

The Paradox of Progress: Doing Theology with Both Sides of the Brain

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Summary

Thesis: a crucial element for progress comes from sources that seem to advance little or no progress (and usually do not seek it).

Reasons:

- Brain lateralization → primacy of right hemisphere activities that explore the reality, not a set of propositions
- Theology and the reality of God → primacy of non-analytic activities like stories, liturgy, music, and contemplative prayer.

Not an anti-analytic thesis. Creative complementarity.

The Brain Lateralisation Thesis

Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (2009).

Complementary 'takes on the world'



Some characteristics (LH vs RH)

Attention to detail.

Sharply focused.

Analytic: break into parts.

Control. Grasp. Put order.

Tools: reifying reality. Mechanical.

Two-dimensional map. Represented.

The known.

Reductionistic. Categories.

Decontextualized, static, fixed.

Big picture.

Broad.

Wholes.

Openness. Chaos. Alertness.

Organic. Living, present.

The unknown.

Intuition. Implicit meaning.

Stories, myth, metaphors. Music.

Understand meaning.



Brain hemispheres and science

Both important: complementarity.

Great scientists are not linear: intuitive, imaginative ('gestalt').

LH as "emissary", supposed to report back, not rule. Good servant, bad master.

"Left hemisphere chauvinism": *leave this to me, you pretty...*

Reason and imagination: need both.

Use both *to some extent* - but how? Complementarity or conflict?

Education, cues, activities → predispose, may favour one/other

Activities that activate/empower the RH: mindfulness, music, stories...



Brain hemispheres and God/theology

Revelation vs. Mystery. Which is primary?

Features of Christian revelation:

- Scriptures: stories - implicit meaning; the whole
- Incarnation: concrete, living

Traditional expressions of (Christian) faith:

- Music
- Liturgy
- 'Theology' (in the modern sense)

Thesis: primacy of the RH. (Not exclusivity.)



The paradox of progress



The challenge of modern academic theology: primacy of the LH.

Analytic, broken into parts. Reductionist. Expressed in language. Detail-oriented. Often decontextualized. Represented rather than experienced as a concrete reality.

Contemporary culture: abundance of RH activities – for entertainment, not serious thought.

Biblical culture and early Christianity: primacy of RH activities.

Paradox: RH activities seem *unrelated to progress*. Music? Liturgy? Prayer? Myths and metaphors??

Evidence?

- Catholic perspective: *Nouvelle Théologie* movement?
- Analytic theology: Eleonore Stump? (*Wandering in Darkness; Atonement*)