

The Sacred Neuron – Extraordinary New Discoveries Linking Science and Religion by John Bowker. I B Tauris 2005.

It can be hard for a religious lay person to appreciate the finer points of theology, and it can be equally challenging for a non-scientist to comprehend the farther extremes of science. It takes a very rare individual to understand both and an even rarer one to synthesize the two and explain the synthesis in a manner that is readily comprehensible.

Yet this Herculean feat has been managed by Professor John Bowker, and not just with the greatest of clarity but in fine style. Bowker divides his book into 6 sections: Conflict and the Reasons Why, The Appeal to History, The Appeal to Value: Art in China and the West, The Appeal to Value: Ethics and Human Behaviour, The Appeal to Coherence and Sex and Safety: A New Crisis Facing Religions. Each of these chapters is then subdivided into a number of layers or strands through which Bowker elucidates his points.

Bowker's lodestone is Hensley Henson, Bishop of Durham between 1920 and 1939, and by his description a turbulent priest who challenged both the religious and secular nostrums of his time. Henson blessed Bowker when he was three years old and years later his father revealed that on the occasion Henson said to him: Remember always that there are people at the gates. Your job is to know whether they are the barbarians – or Lazarus.

Bowker analyses the way in which subjectivity rules so many of the judgements we make in our daily lives and argues passionately that rationality must remain paramount if we are to make the right decisions for ourselves and our societies.

This is a superb piece of work that reminded me of Stephen Jay Gould at his best. Bowker has long had the reputation of being a giant, this book only serves to confirm that reputation.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh