

**RELIGION ON THE MIND:**  
**ARE WE HARD-WIRED FOR RELIGION?**

I have done more new reading for this sermon than I have for a sermon in a long time, and yet answers to this question remain elusive. Tory requested this topic as the auction sermon, and I am really glad about that, for it is quite an interesting topic to explore. There is much more scientific research and discussion of this area on the border between religion and science than when I was in college and seminary. Religious ideas have changed some, but the medical and scientific advances related to mind, heart, and body have been amazing. If you are interested enough, Google *hard-wired for religion* and see how many things pop up!

The question whether God and religious experiences are figments of our imagination or otherwise confined to our brains is not a new one. Philosophers have posed the question many times over the centuries. Some atheists have long asserted that this must be the case. Agnostics, and those who come from a religious perspective but are open minded enough to consider the possibility have often wondered if there is a God.

Tory loaned me the book, *Phantoms in the Brain*, by V.S.Ramachandran and Sandra Blakeslee as a starting place, and during the course of my studies, I found myself pressing the 'buy now' button on my Kindle for Ramachandran's, *The Tell-Tale Brain*, as well as for Barbara Bradley Hagerty's, *Fingerprints of God*, and Andrew Newberg's, *Principles of Neurotheology*. There are also quite a number of other books, articles, and interviews which address the connections between mind/brain and religion/religious experience. Numerous publications, CNN and NPR have addressed this question, and Andrew Newberg's work and discussion of this area are often cited. The study of this boundary area is often currently discussed as Neurotheology, though another label may eventually prevail.

The question of whether religion and religious experience begins within the human brain, and specifically in temporal lobe seizures within dysfunctional brains or whether the brain responds to spiritual forces with temporal lobe activity is at the core of much Neurotheological research. There have been experiments aimed at detecting brain activity occurring in conjunction with both meditation and ecstatic religious experiences such as speaking in tongues. There have been efforts to research the effects of peyote and other hallucinogens in facilitating or causing religious experiences. While meditation may cause some areas of the brain to become less active, ecstatic religious experiences may cause other areas of the brain to become highly active.

Answers to the questions of the origins of religion are of interest to many people, though there are large factions within both scientific and religious communities that are sure they already know the answers. Many religious communities, especially fundamentalist ones, assert that their understanding of the origins of religion, taken on faith and based in sacred writings, supersedes any other possible explanation. Many scientists assume that religious explanations of origins are inherently flawed and wrong since they are unable to explain many empirically tested evolutionary realities and timelines.

Medical researchers have provided possible explanations for the experiences of many religious founders, exemplars, and practitioners via the occurrence of seizures, hallucinations, and other now widely studied and explained phenomena. Jesus' experience in the wilderness, Paul's experience on the Damascus road, Moses' experience on the mountain, and many other transcendent religious events may at least potentially be explained by modern medical science.

One of the most interesting of the mind/religion questions is whether human beings are actually hard-wired for religious or spiritual experiences. Is there some part of our brains that either creates or responds to spiritual or religious experiences in a characteristic way for all or a large number of people?

Some deny this just on the basis of the existence of such a large portion of the population that would deny being spiritual, but that response does not really address the question, since the lack of spirituality could as easily be a widespread dysfunction as some think religious sensibilities are. Could there be something in our brains that is ready to experience events as spiritual or religious, some potential that exists in a large percentage of the human population? Can religion or spirituality be reduced to a function of the brain? Is part of the brain ready to receive and respond to religious or spiritual experiences transmitted from the outside, from God or some other source?

Barbara Hagerty, author of *Fingerprints of God*, is a journalist who had a religious experience while interviewing a woman about fast-growing churches. Raised a Christian Scientist, Hagerty had been trained to rely on prayer rather than medicine. After her experience she was drawn to write about the questions, “Is there another reality that occasionally breaks into our world and bends the laws of nature? Is there a being or intelligence who weaves together the living universe, and if so does He, She, or It fit the description I have been given? Is there a spiritual world... Is there more than this?” Hagerty’s experiences led her to research and write, *Fingerprints of God*. In this book, she reports interviews with neurologists and biologists and Native Americans on questions of the reality of spiritual experiences. She also talks with researchers and those who have experienced spiritual experiences and near-death experiences. Hagerty’s openness to the religious side of the question helps to balance the neurobiological sciences.

Andrew Newberg’s, *Principles of Neurotheology*, gives a name to new studies of this boundary between brain science and religion. His goal in this work is to lay out a process for exploration of the meeting point of religion and brain science. Newberg cites numerous philosophers and theologians whose writings have helped to open a path to explore the boundary between mind and religion. Newberg also looks at the way eastern religions have viewed mind and self, suffering, separation, impermanence, nirvana and universal interconnections. Additionally Newberg mentions the balance between yin and yang, and the awareness of Chi as a flow of energy in Eastern religions as helping to set the stage for studies of mind and religion.

In regard to Christianity, Newberg describes how the Bible and early Christian writings suggest connections between mind and religion, but overall say less about mental and physiological processes than do Eastern religions. Newberg goes on to describe some impacts of Luther's reformation, the perspectives of modern philosophy and theology beginning with Descartes, as well as the more recent views of William James, Rudolph Otto, Mircea Eliade, and Paul Tillich. Newberg also suggests Natural Theology & Process Theology helped to prepare the way for Neurotheology.

Mind, Brain, Religion and Spirituality all meet at the junction of Consciousness and meaning. The physicality of the brain and the breadth of religion organizationally and historically are somewhat easier to describe than the matters of mind and spirit. Science can describe the brain and various fields can describe religion, but mind and spirit are more difficult to quantify. Science has narrowed its search for the location of religious experience primarily to the temporal lobes of the brain, but it cannot yet say much more than that the temporal lobe becomes more or less active than normal with spiritual experiences. The Amygdala, Hypothalamus, and Parietal Lobes may also play a role in the transmission of emotions, sensations, memories, and certain religious experiences.

The biggest challenge for the field of Neurotheology is to bring convincing scientific experiments to prove the connections between the brain and religious experience. The current research areas have potential and offer intriguing clues about those connections, but until human beings can be researched while in the throes of religious experience proof will likely remain elusive. And even if the connections can be demonstrated consistently, the origins of religion and religious experience will be much harder to prove. Only if children could be raised with no religious mention or instruction could it be convincingly proven whether religion originates in the mind. And even if that threshold could be passed, it would still not prove whether there has or has not been a divine being involved in the creation and maintenance of the universe, much less in the creation of living beings, planets, and stars.

Philosophically, proving the existence of a divine being under current circumstances in the universe is impossible without at some point taking that being's existence on faith. Even if such a being were to reveal herself, proving the abilities and extent of that being would be equally difficult. It is equally impossible to prove that God has put into human beings, and only human beings some kind of receiver of divine transmissions. It may be possible to prove the connection between religious experiences and certain activations of the brain, thus demonstrating an innate capacity for religious experience, but the origins of that experience will likely remain elusive.

There are those who now are more convinced of the reality and substance of religion by this work, as there are those more convinced that the truth of religion and the existence of God cannot be proven. At its best, this research can conceivably prove a connection between certain actions of the brain and religious experience, perhaps even a congenital propensity toward religious experience, but beyond that, it remains a matter of faith.

As a religious humanist, I am attracted to this neurotheological research at several levels. I am interested to see how much of a role brain pathology, particularly in the case of temporal lobe seizures may have in explaining religious experiences. I am also interested in the question of why some people have intense religious experiences while others do not. Though I have experienced a few universal Peak Experiences as described by Abraham Maslow, and one or two experiences of the Holy as described by Rudolph Otto, I would not claim that I had had a "born again" experience as described by Christian evangelicals. I also am curious to see how well scientists and religious persons can work together to describe this boundary between science and religion.

My recent study of fundamentalism through Karen Armstrong's book *Battle for God*, also reminds me of the difficulty of bringing the mythic nature of religion into the logic of the modern world. No matter what neurotheology may establish about the nature of our wiring and the responses of the brain, it will not change the power of religious mythos nor will it slow the efforts of fundamentalists to reshape the world by the attempt to establish certain ideas in the law and practices of modern societies.

I have long believed that religion and science could co-exist, for I have believed that they spoke to different spheres of reality. I would no more suggest that the Bible provides literally true descriptions of history, geology, or the cosmos than that science offers only tentative hypotheses within evolutionary theory. In one sense, I would have to propose that we are indeed hard-wired for religion if only because we clearly respond to and experience various levels of religious reality. That is to say that we come imbued with a capacity to experience and appreciate religion. If neurotheology can quantify and explain that capacity, all the better, but I will be inclined to believe that it exists if only because we see the results.

So are we hard-wired for religion? We probably are hard-wired in the sense that something real happens in our brains when we meditate and when we are engaged in some kind of religious experience. Have researchers proven anything that theologians and philosophers had not already addressed? Probably not, but it is still an interesting area of research and hopefully a place where scientists and religious persons can come to understand each other in new and better ways!

What is the bottom line lesson from this study of neurotheology? There is yet more to learn about mind, spirit, our brains, religion, and the universe! I encourage you each to go out there and keep learning!

Peace!