ASHBROOK AS NEUROTHEOLOGIAN

by Larry L. Greenfield

Abstract. James Ashbrook is described as a negotiator in the sense of arbitration and pathbreaking, followed by an account of how he achieved a new way of "making sense" in his neurotheology. Questions are raised about what is distinctly theological about Ashbrook's effort and how the issue of human and divine will is treated. Ashbrook provides inspiration and model for scientifically-based religious inquiry.

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In his account of how he got to the brain, James Ashbrook claims he has "never learned to be in the middle of contending forces easily or constructively." We have no choice but to accept his assessment about the *difficulty* of being at the center of conflict. But we certainly must question his judgment regarding the *consequence* of putting himself there. We are, after all, the beneficiaries of the generative work that has resulted from his negotiations at the hub of contentious energies and parties.

Negotiator, in fact, may be one of the best ways of characterizing, not just Ashbrook's career as pastor, clinician, educator, and thinker, but also the vocation of his life. We learn, early in that same essay, of his call even as a child to hold in balance the contending styles of his parents (styles, interestingly enough, that fit what he later discovered in bimodal consciousness). A strong case can be made for seeing all of his theoretical breakthroughs as serving this practical end. To be sure, the negotiations that take place in the family, the church, the counseling center, the classroom, the community—wherever he is faithfully active in ministry—seem always to become incorporated into his scholarship in convincing ways. They add credibility to his speculative claims, in no small part because of the breadth and efficacy of those activities. But for all the commitments to the "making sense" portion of his work, insights gain

Larry L. Greenfield is Research Scholar at the Park Ridge Center for the Study of Health, Faith, and Ethics. His address is Park Ridge Center, 211 East Ontario Street, Suite 800, Chicago, IL 60611.

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their value finally by helping people to negotiate the separation and overcome the pain that resides in individual selves, or in a family, or among members of a community or society.

Negotiation is not an end in itself. It is an art, enhanced by the sciences (whether they be natural, human, or theological), that seeks the beauty of achieving the more abundant life of selves in community. Fortunately for many, as Ashbrook moved from pastor to clinician to educator to neurotheolgical thinker, he managed to negotiate among those roles so each could benefit from the other and so all could serve a shared purpose.

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As theologian, Ashbrook also has risked being a negotiator, not so much in the sense of arbitration as by making a way through difficult issues and breaking a path in uncharted territory.

He claims the challenge has been to "make sense of God." But anyone reading him recognizes that en route he has tried to "make sense" of much more, including the pathologies that separate human beings from themselves and others, as well as from nature and the divine (the nature of sin), the character of what reunites that which has been separated (the nature of redemption), and, most ambitiously, the phenomenon of making sense itself (the nature of revelation). In the end, it is his negotiating that last challenge—making sense of making sense—that decisively informs all the others.

Ashbrook, out of dissatisfaction with traditional ways Christianity has secured a handle on "making sense" and because of a growing confidence in scientific approaches to how we know, opens and offers a new way of doing theology. The fifth chapter of *The Brain and Belief* provides the fullest account of why he sets aside primary reliance on the inherited schemes of revelation: Neither (generally Roman Catholic) theology that requires both nature and God to be mediated by philosophy nor (generally Reformation) theology that depends solely on God's special disclosure provides sufficiently credible ("conceptually plausible, empirically identifiable, and experientially meaningful") modes for contemporary talk about God and the world (Ashbrook 1988, 129). In fact, Ashbrook claims, both theologies distort reality because they portray God's relation to the world as either final, fixed, and permanent or without any continuity that can be understood and acted upon responsibly.

Nature and reason, Scripture and myth, tradition and special religious experience are genuine but partial sources of revelation—of "making sense" of God and the world, of our human selves individually and socially. To be truly disclosive, however, they must be correlated in a way that only human brains shaped by sex and culture can negotiate in their fully coordinated structures and functions. When one source of revela-

tion or single component of a human brain dominates, reality and its meaning become misconstrued; but when taken together—whole brains and the multiple sources they engage—human lives are enriched and meaningfully reunited with the total context of dynamic world that is being saved and savored. That same fifth chapter and those that follow in *The Brain and Belief* make the case for a new empirical theology that draws on the neurosciences for such a way of "making sense" of reality.

At times Ashbrook seems to propose that human brains themselves are the source of revelation, disclosing most fully what is human, natural, cultural, and divine. As he became more deeply engrossed in brain research—moving, for example, from correlations of bimodal consciousness and religious imagery to the connections between whole-brain and theological functions—this tendency could appear more pronounced. One could almost gain the impression that a religiously sensitive study of the triune character of human brains, especially if due account was given to the components of both the new (consciously analytic and impressionistic) and old (instinctual reptilian and emotional mammalian) brain, would produce comprehensive neurotheological truth, which other sources of revelation might simply confirm. That, I am persuaded, is a misreading of what he intends.

Concerned to overcome the distortions of divisions and dualisms, Ashbrook discerned that the multidimensional and multifunctional character of human brains actually provides connections with the traditional sources of revelation. This means that even the inherited sources, typically thought to be external to human beings or a result of some special experience, are constitutively embodied in the whole brain, and that the whole brain participates in the ecological character of the world. So, yes, the neurosciences become a critical foundation for "making sense"—even making *religious* sense—of nature and reason (now understood to include analytic and imaginative reasoning), scripture and myth, and tradition and culture, since the whole integrative brain includes the meaning-making function of mind. And, yes, something as elemental as the limbic arch has implications for religious ways of engaging the world. It is balanced, not only at the level of the amygdala and septum, but also at the neocortical level of left and right brain processing. But, no, the neurosciences cannot stand alone as a source of "making sense" of reality. Because the neurosciences explore and explain the connections with other dimensions of reality, they also have correlates with intellectual disciplines that attend to those other dimensions. As a result, the neurotheologian is an unusually busy negotiator, as both arbitrator and pathbreaker.

No one should doubt that Ashbrook's case for neurotheolgy is very different from theology's more familiar strategies. Any scheme relying on

a nature-spirit split to secure a place for the sacred and its study, typical of many liberal and neoorthodox theologies, is ruled out of court. He does acknowledge that process thought shares some aims and features with what he is proposing, but parts company with it on empirical grounds. It is not unlike the early Chicago School of Theology replacing the philosophical foundation of natural theology with the disciplines of the social sciences. For Ashbrook, however, philosophy's successor is the natural sciences. No wonder, then, that so few have followed him into such uncharted territory, even if that reluctance also reflects an unwillingness to address the wider challenges of the neurosciences to theology.

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But is Ashbrook's project really neuro*theology*—a credible way of speaking of, or "making sense" of, a reality deserving the humanly constructed name of God? Or would it be better to identify it more modestly as neuro*philosophy* that provides abundant room for religious experience, if religion and religious experience are defined as the human phenomenon of whole making and God as the name given to meaning making wherever it occurs?

One can, in the latter case, account for the presence of theologies of proclamation and manifestation that are grounded in essential components of the whole brain. Similarly, one can properly identify *soul* as an essential feature of humanness that connects materiality and meaning through essential natural rhythms of the whole brain as expressed in both activity/rest and creation/sabbath cycles and the accompanying human emergent of working memory.

It is a different move, however, to make claims about the ways in which neuroscientific accounts of the whole brain provide for us both metaphorical and analogical understandings of the God that commands our belief and worship. That, furthermore, is an *important* different move if it overcomes the wide array of dualisms that have caused at least some modern people to set aside belief and worship.

Ashbrook is clearly attempting to address both tasks—the neurophilosophical and the neurotheological—although it is not always clear which one is receiving treatment at any one time. That frustration aside, his neurophilosophical contributions have proven more satisfying and his neurotheological more suggestive and intriguing.

By connecting religion and faith to nature through the old brain and bridging religion and faith to diverse cultures through the new brain, and then joining those two dimensions, Ashbrook has advanced understanding for the study of both religion and theology. The distinction between these different modes of inquiry, however, is not at the point of meaning making, since that phenomenon can obviously occur in cul-

tures without a developed expression of a divine being or reality. Nor, for the same reason, does the distinction operate when the consciousness of the neocortex leads to choice or intentionality in meaning making, although we are moving closer to the moment of definition. The distinction becomes operative when choice or intention or volition in meaning making carries with it a parallel attribution to a declared reality that is not encompassed by the self. That is a defining theological move.

Although he disclaims any attempt to prove God's existence, Ashbrook assumes not just the reality of God but also God's character as volitional. And because it is possible to explore the plausibility, if not the demonstrability, of such a willful reality, theology has a legitimate role in intellectual and cultural life. Rejecting any form of supernaturalism, moreover, while affirming that the material brain "offers the most empirical anchor of intentionality" in attempts to comprehend the meaning-making reality of God, neurotheology becomes the preferred method of normative religious inquiry. Because the empirical source of revelation is human brains, their structures and functions shape, limit, and authorize how the neurotheologian proceeds: The bimodal character of the neocortex, for example, allows both metaphorical and analogical language to be attributed to the willful and meaning-making reality that is God—and guides how those metaphors and analogies can be used. In fact, the reciprocity that operates between the new and old brains and between the differing roles of the left and right hemispheres of the neocortex reveals a similar reciprocity in God's reality, including that dimension of mind-as-a-part-of-brain that expresses choice and will. Ashbrook cautions against any literal interpretation of metaphors and analogies attributed to God that arise from natural, cultural, and religious experience —exhibiting his firm commitment to the exercise of the Protestant Principle—but the plenitude of imagery and symbols that such a method authorizes permits both creativity and the need for discipline. That combination of imaginativeness and restraint becomes all the more important if the divine reality exercises will and purpose in nature, culture, and religious communities.

With reference to Ashbrook's cherished story of Nasrudin transmitting goods across the border, it is clear that brains carry much freight back and forth across the human-divine frontier. Neurotheology is not at a loss for wares.

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A question can be raised, however, about exactly what gets smuggled across the border when human brains, connected to nature and cultures, are not just the bearers of the theological freight but also are the theological cargo itself.

The issue of the divine intention and purpose is a case in point. The doctrine of God's will has played a central role in Christian theology. It also seems to have a prominent part in Ashbrook's scientifically based neurotheology, based analogically on the way the minds-in-brains of human beings include choice, intention, and planning—that is, the way human beings may be distinctly purposeful creatures by virtue of their neurological evolution. But what then is the status of another scientific claim or assumption about that same natural process of evolution, that is, that changes in nature occur by chance based on random mutation and natural selection, and not will, intention, or purpose? Even if human beings, albeit products of evolution, are meaning-making and purposeful creatures, does this provide a justification for attributing the same meaning-making and purposeful activity to the divine reality? It may, if God is defined as the meaning-making dimension of reality wherever it is found. But it may also point to the inadequacy or inappropriateness of the definition itself. A scientifically based theology of the kind Ashbrook proposes may have to account for the human sense of being related to a dynamic reality that is at least in part outside the human sphere without either denying the legitimacy of that human sense or attributing will and purpose to that dynamic reality.

There is no reason to surmise that the kind of neurotheology that Ashbrook proposes would be unequal to that challenge of negotiating a novel way through conflicting positions of inherited theology and scientific inquiry. After all, Ashbrook himself manifests the corpus callosum of human brains—"the large group of nerve fibers which connects the two halves of the brain, sending information back and forth and coordinating their activities" (Ashbrook 1988, 290)—that is required of any good negotiator. In that role he continues to be an inspiration and a model.

REFERENCE

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