

Church as a Scientific Experiment

I'll take a full-body massage anytime. I've had two in my whole life. The second was the other day, and the therapist was saying: "When I went into the Takoma Park Adventist Church, I just knew these people were my people."

She had grown up Catholic, or nominally Catholic, near where I used to live in Maryland. At thirteen, she'd entered her house one day to find both her siblings smoking marijuana, and both her parents drunk and passed out on the living room floor.

The house was desolate that day, her heart battered. But she began to realize that her family's destiny didn't have to be her own. And when, several years later, she visited a community of Adventist believers bound together by the grace of God, and determined to be healthy, she felt she had found her true home.

Today, at forty-seven, she is a nurse and massage therapist. She is thin as a rake, has an exercise-induced cholesterol rate of 180 ("Without exercise, it's 300") and runs marathons and—oh my!—super-marathons. Her business is flourishing and her life is headed forward, like the clouds on the back of the wind.

What's so...well, so experimental about this?

Let me tell you about Nancey Murphy, who in October, in Coeur d' Alene, Idaho, will headline the 2006 National Conference of the Association of Adventist Forums. Her theme will be "Science and the Human Soul." I've known her since before her book on *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reasoning* won the annual American Academy of Religion prize for the best new work in its category. By then, she had earned not only a doctorate in the philosophy of science at Berkeley, but also a second doctorate in theology at the Graduate Theological Union in the same city.

When you consider how much of establishment science leans toward sheer determinism—physics explains everything; free will is a fantasy—a science-sympathetic reflection on the human soul, from a Christian, surely meets a need. Do our choices mean

something, or are we, at bottom, as helpless as puppets? Murphy will bring a wonderful intelligence and a passionate faith to her reflection on this question.

She believes that whenever religious people think about their convictions, they must approach what they are doing scientifically. Theology, in other words, must subject itself to the canons of probable reasoning, the same rules of thought that govern science.

Not that this makes for easy answers, or easy consensus. Even hard science—physics, chemistry, and the like—cannot, in a straightforward way, get hold of final truth. "Paradigms," in the now familiar image, come and go: Aristotle, Newton, and Einstein saw vastly different worlds. Still, consensus comes easier here than in the "soft" sciences, like psychology or economics, where the human element is a complicating factor. And it comes hardest, no doubt, in the science of God—the theory of the source of everything.

Are we embodied souls, or just machines who fool ourselves into thinking we make a difference? No one can settle the argument easily, or soon, even though it matters so much that we try.

And that brings us back to church. Murphy thinks churches—congregations, denominations—are like laboratories. They are living experiments, and the data from those experiments help, over the long run, to build up or to tear down the hypotheses at the core of Christian conviction.

So when a local congregation gives a battered heart new hope and purpose, it helps to make the most important case there is: the case for God.

Charles Scriven
AAF Board Chairman