

Editorial

This issue of *Zygon* follows up on what in the previous issue (June 1996) we described as “the first installment of a major project that we have had in mind for some time: to take the measure of the burgeoning and significant work of the neurosciences.” The seven articles that carry the freight of the project in this issue center on the work of James B. Ashbrook, not only paying tribute to his foundational and avant-garde work, but also suggesting how it can be carried forward.

Eleven years ago, to the very day, I wrote the following in response to Ashbrook’s 1984 book, *The Human Mind and the Mind of God*:

He has seen with utter correctness one direction in which theology must go, and he is one of the few who have stated that view so emphatically. His effort rests on the assumption that the way in which humans are made is consonant with their Creator and that Creator’s will for them. That being so, our reflection upon God must take into account how we have been made, just as consideration of the empirical data must include the question of what our larger significance might be. (*Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 30 [September 1985]: 349)

I would intensify these comments today. Ashbrook is virtually the only thinker in his generation who has devoted immense effort to interpreting the concrete data of the neurosciences in theological perspective. He has described the evolution of the brain, its structure and dynamic processes, as it does its work of enabling human beings to survive and make sense out of their world—in other words, the role of the brain in making human living viable. His grand interpretive achievement lies in the ways in which, based on his descriptions, he has interpreted the brain’s significance for how we relate to our physical world, to the persons who make up our social world, and to God.

In his accomplishment, James Ashbrook demonstrates that he has seen farther than the rest of us, in perceiving how important the neurosciences are becoming for human affairs in general and for theology in particular. He has not only been a true pioneer in this field that he calls *neurotheology*, he has also emboldened and encouraged his colleagues and students to pick up the work of that field.

The articles that are presented here in response to Ashbrook come from two neuroscientists, Paul MacLean and Rodney Holmes, and two theologians, Larry Greenfield and Kenneth Vaux. Whereas the theologians respond directly to his work, appreciatively and critically, the scientists explore lines of thought that have been important to Ashbrook over the years, and they carry that thought further into new areas of reflection. In his response to them, Ashbrook provides what may be the most incisive statement to date of the issues that focus his work: how knowledge of ourselves and of God, embodied in our brains and in our understandings of them, “maintains and enhances what is genuinely human

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in ourselves and others.” Our journal’s aim in this thirty-first volume is to take the measure of the neurosciences. In this issue, that aim takes the form of presenting a thinker who himself has taken that measure.

Our Teachers’ File initiates a miniseries: What One Needs to Know. In the next few issues, we will feature statements on what students and teachers in religion-and-science courses might consider to be basic knowledge of specific fields. John Albright and Allen Utke deal, respectively, with physics and chemistry in this issue. Subsequent installments will present biology, philosophy of science, postmodernism, and more. We note that a grant from the John M. Templeton Foundation underwrites this section of our journal.

Physicist Lawrence Fagg completes this issue with his reflection on the contribution of fundamental physical theory, that which pertains to electromagnetic phenomena, to any attempt to do natural theology.

—Philip Hefner