

Book Review: ‘Our Religious brains’

“Our Religious Brains: What Cognitive Science Reveals About Belief, Morality, Community and Our Relationship With God” by Ralph D. Mecklenburger. Jewish Lights Publishing/Skylight Paths Publishing (Woodstock, Vt., 2012). 193 pp., \$18.99.

Reviewed by Mitch Finley

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Do science and religion have anything to learn from each other? Modern Catholicism holds the sciences in high regard. “Our Religious Brains” – written for the layman in language that eschews technical scientific terminology – may appeal to many Catholic readers. Its focus is on what we can learn about faith, religion, and theology from scientific data on how the human brain functions.



Author Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger of Beth-El Congregation in Fort Worth, Texas, an adjunct faculty member at Brite Divinity School, has also served as the Jewish co-chairman of the Texas Conference of Churches’ Jewish-Christian Forum, and he speaks widely on topics related to science and religion. The Christian reader will value the author’s insights without, of course, expecting him to bring Christian perspectives to his discussion. Only now and then will Christian readers find that this detracts from what they can learn from this book.

Rabbi Mecklenburger wisely admits that insights he presents from both the cognitive sciences and theology are necessarily tentative and may well need revision in years to come. “But,” he adds, “it would be cowardly on that basis ... to refrain from drawing conclusions, some possibly controversial, based on the new understandings coming to light.”

“Our Religious Brains” shows how scientific research on how the human brain functions not infrequently also sheds light on what we mean by personal metaphors

for God and what we can learn about faith from science. The book also discusses understandings of terms such as “soul” that take into account how the human brain at present seems to function.

In his discussion of the word “soul,” Rabbi Mecklenburger insists that while it remains a powerful metaphor, “a metaphor cannot carry our consciousness beyond death.” This is the most obvious section of his book in which the author limits his conclusions to a connection between what he learns from cognitive science and a traditional Jewish belief that, in his words, “Personal immortality is wishful thinking.” Instead, he wholeheartedly accepts belief in “corporate immortality,” e.g. the notion that, “We live on through our children.”

In discussing the idea of some form of life after death, it’s understandable that Rabbi Mecklenburger would not be able to include the Christian scriptures and Christian doctrines among his theological sources. At the same time, one may wish that he had acknowledged the existence of contemporary scientific research – into near-death experiences and experiences of the presence of loved ones after death, for example – that at the very least raises the tentative possibility of some form of personal existence after natural death.

“Our Religious Brains” goes on to discuss what brain function research suggests about free will, concluding with Catholicism that “we have significant though not absolute, freedom to make decisions.” Moving on to the theme of “morality,” Rabbi Mecklenburger arrives at the intriguing conclusion that while it seems impossible to prove the existence of ultimate moral truths, yet “to make life choices, not falling into relativism and indecision, we must act as if we know ultimate moral truth.”

On the topic of “organized religion,” this book finds both scientific and theological support for the validity and need for institutional religion. “Higher animals,” Rabbi Mecklenburger writes, “and then we humans, are naturally social creatures who not only cope with but also need community.” Is one organized religion as good as the next, then? No, for Rabbi Mecklenburger it’s ultimately subjective. There “is no one-size-fits-all-religion,” for religious preferences boil down to which religion’s “communal story” fits each person’s personal story.

“Our Religious Brains” is an intriguing discussion of a topic too-rarely presented in

ways that the average educated reader will find both accessible and thought-provoking.

Finley is the author of more than 30 books on popular theological subjects including “Whispers of God’s Love: Touching the Lives of Loved Ones After Death” (Liguori Publications). To learn more visit

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