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OTTAWA — One of the world's foremost neuroscientists is about to tell some of the world's foremost theologians the bad news: God may exist, but the human brain is simply not capable of knowing that for sure.

Georg Northoff, research director of Mind, Brain Imaging, and Neuroethics at the University of Ottawa's Institute of Mental Health Research, will speak March 23 to several hundred theologians at the University of Marburg, in Germany. The 500-year-old school has produced such towering intellects as theologian Paul Tillich and philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Northoff, internationally recognized for his research into brain function, will be the only scientist to speak to the group.

"We will never be able to answer the existence of God," he said this week from his office at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre. "There is a limit because of the way the brain functions. (That) limit . . . is the price we to pay for consciousness.

"We can research the neuro-mechanism into belief, but we cannot say anything about God. That's where we have to go to philosophy."

To any theologian, or simple man of faith, the fact that science doesn't have all the answers seems laughably self-evident.

But Northoff points out that all our thoughts and feelings, even a transcendent sense of holiness, ultimately emanates from a big, wet, physical brain trapped in a hard skull. The brain is built to focus entirely on the threats and pleasures of its

immediate environment — attacking lions, lovely young mating partners — and can never escape to see the larger picture. It cannot see beyond its own life without dying. It cannot even look at itself without ending up in a surreal fractal loop of the mind examining itself, examining itself as it examines itself ad infinitum.

“I would never deny the feelings (of the faithful),” said Northoff. “But what I would deny is that the content of his feelings, God in this case, exists independent of him. That is something that is beyond his knowledge.”

Northoff thinks his reception at next week’s meeting may be a little chilly but it could be worse.

“Many colleagues of mine say all belief is b----- and everything is the brain,” he said.

“I’m not saying that, I have an open position.”

In his clinical work, Northoff has found people with strong religious beliefs are not as prone to suicide, because they have a sense of obligation to God. He had one patient in a deep depression who had nagging doubts about God, “but on the other hand it was the only thing that kept her alive.”

As a young doctor, a psychotic punched him and knocked him down, outraged that anyone would treat Jesus with such disrespect as to suggest he was suffering a mental illness.

Two other psychotics both claimed they were God — and each thought the other was clearly delusional.

Northoff finds spiritual practices can help in some mental illnesses, and he believes it would be worthwhile to study the meaning of religion from a sociological or anthropological point of view.

He has done research on brain activity in people who react emotionally to something positive or negative — a picture of a gun, or a smiling baby, or a prayer.

Of course, religious people reacted to the prayer. But what does that really mean? From a neurological point of view, what is faith? What is belief? What happens when it goes away?

He was raised Catholic, but no longer practises.

“There was a certain coziness, which is lost, an emotional coziness. On the other hand, you substitute it by other things. For me, all this research, and philosophy are as important for me.”

Northoff arrived in Ottawa last year, a major catch for the research institute.

“He’s one of the top psychiatry researchers in the world,” said chief executive officer Zul Merali.

Northoff, who holds doctorates in both neuroscience and philosophy, holds two prestigious Canadian research chairs simultaneously: Canada research chair in mind, brain imaging and neuroethics, and the ELJB-CIHR Michael Smith chair in neurosciences and mental health. The chairs carry with them more than \$3 million in funding over the next seven years.

He will be advancing the new technology of brain imaging, which allows the conscious mind to be studied scientifically.

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