From “Freedom of Thought”

The locus of the human mystery is perception of this world. From it proceeds every thought, every act. I like Calvin’s metaphor-nature is a shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed. As we perceive we interpret, and we make hypotheses. Something is happening, it has a certain character or meaning which we usually feel we understand at least tentatively, though experience is almost available to reinterpretations based on subsequent experience or reflection. Here occurs the weighing of moral and ethical choice. Behavior proceeds from all this, and is interesting, to my mind, in the degree that it can be understood to proceed from it.

…There is a deeply rooted notion that the material exists in opposition to the spiritual, precludes or repels or trumps the sacred in this area. This dichotomy goes back at least to the dualism of the Manichees, who believed the physical world was the creation of an evil god in perpetual conflict with a good god, and to related teachings within Christianity that encouraged mortification of the flesh, renunciation of the world, and so on.

For almost as long as there has been science in the West there has been a significant strain in scientific thought which assumed that the physical and material preclude the spiritual. The assumption persists among us still, vigorous as ever, that if a thing can be “explained,” associated with a physical process, it has been excluded from the category of the spiritual. But the “physical” in this sense is only a disappearingly thin slice of being, selected, for our purposes, out of the totality of being by the fact that we perceive it as solid, substantial. We all know that if we were the size of atoms, chairs and tables would appear to us as loose clouds of energy. It seems to me very amazing that the arbitrarily selected “physical” world we inhabit is coherent and lawful. An older vocabulary would offer the word “miraculous.” Knowing what we know now, an earlier generation might see divine providence in the fact of a world coherent enough to be experienced by us as complete in itself, and as a basis upon which all claims to reality can be tested. A truly theological age would see in this divine Providence intent on making a human habitation within the wild roar of the cosmos.

But almost everyone, for generations now, has insisted on a sharp distinction between the physical and the spiritual. So we have had theologies that really proposed a “God of the gaps,” as if God were not manifest in the creation, as the Bible is so inclined to insist, but instead survives in those dark places, those black boxes, where the light of science has not yet shone. And we have athiesms and agnosticisms that make precisely the same argument, only assuming that at some time the light of science will indeed dispel the last shadow in which the holy might have been thought to linger. Religious experience is said to be associated with activity in a particular part of the brain. For some reason this is supposed to imply that it is delusional. But all thought and experience can be located in some part of the brain, that brain more replete than the starry heaven God showed to Abraham, and we are not in the habit of assuming that it is all delusional on these grounds. Nothing could justify this reasoning, which many religious people take as seriously as any atheist could do, except the idea that the physical and the spiritual cannot abide together, that they cannot be one dispensation. We live in a time when many religious people feel fiercely threatened by science. O ye of little faith. Let them subscribe to Scientific American for a year and then tell me if their sense of the grandeur of God is not greatly enlarged by what they have learned from it. Of course many of the articles reflect the assumption at the root of many problems, that an account, however tentative, of some structure of the cosmos or some transaction of the nervous system successfully claims that part of reality for secularism. Those who encourage a fear of science are actually saying the same thing. If the old, untenable dualism is put aside, we are instructed in the endless brilliance of creation. Surely to do this is a privilege of modern life for which we should all be grateful.