

A Different View of *Touching a Nerve* by Patricia Churchland

Patricia Churchland is the queen of eliminative materialism and a committed atheist. Why did *PSCF* review her latest book in the December issue (Churchland, "Touching a Nerve: The Self as Brain," *PSCF* 66, no. 4 [2014]: 259–61)? There are many good reasons! She is one of the most respected neuroscientists in America and received a MacArthur Fellowship for her work. This book is not just a rehash of her previous work; it presents fundamentally new philosophical stances for her. Previous work assumed that conscious thought was merely an epiphenomenon; Churchland joined many colleagues in adopting that stance. In this book, she presents the perspective that our conscious thoughts are real objects of investigation and denotes this position as "mental realism." This is a huge step forward for both Churchland and for the whole field of neuroscience. The full range of conscious experiences of actual humans is now under consideration.

While Christians often minimize the importance of our chemical and biological parts in a description of our mental and religious life, Churchland takes on this issue directly. Specific chemicals have demonstrable effects on human thought. She also acknowl-

edges that specific thoughts have demonstrable influences on brain chemistry. This paradigm also applies to biological structures and human thoughts. She has important things to say to those of us who believe. Both biological and chemical influences must be taken into account when dealing with extreme religious experiences. Scripture admonishes us to "test" the spirits. When "visions" are the result of drugs, sensory deprivation or communal hysteria, scientists rightly point out the known and observable factors that are within their purview. God has graciously given us human bodies so that we can worship and serve him here on earth, but we must face the realities of being incarnated.

Human experience is highly complex, and there are many factors that enter into any actual historical situation. Scientists talk in terms of levels or worlds of discourse. The chemical level of description does not contain all the information that matters, any more than the biological or social. *Touching a Nerve* is the best popular book on the brain and human functioning yet written.

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