

Students engaged in discussion about intersection of religion and the brain

Maggie Castor
Reporter

A full house was present for the discussion, "Spirit and Synapse: Did God Create the Brain, or Did the Brain Create God?" on Nov. 6. The classroom where it was held overflowed with people. Jeffrey Pugh, head of the religious studies department, and Mathew Gendle, assistant professor of psychology, led the discussion.

The professors have been working together for two years on an honors course titled "Consciousness and Religion" and were inspired to put together the presentation.

From the beginning of the presentation, both professors stressed the interactive nature of the discussion and encouraged audience members to share their ideas and thoughts.

"This is one of those topics where the more you seem to know, the less you understand," Gendle said.

The discussion was opened with a brief description of neurons, which send signals from the brain to other parts of the body. For the past 20 or 30 years, research has been conducted to determine the neurobiological effects of religious practice.

Throughout history, there have been cases of people experiencing seizures that they claim are a result of profound religious experiences. Studies are currently being conducted to determine which part of the brain is used and affected during religious practice.

It's been found that when some people are exposed to small amounts of electromagnetic pulses, a "religious

experience occurs." This varies depending on the individual, as some people experience nothing when exposed. The religious experiences that do occur always relate to a concept that the subject was exposed to prior to the experiment.

This raises the question of whether religion is used as a man-made tactic to cope with life's big questions. Pugh clarified that the research does not prove or disprove that religion is a creation of the brain, only that it affects the brain.

Pugh discussed two philosophical positions regarding the soul or mind. The first concept is the idea that the soul and mind are separate from the body.

This is a common theory among Western perspectives that views the body as a "container." The second concept views the soul or mind as a neurobiological process.

"Although I must say, for me personally, I would love to see an intellectual community at Elon that generated the type of excitement that many of the people in the room seemed to have," he said. "So, the realization that we could be that university where ideas are debated, talked about and studied does excite me greatly."

Scientists are now searching for a specific "God spot" in the brain. As of now, a specific area has not been identified, but several areas of the brain are affected during religious experiences.

A concept called "emergence" suggests that religious experiences may not be related to something tangible, but instead achieved through the specific inter-workings of the

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brain as a direct result of human inquiries.

Sophomore Michael Zimmerman attended the discussion as a requirement for his world religions course but also because he had an interest in the topic.

He said he would have liked to see the professors go deeper into religions that have died out and discuss whether the brain works differently for individual religions. If the effects of the brain vary from one religion to the next, this would assist in backing up the survival tactic theory.

Jenny Schnaak said she found the discussion very informative and interesting, but left without concrete conclusions.

"The concept of a 'God spot' in the brain is intriguing, and I gained insight on several other concepts as well," she said. "However, no conclusions were made by the end of the seminar."

The reaction and involvement of those attending pleased both professors.

"My hope is that students can learn to wrestle with intellectually complex issues with civility, openness and an understanding of the complexity of the issues," Gendle said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Sorority recruitment event tomorrow

Elon's Panhellenic Council is hosting a recruitment event at 7:30 p.m. tomorrow. A comedic pageant, called Miss Recruitment 2009, will be held in Yeager Recital Hall. Any women who are interested in learning more about Elon's sororities and recruitment week are welcome to attend. Contact Michele McGraw at mmcgraw@elon.edu with questions.

Battle of the Bands on Friday

SUBLive will present the Battle of the Bands on Friday, Nov. 14. The event will be held at Lighthouse, beginning at 9 p.m. The cover charge is \$3 for students who are over 21 and \$5 for students who are under 21. Bands can sign up in Moseley 207.

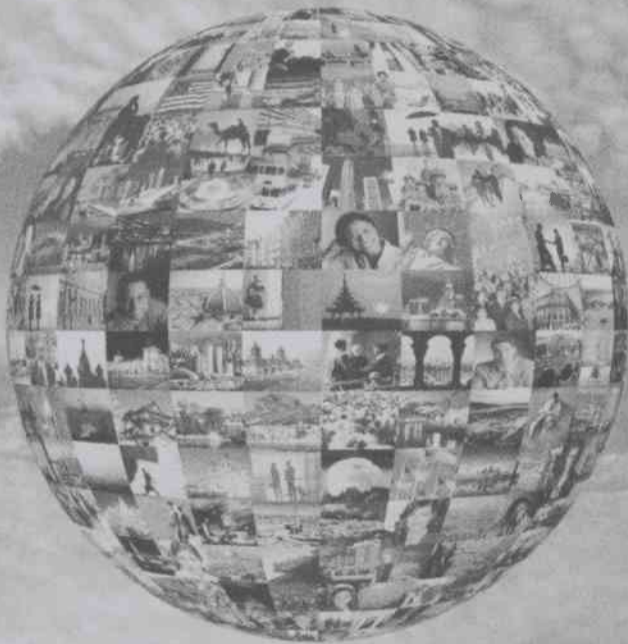
Photo exhibit begins Monday

Amnesty International will host a brief opening for Scott Langeley's photo exhibit on Monday, Nov. 17. The exhibit will be held in Belk and Grey Pavilion in the Academic Village and will run until Nov. 21. Langeley, an acclaimed photographer, photographs things he perceives as unjust.

D.E.E.P. Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow

D.E.E.P. will host a Thanksgiving dinner honoring the men and women of the military tomorrow. The free dinner, which will be catered by Cracker Barrel, will be held in McCoy Commons 212 at 6 p.m. To RSVP, contact Joy Baxter at jbaxter3@elon.edu.

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