

## 27/7/2014. *How we are able to perceive God*

A book is in the shops called *How God changes your brain* by Andrew Newberg, a neuroscientist. It is now possible to scan the brain in real time and discover which parts are active and which are quiet during various activities – including contemplative prayer and other religious activities, which have their own distinctive patterns. So is all religious experience, including Christian, nothing but brain patterns, and therefore a delusion? By no means! Distinctive patterns are also seen in rational thought and nobody says that rational thought is ‘nothing but’ a brain pattern. Rational thought has its own brain pattern but it is a lot more than that – it has given us much of mathematics and technology, for instance.

Contemplative prayer involves a stilling of the parietal lobe, which among other things is responsible for orienting ourselves in space and time – we lose ourselves – and stilling of the part of your brain that is apt to pop tomorrow’s shopping list into your mind while you are trying to concentrate. The centres of concentration are activated, and the limbic system, which regulates emotions, is also active. We are a unity of material and spirit, and given modern advances in technology I would have been surprised if neuroscientists *hadn’t* found parts of the brain through which God can communicate with us directly via our inner selves. Our culture puts great prominence on feelings, but God can communicate with us in many ways. He can use our eyes (and visual cortex) to give us visions, or our ears to give us words, or – closer to this recent work – he can use dreams. He did that with Joseph (Matthew 1&2). Moreover, atheists who assert that religious experience is ‘nothing but’ brain patterns are forgetting that specific brain patterns light up when other human beings communicate with us, and those atheists don’t deny the existence of other people! The only difference is that we don’t normally see God walking round today, as we see other people; but that is a very old argument against God. It was answered long ago: the world has material and spiritual aspects, and there are basically material beings such as earthworms, so why shouldn’t there be purely spiritual beings too?

Furthermore, there have been times when people *could* see God walking round on this earth. People who lived in the Holy Land 2000 years ago saw God walking round, when he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah (9:6) that a child will be born whose name is Wonderful Counsellor, mighty God. He took the name Jesus Christ. The earth will also see him again when he returns physically to rule it. We could also have seen God walking this earth that he created, before the Fall; Genesis 1&2 show God on very close terms with Adam and Eve. It is our sinful natures that now prevent us being unendingly aware of his presence, and if God were to gaze directly on sinful man without Jesus in between then we would be unable to bear it. But we were not originally designed like that. Scientists who did the present work make a very deep mistake if they suppose that the default state of humans is not to be aware of God. He created us to be aware of him, so it is fully expected that he gave us parts of our brains that can respond directly to him and give us spiritual experience of him. I wonder how different the brains of animals are, given that animals are not made in the image of God and are not capable of personal relationship with him.

Newberg finds a difference between the brains of religious and non-religious people. That will be because religious people have trained their brains differently. Specifically, we Christians have learned to know our shepherd’s voice. I knew a man who never got to know God yet never denied his existence. He insisted that listening to certain passages of classical music put him in God’s presence. I believe instead that the parts of his brain that were capable of knowing God were stimulated by the music. Stimulation of those parts by electromagnetic fields might also induce spiritual sensations, but those who know God personally will recognise how crude those sensations are compared to personal knowledge of Him.

The main difference between the human brain and mammalian brains are the parts that relate to speech. The Christian phenomenon of tongues therefore involves giving what makes us human over to God, and is a genuinely deep surrender. It is no surprise that the parietal lobe, involved in religious experience, is heavily involved in speech.

In summary: these findings prove or disprove nothing about God. To say otherwise is a category error. They simply tell us more about ourselves and about some of the ways in which communication can take place between us and God.