heaven as described in theistic conceptions of religion, whereby the dead can go to an afterlife. In the image to the right, we see Nancey Murphy's argument against this in visual format.

**A Study in Physicalism**: This work stems from Nancey Murphy’s nonreductive physicalism. She discusses how the atomist revolution undermined a medieval conception of the soul by questioning the idea of the soul as the form of the body. She also points out that the Darwinian revolution highlights that interspecies transitions (e.g. between lesser primates and humans) were too gradual to claim that only humans have souls. Finally, Murphy argues that neuroscience shows that the complexity of the human “soul” is really just a byproduct of the complexity of arrangement in the brain.

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