

Brain, Mind and Soul: Towards a Contemporary Catholic Understanding of the Human Soul

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30 September 2014

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SUMMARY

The Christian concept of the human soul usually means life for the body, rationality, the spiritual within, and a carriage through death into eternity. Yet questions about the soul that have traditionally been asked in philosophy and theology are being raised in other contexts. As belief in the soul is questioned by researchers, and appears to be gradually vanishing in the face of scientific materialism and metaphysical scepticism, the attention naturally shifts to the physical brain. It holds many wonders, how this central organ of the human body can be the indispensable and vital centre of life, consciousness, reason, cognition, emotion, memory, language, free will, personal identity, faith and spirituality, and much more.

This thesis argues that a contemporary Catholic understanding of the human soul needs to be aware of and responsive to developments in the study of brain and mind by modern philosophy and science. Indeed, the sciences and its accompanying philosophy of physicalism are necessary to study and explain the human brain, body and mind. However, they encounter certain limits in the scope and depth of explanations, especially in matters of the spirit and what is beyond space and time.

The thesis commences with Catholic thought, and an outline of the traditional Catholic understanding of the human soul. The two principal sources are firstly, some significant teachings from the magisterium of the Catholic Church and other Church bodies. Secondly, Tommaso d'Aquino or Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274), perhaps the most cited teacher in the Catholic tradition. His systematic and assiduous inquiries incorporate the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Nevertheless, the language and concepts used have become difficult for many who are immersed a scientific and technological milieu. This also introduces the possibility of dialogue between traditional teachings and current knowledge and research in the natural sciences.

The thesis then critically investigates several relevant areas of today's sciences which can contribute new insights on the soul: neuroscience; research into religious, spiritual, or mystical experiences; degeneration of the brain and how it affects

people's lives and souls; the human descent from other animals in evolution; and then some important ideas from a wider, existential perspective.

To close, the thesis returns to the traditional Catholic ideas on the human soul and works towards an updated Catholic understanding of the soul illuminated by the sciences and related philosophy. The subjects analysed are: Christian dualism, Christian materialism, contemporary Thomism, and the soul as taught by the Catholic magisterium.

The thesis proposes that any development or renewal of the Catholic Church's teachings will only be possible through dialogue with the sciences and neuroscience in particular, together with philosophy. The thesis concludes by offering a number of modest considerations for a future Catholic understanding of the human soul.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to firstly acknowledge the expert guidance and professional, patient encouragement of my principal supervisor, Associate Professor Stephen Downs. His help was valued all the time, but particularly during the majority of years of my candidature as a distance education student.

The involvement of my co-supervisor, Reverend Doctor Denis Edwards, is warmly acknowledged too.

The preparation of this thesis relied on the assistance of past and present staff at Flinders University Library, its Flexible Delivery Library Service, its Document Delivery services; as well as past and present staff at the Adelaide Theological Library, and the Faculty of Education, Humanities and Law.

I would also like to recognise one my past philosophy lecturers, Reverend Doctor John E. Begley, S.J. (1921-2010), who first suggested the human soul as a promising subject for a thesis.

Finally, the interest and support of my family, plus my confrères, the priests and brothers of the Salesians of Don Bosco, were important overall.