HOLINESS
THE JOURNAL OF WESLEY HOUSE CAMBRIDGE

Knowing your right from your left: brain science and the future of Christian mission

A review of *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World,* Iain McGilchrist (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, [2009] 2012), 544 pp, £12.99 pbk

I note that there are a number of very large books from the past ten years that have found their way onto my shelves, among them Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007, 874 pp), Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (2009, 1161 pp), Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (2012, 574 pp), Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011, 746 pp), and Chad Meister and James Beilby (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Modern Christian Thought* (2013, 867 pp). Most of these remain only partly read, sadly. But all were well reviewed, some glowingly so, and my intentions remain good: they *will* be read in their entirety at some point (!). Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* was not there, though I knew it should have been. Many scholars in a range of academic disciplines made me feel bad for not having read it ('you really should'). It, too, is a big book (544 pp in the rather small-print paperback edition of 2012 before me, and I am estimating there are about 265,000 words of main text here). I approached it with relish, though feeling a mixture of guilt and responsibility too (I really *ought* to have wrestled with it earlier). I can confirm that it is not likely to work as light end-of-day pleasure reading. But it is spectacularly illuminating and mind-stretching, and raises profound questions. It will be especially appreciated by anyone who thinks that religion has a major, positive role to play in the next phase of Western culture, even though it is not 'about' religion at all.

www.wesley.cam.ac.uk/holiness
HOLINESS The Journal of Wesley House Cambridge
Volume 2 (2016) Issue 1 (Holiness & the Body): pp. 133–138
ISSN 2058-5969

First things first: I am neither a neuroscientist nor a neuroscientist's son. Hence, my capacity to do justice, as a reviewer, to the first half of the work is limited. As an arts and humanities-trained theologian, I can, though, at least do something with the second half. For even if I take much of the first half on trust, I am able to assess the use made by McGilchrist himself of his own exploration of brain science with respect to the past and projected future of Western culture. And I can then suggest whether, and if so in what way, the book's findings might have anything fresh to say to contemporary theology and mission.

So to the book itself. Across its first six chapters (Part One), its author maps out what the brain is like. Taking on oversimplistic accounts of more popular 'left brain/right brain' accounts of human consciousness and activity, McGilchrist is at pains to point out that we would do better to talk of hemispheres within the brain, recognising that both sides are vital and have different functions, though always working together. Even if we talk of respective emphases or tendencies for each hemisphere, it is vital that we talk primarily about how they relate to each other. If the left hemisphere can be said to be the more scientific, the more calculating, the more bureaucratic, the more linear, its contribution is vital to overall perception and understanding of the world. It works best when steered by what the right hemisphere does, and gets above its station if it tries to measure everything and pretend that it can stand outside of the observation process. For we are implicated in, affecting and being affected by, the very world we are trying to perceive and understand – something the right hemisphere grasps more clearly. If the right hemisphere is more global, looking for the big picture, lives more happily with metaphor, and fosters arts, culture and religion, it needs the focused attention of the left to take up its sketchy or daring insights, or its visions, and see if they can be turned into anything, even something practical and useful.

That, in general, is what the first 230 pages or so spell out in some detail – mostly in accessible ways, though still stretching nevertheless. Perhaps the starkest summary of the first part of the book is the following statement: 'There is no such thing as the brain, only the brain according to the right hemisphere and the brain according to the left hemisphere …' (p. 175).

But what are some specific insights from the book's first part which are worth noting? Here are some which prove decisive for the book's second part. First, it is important to distinguish reason and reasoning from rationality. It is not true to say that the left hemisphere is the 'rational bit' of the brain, while the

right side deals with emotions. Both sides enable us to reason. They simply enable us to do this in different ways, the left hemisphere making more of scientific problem-solving. Second, 'betweenness' and relationality are especially significant in human meaning-making and are more the preoccupation of the right hemisphere. This leads McGilchrist to conclude that 'the essential difference between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere is that the right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation' (p. 93). (That said, McGilchrist has already noted that there 'is not likely to be "a God spot" in the brain', p. 92.) Third, the body is so very important, and yet Western culture has too easily privileged the abstract, the disembodied, the thought, rather than physicality or emotion. Fourth, though there is no single truth about anything, this does not mean there is no truth worth seeking or working with, especially given that 'None of us actually lives as though there were no truth' (p. 151).

The book's second part then tests out the insights gained from the physiological and neuroscientific first part with respect to the history of Western culture. 'What if', McGilchrist is asking, 'the different hemispheres have been in the ascendancy at different times in cultural history?' How might a right- or left-hemisphere emphasis have taken shape at different points in history, within cultural movements? Again, even though there are some sweeping suggestions being made, McGilchrist still does not want to oversimplify, as if either hemisphere can disappear off the scene altogether. Both hemispheres always work in tandem. That said, we are currently, says McGilchrist, in a situation where the left hemisphere has been trying to take control of the way we think, and it is dangerous for Western culture: 'all the available sources of intuitive life – cultural tradition, the natural world, the body, religion and art – have been so conceptualised, devitalised and "deconstructed" … by the world of words, mechanistic systems and theories constituted by the left hemisphere that their power to help us see beyond the hermetic world that it has set up has been largely drained from them' (p. 244).

The remainder of the book is a creative exploration of Western cultural history from the perspective of the fluctuating dominance of one hemisphere or the other. From Plato's left-hemisphere dominance, a view of the world put forward 'so strongly that it has taken two thousand years to shake it off' (p. 288), through to postmodernism, McGilchrist offers us some intriguing interpretations of different phases of cultural history. The Reformation was a search for certainty and authenticity, yet – sometimes despite the Reformers themselves – was a heavily left-hemisphere movement. It would inevitably feed the Enlightenment

in due course, over against which Romanticism was an important right-hemisphere corrective. 'Romanticism … demonstrates, in a multitude of ways, its affinity for everything we know from the neuropsychological literature about the workings of the right hemisphere' (p. 379).

But Romanticism has not been allowed to prosper because of the attempt in the modern world 'by the left hemisphere to take control of everything it knows so that it is the giver to itself of what it sees' (p. 402). The problem we are faced with, in short, is that left-hemisphere dominance is in danger of preventing our seeing fully what is 'there', or encountering what may be beyond us, or imagining creatively what might yet be. The desire for control of what we can test and measure leads us to be too self-enclosed.

Where, then, does this lead? If McGilchrist is basically right, even if experts may be able to take him to task on finer points here and there, what is a Christian today to make of all of this? Intriguing as the physiology and neuroscience is, and vital though it is for those engaged in medical care and related research, what else can we learn or conclude from all this about how we think, believe and live?

McGilchrist accepts that his is largely an argument applied to Western culture. Neuroscientifically speaking, though, much should be applicable to other cultural settings. (He does venture into some non-Western examples, but not very far.) But even with respect to the West there are some important lessons to be drawn out.

First, we are reminded that 'we need metaphor and *mythos* in order to understand the world. Such myths or metaphors are not dispensable luxuries, or "optional extras", still less the means of obfuscation: they are fundamental and essential to the process' (p. 441). At its simplest for Christians this means the need, I suggest, to keep on 'telling the Christian story', whether or not we know which bits are historically true or not, even if we cannot all agree on the details, and accepting that Christianity exists in multiple versions, and jostles alongside other faith traditions telling their own stories. The telling of the story is an essential aspect of mission, as it is presented in a form which humanity needs, even if the left-hemisphere-dominant times in which we live are likely to be flippant about why we keep on doing it. How the Christian story will prove useful we perhaps cannot even predict, as it will achieve things in and for humanity which we may not be able to anticipate. But working with Christianity's 'metaphor and *mythos*' is vital for human well-being. It is as simple as that.

Second, if 'affect comes first, the thinking later' (p. 184), then there are important things to be learned about worship and mission. But before the charismatically inclined – or those who sit loose to structure in worship and are keen to 'move' those in the congregation first and foremost – declare 'I told you so!', McGilchrist is quick to remind us that 'the immediate pre-conceptual sense of awe can evolve into religion only with the help of the left hemisphere' (p. 199). Theologians of a more cognitive bent do, then, have a job to do after all. In the same way, though, that so much of popular culture, and so many (all?) of the arts, also work affectively first, this is a very important and salutary reminder of how so much of our life actually 'works'. If, however, we live in left-hemisphere-dominant times, and if we happen to be in employment which is highly bureaucratised and not very creative, then worship (and arts and creative media and culture) are clearly counter-cultural, functioning in sharp contrast to much of what we are doing lots of the time. Mission and worship will inevitably have to take note of this, building on, and fostering further, the imaginative areas of life, ever mindful of the left-hemisphere desire (including the work of the theologians!) to measure, control and even stifle what the right hemisphere is doing.

Third, it is worth putting in a good word for right-hemisphere theologians. Even accepting that much theology (systematic theology especially) will have a tendency to 'box', to contain, to regularise, we have to recall McGilchrist's reminder that both hemispheres are always involved together in whatever is under scrutiny. We know that there can be no theology without right-hemisphere activity. The only issue is whether the right-hemisphere activity is paid sufficient attention to as the (important and necessary) left-hemisphere work is done. In other words, are the systematic theologians listening enough to the practical and pastoral theologians? Are the biblical scholars – when doing their detailed textual and historical (left-hemisphere) stuff – paying sufficient attention to what ordinary readers, and artists and musicians and liturgists, are doing with texts? 'Good theologians', we might say, are obviously going to be 'both-hemisphere' people. But we all have our emphases (and systematicians will, I assume, veer to the left). I am, though, left wondering how, say, considerations about the balance of staff in theological institutions, or in circuit ministerial teams (or in national church offices?) might need to bear the brain hemispheres in mind.

Fourth, and finally, there is a major health and well-being issue here. I have been struck recently by how often I have heard reference to the dangers of 'perfectionism'. I am not talking here about church life specifically – though

churches cannot be unaffected by what is going on in society. I mean people I meet in everyday life who resist the call to 'be perfect', to 'work towards a perfect body', or to make no mistakes at work, or to try and fashion the perfect organisational structure. Now this sets a significant theological hare running to which, in one sense, there is a simple answer: because none is perfect save God alone, and humanity will always go on wrestling with sinfulness (and fragility, and imperfection), then it is clear what the task is. We have to find a way of living with imperfection – knowing it to be true of all, and therefore of ourselves – and God (and even theology) will be able to help here, whatever the New Atheists might say. The challenge, of course, is how even to get a hearing in public, cultural life when theology's contribution is not always made welcome. McGilchrist's book, though, provides an opening here. Two quotes from the final chapter of the book stand out:

> People in the West characteristically over-estimate their abilities, exaggerate their capacity to control essentially uncontrollable events, and hold over-optimistic views of the future … so much does our happiness depend on such illusions, that, in the West, lacking them is even correlated with psychiatric problems. (p. 456)

And, further:

> The espousal of unrealistic expectations in the absence of a readiness to make sacrifices may be one of the most significant factors in the escalating rates of depression in developed, and developing, countries … (p .457)

These are sobering claims. If McGilchrist is anywhere near right then religion has a vital role to play, alongside other forms of cultural activity admittedly, in helping to foster a more human humanity than the forms of humanity which are often being recommended and promoted in the West at present.

The value of the Christian story, attention to affectivity, a balanced approach to theology, and a recognition of limitations: all of these flow, then, from attention to the brain. Who would have thought it? Readers who turn to McGilchrist's book will surely receive from it much more than I have been able to summarise and suggest here. But I trust my engagement with it will have proved useful to readers who only read this review. After all, not all read large books fondly.

Clive Marsh