

On
Being
Human

in the 21st century

John Everett

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the correspondents of 'Meditations of a Netcaster', who will be recognise quite a lot of the material in this book, much of which was originally written in response to their questions.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The passages quoted in this book are from either the Revised Standard Version or the New International Version of the Bible. The references are given for each passage. Stand-alone quotations are signified by a change of font. The only modification has been to omit verse numbers, for better readability. These were never part of the original documents in any case.

Introduction

This book covers a wide range of topics: psychology and psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and the psychological insights we find in ancient texts. To be fully inclusive in tackling the question of what it means to be human we need to address spiritual answers as well as scientific answers. Who can possibly be an expert in all these fields?

The good news is that possibly no one is an expert in all these fields, so maybe someone who is quite well read in all of them may be useful.

Not everyone will agree that one needs to see what the New Testament of the Bible has to say on the subject is useful. Some will *a priori* reject the idea. But suppose it is true that the thing that differentiates us humans from the rest of the animal kingdom is that we have the capacity to be spiritual. Suppose is it true that unless we have a viable relationship with the source of all being we are in reality somehow diminished, somehow less human than we have the potential to be.

In 1999 I began posting occasional short blog

articles which I called 'Meditations of a Netcaster'. Fifteen years later I have reviewed these, and decided to include just a few of them in a longer attempt to address the question we are focusing on. Some have been slightly revised in this process.

My qualifications to write on this subject? I read Classics and Theology at Cambridge University, and I taught the New Testament at Advanced Level for several years before starting my own business, a software house. This company provided a back-office system for private client stockbrokers. From ancient texts in languages no longer spoken to modern high level computer languages is quite a jump. It brings one firmly into all the modern ways of thinking, and in my case this has extended to thinking about how one might reconcile modern views on psychology with the traditional answers given by the followers of Jesus Christ about what it means to be human.

My experience as a human includes being a husband, a father, and a grandfather, teaching teenagers, managing a business with 70 employees, and now being an elected local councillor as retirement public service. I have published a text-book on the life of Jesus Christ, and a critique of the book of Genesis, comparing modern scientific knowledge with this ancient text.

I am sure, dear reader, that you will not agree

with everything you find here, but my hope is that you will have been stimulated to think about these issues, and come to your own reasoned conclusions. So please read this book slowly, as it is not very long, and pause for thought regularly as you do so. It may provoke you to look in more detail at some of the topics raised. I am more focused on provoking questions than in supplying answers.

On using the Bible

We need to understand what the Bible is before we can use it helpfully. In these pages I will be using the New Testament predominantly, so here are some thoughts about it.

It is categorically not a collection of proof-texts which we can turn to in order to answer all the questions about God we might have. In reality it is mostly stories. The first five books are all pure narrative: who did what, who said what. One copy of mine of the whole New Testament has 570 pages, and of these the first 335 are narrative. Then come lots of letters, some quite short, all written for the same reason we ever write letters: because we have something to say but could not get there to say it face to face. These letters contain stuff about purely local situations, together with greetings to people obviously known to the writer but otherwise never mentioned in any surviving literature. Then to round it off we have a series of visions, and even this book has seven letters in it.

Not one of the individual parts of what we now call the New Testament was written with any consciousness that they would be eventually included in an authoritative collection of

writings. The age in which they were written was not like ours, with its emphasis on the written, printed word. That age gave far more weight to the spoken word. While there were living witnesses of events, who needed a written account? It was only when these living witnesses were beginning to be fewer and fewer, as age and death overtook them, was there any need for their memories to be preserved on paper. The task of the Christian Church in the second century was to define which of those written accounts and letters had real authority, and this is how the collection of them became what we know today as the New Testament of the Bible.

Two thousand years later we cannot have any better evidence of what Jesus did and said, or of what those immediate followers – to whom he had directly given authority – taught. The key word is authority. This, to me, is what the New Testament has.

Inevitably any references to the human condition in these narratives, letters, and visions is purely incidental. In no way was the writer addressing the question about what it means to be human. He was addressing quite different questions, but using assumptions about being human that allow us to extract some helpful insights into our fundamental question.

Are these extracted insights useful? Are they

true? That is the question that you, dear reader will have to consider. But certainly they may be regarded as useful if they are set alongside the assumptions made by modern clinical psychology, with its competing methodologies, its differing diagnostic criteria, and its differing treatment procedures.

Science

There was a time once when people discussed Religion and Science, as though they were alternative ways of understanding the human condition.

For most thinking people this is no longer a valid debating point. Religion has been deemed irrelevant, and the discussion has moved on.

Well I want to bring it back. For the very good reason that having won the argument Science (with a capital 'S') has itself become a religion. If you don't believe me, consider how often you read a statement beginning with the words 'scientists believe...'. If this phrase does not hurt your ears a little, you have already fallen into the trap. Doh! What trap?

The basis of science is discovering the nature of things by hypothesis and experimental testing. By this means we get to know the truth, and '*scientia*' is the Latin for knowledge, things I can '*scio*', 'know'.

So the statement 'scientists believe' is no more useful (and no less useful) than 'lorry drivers believe', for the beliefs of any scientist are

exactly those parts of their life not based on science.

There is another reason to suspect any statement couched in terms of 'scientists believe', and that is that anyone who is a scientist usually calls himself a biologist, a chemist, a physicist, or whatever, but rarely simply a 'scientist'. Science as an academic discipline is just too huge for any one person to be a generalist: there are no thermo-nuclear-physicists who are specialists in, say, botany or any other branch of science.

Please bear with me, as this matters. Where is 'Science' taking the human race, and do we really want to go there? And who are the high priests of this religion, who call themselves 'scientists'? Above all, what is this religion called Science, and what are its beliefs?

The scientific method can be very simply stated: it is a verification process, that demands repeatability. If I propose a hypothesis, then my verification process must be watertight; all possible logical alternatives must be ruled out, and my experiments must be capable of being repeated with the same results every time. My hypothesis must also be potentially refutable. I must propose certain sets of data that would, if they occurred, actually disprove my hypothesis. So, my hypothesis must, in essence, be both verifiable and refutable. Even then Newton will be corrected by Einstein, and Einstein will be

corrected by ..., and so on for a long time yet, as our ability to find and handle new data progresses.

All the beneficial advances made in the last three centuries or so have been made possible because doctors, chemists, biologists, and physicists have found out the truth about blood circulation, viruses, bacteria, combustion, and a million other things by direct observation, and experimental verification. To give but one example, infant mortality was drastically reduced when doctors started washing their hands between observation of different pregnant mothers, and that not so long ago. The list is endless of how beneficial knowledge ('*scientia*') can be.

Knowledge replaces superstition, and sometimes (eventually) vested interests too. The pharmaceutical industry, the tobacco industry, and of course all the science used in the construction of warfare technology, have a legacy that is not entirely for the benefit of the human race. It needs to be remembered that science has given us both aspirins and heroin, both immunisation and nerve gas, and so on; the list is endless.

The rockets that propel our communication satellites into space, the internal combustion engine that takes us to work, and almost every appliance we take for granted, have all arrived on the basis of knowledge gained by scientific

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