

WORLD & NATION

Neurotheology research touches nerves of some

NEW YORK (CNS) — A new branch of scientific research called neurotheology is seeking to uncover the link between the human brain and religious experiences.

Neurotheology — the subject of a cover story in the May 7 issue of *Newsweek* magazine and of a new book called "Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief" — is the study of the neurobiology of religion and spirituality.

Psychologists and neurologists already have discovered through brain imaging that certain parts of the brain are stimulated and other parts quieted by religious activities such as meditation and prayer.

For his book, *Why God Won't Go Away*, published in April by Ballantine Books in New York, Dr. Andrew Newberg and his co-authors used data from brain imaging of Tibetan Buddhists and Franciscan nuns during prayer.

"The sensation that Buddhists call 'oneness with the universe' and the Franciscans attribute to the palpable presence of God is not a delusion or a manifestation of wishful thinking but rather a chain of neurological events that can be objectively observed, recorded and actually photographed," the book says.

Newberg, clinical assistant professor in the nuclear medicine department and instructor in the psychology department at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, wrote the book with fellow University of Pennsylvania professor Dr. Eugene G. d'Aquili, who died in 1998, and freelance writer Vince Rause.

"Of all the surprises our theory has to offer — that myths are driven by biological compulsion, that rituals are intuitively shaped to trigger unitary states, that mystics are, after all, not necessarily crazy, and that all religions are branches of the same spiritual tree — the fact that this ultimate unitary state can be rationally supported intrigues us most," they wrote.

"The realness of Absolute Unitary Being is not conclusive proof that a higher God exists, but it makes a strong case that there is more to human existence than sheer material existence," they added.

"As long as our brains are arranged the way they are, ... spirituality will continue to shape the human experience, and God, however we define this majestic, mysterious concept, will not go away," they said.

In an essay accompanying the six-page *Newsweek* article, religion editor Kenneth L. Woodward said he doubts "whether this evolving 'neurotheology' is theology at all."

"It tells us new things about the circuits of the brain, perhaps, but nothing new about God," he added.

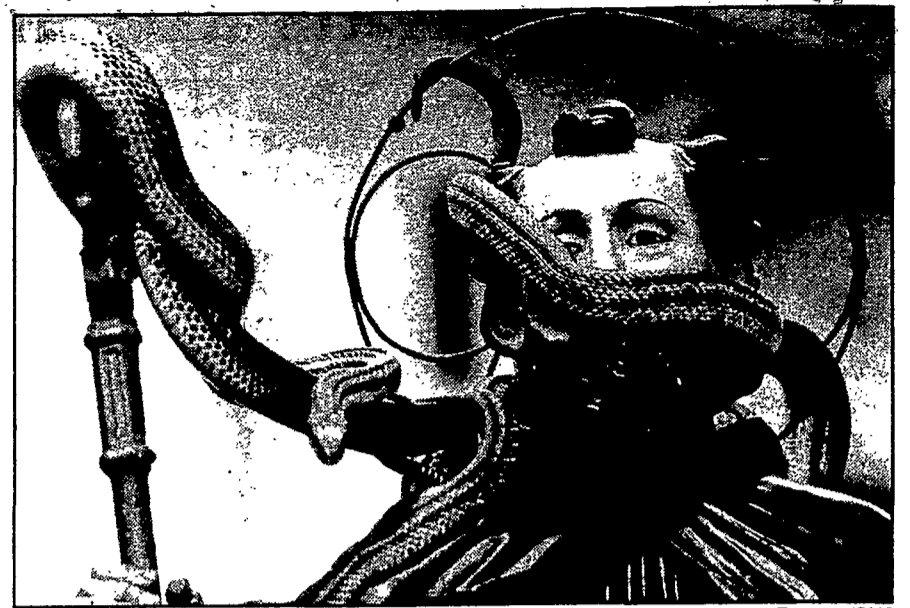
"The chief mistake these neurotheologians make is to identify religion with specific experiences and feelings," Woodward said.

He added that "very few Christians have experienced what Christian theology calls mystical union with God," nor have many Buddhists "experienced the 'emptiness' that the Buddha identified as the realization of 'no-self.'"

"To suggest that the brain is the only source of our experiences would be reductionist, ignoring the influence of other important factors, such as the will, the external environment, not to mention the operation of divine grace," he added.

Earlier this year, the Vatican's leading expert on bioethical issues and medical research said Newberg's research illustrates the deep bond between spirit and body but does not explain away religious belief.

"This research demonstrates that when someone prays, certain parts of the brain are involved," said Bishop Elio Sgreccia, vice president of the Pontifical Academy for Life. "That does not lessen the value of prayer, and even less does it prove that God is an invention of the brain."



Reuters/CNS

Snakes alive

Live snakes coil around a statue of St. Domenico in an unusual religious procession May 3 in Cocullo, Italy. The festival recalls the legend of the saint in which he saved residents of the city from the bites of snakes and rabid animals in the 11th century.

New York nun killed in Guatemala

By Stephen Steele
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — A U.S. nun who worked with victims of violence in Guatemala was shot dead in an apparent robbery, her religious order said.

Charity Sister Barbara Ann Ford of New York was shot numerous times in a midday assault in Guatemala City May 5.

Sister Ford, 62, worked in Guatemala for 20 years, helping victims of the country's 36-year civil war recover from their psychological wounds.

"She had a great love and a great compassion for the indigenous people, especially the rural poor," said Charity Sister Doris Smith, spokeswoman for the religious order.

Charity Sister Elizabeth Vermaelen, the order's president, said Sister Ford "was a woman who loved God's people, especially the people of Guatemala, passionately."

"She reached out to them in every way possible to meet their needs of body, mind and spirit," she said.

Sister Ford had served as health coordinator of the Guatemalan Diocese of Quiche since 1989.

She assisted efforts to recover bodies that were buried in mass graves during the

war. She also ran a mental health project to help people deal with their memories, the Sisters of Charity said.

Details of the shooting were sketchy, but eyewitness reports said the nun was shot by "two well-dressed men, no more than 25-years-old," according to a statement from the Washington-based Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA.

Sister Ford was driving alone in a pickup truck, found a few blocks from the crime scene, the Sisters of Charity said.

She first arrived in Guatemala in 1978 after a series of earthquakes devastated the country. She worked in the Diocese of Solola-Chimaltenango for eight years.

In 1986, she returned to teach for three years at Lincoln Hospital in Bronx, N.Y., then went back to Guatemala.

In Chupol in the Diocese of Quiche, Sister Ford ran literacy projects for women and found ways to provide the community with running water and electricity.

"She was able to get doctors and engineers to come to the area and help," Sister Smith said.

International news agencies report that six Americans have been killed in Guatemala in the past 18 months, and no arrests have been made in any of the cases.



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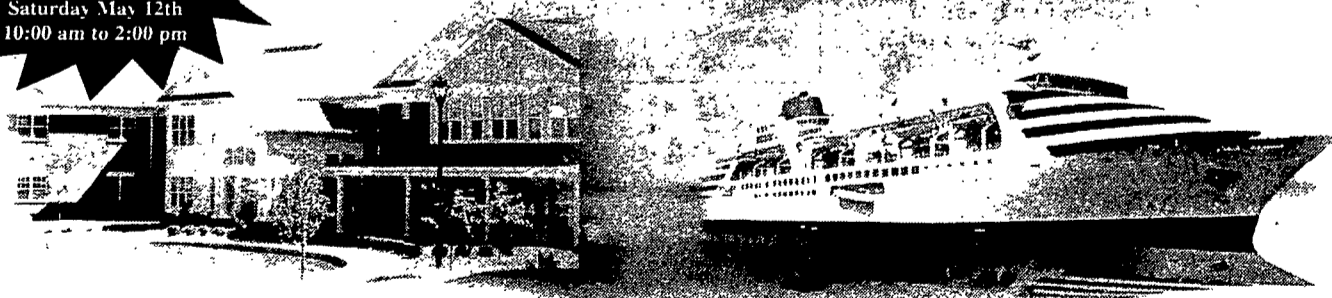
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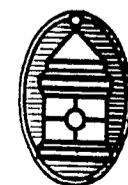
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