

Trinity College Cambridge

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Good Books

Iain McGilchrist: *The Master and his Emissary*

Bible Reading: Mark 3: 20–35

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The book I've chosen to talk about this evening may seem an odd choice. First of all, it's not a religious book, as such. Neither is the author a theologian, or indeed a member of any church. It's also a monumental tome. It's nearly 600 pages long; it has 1,856 footnotes, and a bibliography which covers 67 pages in dense print. I can't even claim to have read it from cover to cover – although I've been reading it for months!

So why do I commend it? The answer is simple. It's a book that's helping me think afresh about something that's been puzzling me for years. If it's been puzzling me, I suspect it puzzles others. Maybe it puzzles you. Which is why I want to say something this evening about the theory Iain McGilchrist sets out in his book *The Master and His Emissary*.

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So what's the puzzle? It's something that stems from the experience of working in two different fields: academia and the church.

Before I was ordained I was for nine years a social scientist at Nuffield College in Oxford. Those of us who study there are encouraged and trained to think empirically: to analyse, to look for evidence, to test hypotheses, to quantify and use statistical analysis, and not to trust anything until we'd amassed sufficient evidence to prove the point; and even then to keep an open mind as some new information may mean that we might need to change our thinking. It's an education that robustly puts the science into social science. That's how I was taught to use my brain, and I became aware that I began to think in this way not just about my research, but about things more generally.

Then I went into the church, first of all to study at theological college. There I was taught to think in a different, but equally rigorous way. I was trained to think more philosophically. My fellow ordinands and I were tested on our belief in God, whose existence cannot be proven. And we were being formed in such a way as to place our trust in that God, and to allow our lives to be shaped by the values and teaching of a religious tradition that is one of many such traditions, and which we all know is not without flaws.

The two environments in which I was immersed seemed to be based on two very different ways of thinking about – or ‘attending to’ – the world. One was based on seeking to prove things; the other was about learning to live trustingly with doubt and uncertainty. One was about seeking truth through factual information; the other was about seeking truth through mystery. One encouraged looking at detail, the other the bigger picture.

What’s puzzled me over the years is whether or not these two ways of being and thinking are compatible. They certainly caused a tension with me, not least when it came to religion. At one moment I was with many who would reject religion on intellectual grounds because they couldn’t accept with the concept of a God who is unknowable, unprovable, and ultimately mysterious. The next moment I was amongst those – including many highly intelligent people – who were willing to trust their lives to such a God.

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When I think about these differences, to quote Mr Gumby from Monty Python, ‘My brain hurts.’ Perhaps, then, like Mr Gumby, I need to see a brain specialist. Well, fortunately, Iain McGilchrist is a brain specialist – an eminent psychiatrist – and the theory he presents in his book provides a framework for exploring and perhaps reconciling these different thought-worlds.

His book is about the divided brain. It distils a lifetime’s work. Iain McGilchrist is a former Consultant Psychiatrist at the Bethlem Royal and Maudsley Hospital in London, and also researched in neuroimaging at John Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore. Interestingly, and perhaps significantly, he also taught English at Oxford.

To cut a very long story short, what Iain McGilchrist argues is that while the simplified view that the left hemisphere of the brain deals with reason and the right with imagination is false, there’s nevertheless a profound difference between the left and right hemispheres.

Reason and imagination, he argues, involve both sides of the brain working together. The left hemisphere, however, deals with narrow, sharply focused attention to detail. The right hemisphere gives us a sustained, broad, open, vigilant alertness to the world around us. The left hemisphere majors on language; the right gives us the capacity for metaphor, to understand body language, and the symbolic.

Crucially, both sides are aided by the frontal lobe, the function of which is to inhibit the rest of the brain. Other animals live for the moment – they don’t have this mental brake pedal. The human frontal lobe, however, enables us to stand back in time and space and distance ourselves from the world. With this mental detachment, we develop the capacity to think deeply and reflect and apply our minds to manipulate the world; and it also gives us the capacity to empathise with others.

McGilchrist’s hypothesis is that over time, western culture has changed in relation to brain function. Looking back to classical times – the era of the Greek philosophers – and to Saint Augustine and others, McGilchrist sees a wonderful balance between the right and the left hemispheres.

Over time, however, he argues that in western cultures we've evolved or been conditioned to be dominated by the left hemisphere. This imbalance, he believes, has profound consequences not only for individuals, but for society at large. For instance, he argues that this imbalance helps explain why, despite the human pursuit for happiness, we seem to be going down a route that creates increasing levels of mental illness.

He says, too, that it shapes art and affects music. He argues that we can become conditioned not to enjoy art and music for their intrinsic beauty which cannot be put into words, but look for specific meaning. If the artist is inarticulate about the meaning his or her work, it is somehow devalued. Language, then, becomes the only respected medium for communication.

Why is this shift happening? McGilchrist believes that the left hemisphere has an advantage over the right: what he calls the 'Berlusconi effect' – because it controls the media. It enables us to talk convincingly about the things that the left hemisphere majors on, and so it has a competitive edge over the left.

However, for healthy, flourishing individuals and societies, McGilchrist argues, we need to rediscover that balance between the two hemispheres, and not to inhibit the thought processes driven by the right hemisphere.

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What Iain McGilchrist is arguing resonates strongly with what an increasing number of theologians are focusing on. Last week I had the privilege to discuss the book with Iain, who told me that it's receiving a lot of interest from theologians and religious people.

For instance, it may shed light on the conundrum of why societies in Western Europe are generally more secular than in other parts of the world. It's certainly relevant to understanding the often troubled relationship between science and religion.

Even if you're not a scientist – or a social scientist – it's hard not to be influenced by the scientific mind-set that's so important in today's world. In a world where science and technology are bringing about so much change, it's tempting to value this more highly than anything else, and to place our trust in those bringing about this change by looking to them for leadership. Even to value their opinions beyond the areas in which they have particular expertise. This is the sort of imbalance that McGilchrist is concerned about.

We can see this imbalance at work in religions – trying to apply scientific thought to religious concepts. It doesn't work. Treating myth and metaphor as fact leads to creationism and the futile exercise of trying to find the remains of Noah's ark.

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If I'm allowed – briefly - to plug a second book this evening, then it would be the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sack's, latest book, *The Great Partnership: God, Science and the Search for Meaning*, which acknowledges Iain McGilchrist's influence.

What the Chief Rabbi argues is not only that science and religion are compatible, but they need each other – for precisely the reason that Iain McGilchrist argues: that we should address the imbalance between the left and right hemisphere thinking, and use both holistically. ‘*Science takes things apart to see how they work*’ says Jonathan Sacks. ‘*Religion puts things together to see what they mean.*’ He then says, ‘Without going into neuroscientific detail, the first is predominantly left-brain activity, the second is associated with the right hemisphere.’

Jonathan Sacks cites times in human history when religion tried to dominate science – the most famous example being the trial of Galileo. Today, he argues, science seeks to dominate religion. We need both in equal measures, he says; just as we need a balance between information and wisdom to enable us to flourish.

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In our reading from Mark’s gospel (Mark 3: 20–35), Jesus points out to those who think he’s out of his mind that a kingdom divided against itself will collapse through internal conflict. How absurd, then, to argue that he’s using satanic powers to drive out Satan from others. Instead, Jesus is working to bring healing and wholeness.

The Master and His Emissary is about bringing healing and wholeness where there is internal conflict. The book takes its title from a story by Nietzsche about a domain where an emissary usurps his master, and as a consequence of the conflict the domain collapses.

How might we learn from this book? Well, if the theory is correct or along the right lines, then I find it reassuring that the tensions I felt in the transition from being a social scientist to a priest were really healthy mental exercises – I was being forced to stretch both hemispheres.

In a lecture about his book, Iain McGilchrist quotes Einstein, who said, ‘The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant but has forgotten the gift.’ Iain McGilchrist’s take-home message is to remember the gift. To be aware of – indeed beware of – the dominance of left-hemisphere thinking, and learn to value the right as well, because it’s only when the two are working in balance that we make best use of the gift of our mental faculties.

So if we’re prone to imbalance, what might we do? Here are a few suggestions to end with. Read fiction as well as non-fiction. Read poetry as well as prose. Listen to music for sheer pleasure. Look at art to appreciate its beauty, and don’t try to analyse it. Try coming regularly to Choral Evensong. Read *The Master and His Emissary* and *The Great Partnership*.

And if you really can’t face reading a book that’s nearly 600 pages long, there’s another option. Go to YouTube, type in ‘RSA Animate – the divided brain’ and watch the Royal Society of Arts’ brilliant twelve-minute animated version of Iain McGilchrist’s book.