


Alone in the world? Indeed, and liberatingly so

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How do we know that we can trust our viewpoints, our dogmatic principles and our religious convictions to constitute veracity, if not truth? Where can an arbiter be found for our deliberations to establish the trustworthiness of our viewpoints or belief systems, when we differ one from the other on religious matters, and in the context of religious conviction also differ in political and social endeavours? Van Huyssteen deserves commendation for his contribution to this discourse in developing the concept of a *postfoundationalist* epistemology in an attempt to justify theology's integrity, and endorse theology's public voice within our highly complex and challenging world. He suggests that the concept of *human uniqueness* might be the common denominator in the contributions of theology (in its specific understanding of the unique status of humans in God's creation) and science (in its understanding of the unique stature of *Homo sapiens* in terms of biological evolution). However, the author, in this article, argues that given the radically diverse disciplines of science in our highly developed technological – and indeed within our current Covid-dominated context (on the one hand) and the pre-scientific context of religion (on the other hand), it becomes increasingly difficult to imagine how it can remain possible to find something like a common issue, a shared problem, a kind of mutual concern or even a shared overlapping research trajectory that might benefit precisely from this envisaged interdisciplinary dialogue. Is it possible that 'alone in this world' could mean something different than what Van Huyssteen suggests?

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: How do we know that we can trust our viewpoints, and our religious convictions to constitute truth? Van Huyssteen develops the concept of a *postfoundationalist* epistemology in an attempt to justify theology's integrity within the discourse with science. However, the author in this article argues that it has become increasingly difficult for systematic theology to find a shared overlapping research trajectory that might benefit this interdisciplinary dialogue.

Keywords: Wentzel van Huyssteen; theological anthropology; paleoanthropology; human uniqueness; COVID-19; integrity of Christian theology; biological evolution; neurological research.

Introduction

No other person has had a more profound intellectual influence on me than Wentzel van Huyssteen. Even as a student hearing him for the first time in the auditorium of the Stellenbosch Faculty of Theology in the mid-seventies, I realised that the encounter would be life changing. He was a visiting lecturer invited to address the students shortly after his return to South Africa from the Netherlands, where he completed his postgraduate studies and obtained his doctorate from the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.¹ He was on the verge of a long, meaningful, influential and illustrious career as a ground-breaking academic in the context of the theological world. Although I could not know this at the time, I intuitively realised that the traditional theological discourse had forever changed for me.

I had been critically aware of my growing uneasiness with the sociopolitical role of the church (Dutch Reformed) and of theology (especially the use of the Bible as the prime reference and source for truth claims by prominent role players in politics and the church) in the context of apartheid South Africa at the time. This uneasiness was initiated and developed through the influence of lecturers, such as professors Willie Jonker, Nico Smith, Dawid Bosch, Ferdinand Deist and others. The uneasiness combined with a growing scepticism of the value of my theological

1. Van Huyssteen's doctoral thesis on the German Reformed theologian, Wolfhart Pannenberg, was published in 1970 with the thought provoking title: 'Teologie van die Rede (Theology of Reason): Die funksie van die Rede in die denke van Wolfhart Pannenberg', This publication was followed in 1986 with *Teologie as Kritisiese Geloofsverantwoording*, published by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) press. Both these publications had a decisive influence on my theological thinking during 'the early years'.

Note: Special Collection: Festschrift for Wentzel van Huyssteen.

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training to meet the challenges of my future ministry. Although I did not comprehend much of what Van Huyssteen was presenting to his audience at the time, I had been struck by the fresh and alternative choice of words, concepts and formulas that spurred me to learn more, to understand better and to advance myself in the theological discourse of this young theologian.

And so, my life journey with Wentzel van Huyssteen began.

The early years

The main issue had been and remains to this day: how do we know that we can trust our viewpoints, our dogmatic principles and our religious convictions to constitute truth? And when we differ from one another on religious matters, and in the context of religious conviction also differ in political and social endeavours – as part of the broader society which obviously include matters of a scientific nature – where can an arbiter be found for our deliberations, to establish the trustworthiness of our viewpoints or belief systems?

In the latter part of the 1970s, both Van Huyssteen and I moved (totally independently and unaware of each other) to the Eastern Cape. He had been appointed as a professor and head of the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Port Elizabeth (today the Nelson Mandela University), while I accepted my first congregational calling to be the minister of religion in Burgersdorp, and later in Port Alfred. While still in Burgersdorp, Van Huyssteen and his wife Hester paid a visit to our town. She was invited to address the woman's league of the congregation, while he accompanied her to explore his town of birth. And so we met again and became friends, colleagues and sparring partners in theology.

Initially, the theological epistemological discourse in which we participated was limited mostly to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) (NG Kerk) but reached also into the reformed family of churches and theological faculties at Stellenbosch, Cape Town, Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein and Pretoria, which included theologians at the University of South Africa also situated in Pretoria.

In 1981, a European report with the significant title 'God met ons' ('God with us') was published by The Reformed Church in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerk in Nederland – GKN). In this publication, which focused predominately on the problematic and prominent issue of the 'Authority of the Bible', a definitive stance in favour of *relational truth* had been proposed in opposition to the notion of *objective truth*, allegedly founded in the Bible and interpreted by the confessions of the reformed tradition. In 1982, Van Huyssteen and I published a South African contribution to this discourse in a booklet entitled 'Geloof en Skrifgesag' ('Faith/Belief and Biblical Authority'). We presented an enthusiastic exposition of a formula for *relational truth* – all in a bid to assist the conversation on the interpretation of the Bible

within our own ranks. This little publication led to quite a stir generally, and even sporadic outrage within the church and theological circles. The accusation levelled at us was mainly for jeopardising the authority of the Bible as the objective Word of God, and in doing so deviating from the clear formulas of faith founded in the confessional documents of the Christian church but also more specifically in the Christian Reformed tradition.

This occasioned us, in collaboration with two other colleagues in the Department for Biblical Studies, Francois Swanepoel and Jacques Rousseau, to publish an article in the official DRC (Dutch Reformed Church, or NG Kerk in Afrikaans) weekly, *Die Kerkbode*, on the relationship between the Bible and the reformed confessional documents. The May 18, 1983 article, *Basiese riglyne vir 'n gesprek oor die Skrifgesag* (*Basic guidelines for a discussion on Biblical authority*) was succeeded on September 23 by a second one, *Die ware gesag van Belydenisskrifte* (*The real authority of the Confession*), expounding the real nature of the authority of the confessional documents in relation to the Bible. Unsurprisingly, albeit disappointingly, these publications caused some commotion within theological and church circles and we were accused of imposing a measure of 'subjectivism' into biblical belief, compromising the (alleged) objective truth contained in the Word of God.

The public quest for the integrity of statements of truth in church matters and theology had started. It was an intellectual endeavour developing in a number of ways and stages over almost four decades, always underpinned by the epistemological question.

Moving to the USA

Contextually, Van Huyssteen's journey and mine proceeded rather diversely, yet intellectually, surprisingly and similarly. My context was the church and the theological discourse within its own ranks. Van Huyssteen moved to Princeton in 1992 to take up the then newly established *James I McCord Chair of Theology and Science*.

By that time, Van Huyssteen had already established himself as a formidable force in the theology and science discourse, even more so outside the borders of South Africa. To a certain extent, his influence as a theologian was always more appreciated in Europe and the USA than in his home country.

Van Huyssteen remained continuously engaged with academics and researchers on a multidisciplinary level and published numerous articles and publications² of which *The Shaping of Rationality* (1999) offered his then most current understanding of the relationship between theology (theological anthropology) and science (paleoanthropology) as equally important human endeavours in shaping our understanding of reality.

²Evident from Prof. Wentzel van Huyssteen's *curriculum vitae* at the end of this publication.

Alone in this world (and human uniqueness)

In 2004, Van Huyssteen was invited to present the prestigious annual *Gifford Lectures* at the University of Edinburgh. These lectures, very much based on his *The Shaping of Rationality*, mentioned above, were subsequently published in 2006 as *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Van Huyssteen 2006). I am convinced that this book represents Van Huyssteen's *magnum opus*.

From the very outset, in chapter 1 – *Human Uniqueness as an Interdisciplinary Problem?* Van Huyssteen (2006) warns against a generic notion of the concept *Theology and Science*. He declares:

[T]he radical social and historical contextuality of all our rational reflection should make it abundantly clear that in interdisciplinary dialogue, the rather vague terms 'theology and science' should be replaced by a focus on specific theologians who are trying to do very specific kinds of theologies and are attempting to enter into interdisciplinary dialogue with very specific scientists, working in specified sciences on clearly defined, shared problems. (pp. 4, 44)

He (2006) raises the possibility of identifying:

[B]etween radically diverse disciplines, something like a common issue, a shared problem, a kind of mutual concern or even a shared overlapping research trajectory that might benefit precisely from interdisciplinary dialogue. (p. 5)

Adhering to this specifically focused approach in the theology and science discourse, Van Huyssteen elects for theology what he calls *Theological Anthropology*, the theological discipline engaging with *Paleoanthropology*, as a sparing partner for science. He charges (2006:8), 'I will argue that theology and the sciences find a shared research trajectory precisely in the topic of human uniqueness'.

However, when a concept like human uniqueness is used in theology, it may mean something entirely different from when it is used in the sciences (Van Huyssteen 2006:9). Van Huyssteen consequently sets the stage for this engagement between theology and science by asking 'n number of very important and challenging questions:

[H]ow reasonable is it for a theologian, after examining, for instance, the results and accomplishments of some of the sciences dealing with anthropological issues, to expect these sciences to provide a basis of important links or even stages of discussion of issues on human origins, human nature, human uniqueness and human destiny? How realistic is it for a theologian to expect scientists to take theological contributions to this central topic seriously? And when the dialogue is finally narrowed down to theology and paleoanthropology, how may paleoanthropology enrich theology, and what – if anything – may theological anthropology contribute to paleoanthropology? (p. 8)

The answer to these questions is of paramount importance, especially if theology takes its point of departure for interdisciplinary discourse on its so-called *grand claims* in theology – God as the creator of the universe, the age of the

universe, the origin of life and the importance of theological claims for the possibility of a relationship between humans and this Creator. Van Huyssteen (2006:8) calls this a powerful theological appeal, which he emphatically formulates, 'we have not understood our world, and ourselves, until we have understood ourselves and our world in relationship to God'.

The question is set: should – can? – theology willingly abandon these grand theological claims when entering the context of scientific research and empirical claims on human origins, human nature and even human uniqueness (if so), without forfeiting integrity within its own ranks? And even if this abandonment be possible, can theology expect to be taken seriously by any specific scientific discipline? Can theology do this without losing its integrity in own ranks?

'Who would care to hear this voice?' posits Van Huyssteen (2006:9).

Postfoundationalist epistemology

In this endeavour, Van Huyssteen (2006) deserves commendation for developing the concept of a *postfoundationalist* epistemology, and by doing so, attempting to revise theology's public voice. This is an argument for the:

[C]learing of an interdisciplinary space where not only very diverse and pluralist forms of theological reflection but also science and other disciplines might explore shared concerns and discover possible overlapping epistemological patterns in an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation. (p. 31)

Van Huyssteen (2006) proceeds to explain what the positive results of a postfoundationalist notion of rationality mean to him:

... (it) enables us to communicate across boundaries, and to move transversally from context to context, from one tradition to another from one discipline to another. This tentative and shared mutual understanding that we achieve through this I have named, following various other scholars, a wide *reflective equilibrium*. (p. 31)

For Van Huyssteen (2006), this approach to the interdisciplinary discourse, not only within theology, but also within the diverse plethora of scientific disciplines, would make it possible:

[T]o (1) collapse rigid, modernist disciplinary distinctions and create more comprehensive interdisciplinary spaces where (2) traditional epistemic boundaries and disciplinary distinctions are blurred precisely because the same kinds of interpretative procedures are at work in all our various reasoning strategies and (3) through a creative fusion of hermeneutics and epistemology, reasoning strategies as distinctive and different as theology and the sciences may be revealed to share the rich resources of human rationality. (p. 34)

Within this frame of reference, Van Huyssteen proceeds at length to develop the concept of *human uniqueness*, as it is understood in theology as well as in science, by probing the possibility that there might be a reasonable probability of arriving at a common place where the mutual acceptance of

the other's position on humanity may be realised, with even the possibility of enriching one another on the issue of being human. In this regard, he somewhat issues a warning both to theologians and to scientists not to treat the issue of human uniqueness as if it was only a biological or anthropological event (scientists), or only a spiritual or religious indicant (theologians). The 'book of human nature' is not only written in one language Van Huyssteen (2006:35):

[N]o one disciplinary language, however, can ever completely capture every aspect of the complex issue we are trying to understand here, and this will become an important argument against those disciplinary purists who are made uneasy by the messiness of multiple vocabularies in interdisciplinary research. (p. 36)

A common issue (*imago Dei*)

In answer to his challenge on the possibility of finding a *common issue*, a shared problem, some mutual concern or even a shared overlapping research trajectory that might benefit precisely from interdisciplinary dialogue, Van Huyssteen suggests that the concept of *human uniqueness* might be the common denominator in the contributions of theology (in its specific understanding of the unique status of humans in God's creation) and science (in its understanding of the unique stature of *Homo sapiens* in terms of biological evolution).

In refining this complex framework, Van Huyssteen eventually turns to the theological conviction within specific religious traditions (for instance, *human uniqueness* is important to all three Abrahamic faiths) that 'man' (*Homo sapiens* in scientific language) was created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), in order to investigate the possibility of finding common ground in theology (theological anthropology) and science (paleoanthropology).

The long history of reflections on this conviction (*imago Dei*) in Christianity, specifically within the Christian Reformed tradition, might be an interesting point of discussion, but for current purposes, it is essentially important to understand Van Huyssteen's take on the uniqueness of *Homo sapiens* in terms of biological evolution (involving advances in neurological research and other relevant disciplines like biology and medical science) and paleoanthropology (understanding the origin of life, specifically the history of *Homo sapiens*).

Van Huyssteen addresses the concept of contemporary *evolutionary epistemology* at length with preferred reference (among a number of others) to the interdisciplinary work of Henry Plotkin (evolutionary psychology) and Franz Wuketits (biologist, interested in evolutionary epistemology).

For Van Huyssteen, Plotkin's most valuable contribution to the question of the evolution of human cognition is found in the way he develops the relationship between instinct and rationality. In addition to his contribution, the concepts that Wuketits developed point towards the importance of

interpreted experiences from which new expectations develop through imagination, leading to some hierarchy, or progression, maturing the concept of evolutionary epistemology. The latter, according to Van Huyssteen (2006), facilitates a multidisciplinary approach to the central theme of his study: the unprecedented contemporary focus on what it means to be human:

[I]t has already become clear that not only various sciences, but also evolutionary epistemology itself are now building on and extending our common sense perceptions of human uniqueness, and by doing that are also crossing over into some of the most traditional theological territories. Christian theologians, like Christians everywhere, traditionally believe that there is something absolutely unique about being human, precisely because humans are believed to be created in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26–28 so clearly states. However, disciplines like evolutionary biology, paleoanthropology, archaeology, genetics, artificial intelligence and robotics, neuroscience, cognitive science, cognitive psychology and evolutionary epistemology (to name just a few) are now all directly challenging any unnuanced notion(s) of human uniqueness, and by implication, therefore, this traditional Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei*. (p. 108)

In order to illustrate an understanding of the value of this interdisciplinary discourse, Van Huyssteen emphasises the Christian theological concept of the *imago Dei*. After discussing the interesting and diverse history of this theological concept at length (pp. 111–162), starting with references to and expositions of the biblical text, through the various interpretations of the early Christian philosophers such as Augustine, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, following through the history of the reformation (Luther and Calvin), and more contemporary theologians, such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Gerhard von Rad and James Barr, as well as Reformed figures such as Gerrit Berkouwer, Karl Barth, (interestingly excluding Rudolf Bultmann) and Wolfhart Pannenberg (more at length) – he concludes that the doctrinal tradition of this concept (*imago Dei*), embedded within the broader context of the complex history of ideas of the Christian faith, goes beyond the various interpretations of the Biblical texts. It finds expression in a diverse history of worship, reflection, prayer and even social action.

Within the context of *human uniqueness*, the understanding of *imago Dei* for Van Huyssteen (2006) is fundamentally an expression of a relationship between God and human between the Creator and creature. It is expressed in human experience and in human celebration. *It is God embodied in human uniqueness*:

The defining notion of the *imago Dei* in theology, when seen in its deepest sense as embodied human uniqueness, will turn out to be an interesting and even tempting, link to various notions of human uniqueness in the sciences. (p. 162)

In order to further emphasise this point, Van Huyssteen (2006) takes up another fascinating development within palaeontology, namely, paleoanthropology, which he describes as an:

[U]mbrella term for the diverse group of sciences contributing to the knowledge of human evolution, including studies of extinct and living humans and their exclusive ancestors and relatives, and also the wider biological framework within which the hominid family exists. (p. 166)

Adding in a footnote here, he specifically points out that palaeontologists who study human fossils and archaeologists who study the behavioural record of ancient humans, are at the core of this scientific endeavour.

Van Huyssteen invites us then to ask the question as to what we might encounter when we 'sail upstream toward our origins' and look at the spectacular cave art in Southwestern Europe, dating from the end of the last Ice Age. The interpretation of these images (rock art of the Cro-Magnon, for instance, to be found in the caves of Lascaux in France and Basque in Spain) demands a specialised scientific discipline, and Van Huyssteen relies on the prominent Ian Tattersall, a paleoanthropologist and emeritus curator with the *American Museum of Natural History* in New York City, whose current major research focusses on how modern humans acquired a unique style of thinking, and how we managed to dominate the planet whilst other human species got extinct.

Humans as spiritual beings

From Tattersall, van Huyssteen learns that what contributes to our uniqueness, our *aloneness in this world*, is not only that we are simply more intelligent than other species, we are also differently intelligent. According to Van Huyssteen (2006:190), Tattersall's main point in understanding human uniqueness is that '*Homo sapiens* is not simply an "improved version" of its ancestors, but is in fact a new thing altogether, qualitatively distinct from them in highly significant if limited respects'.

What Tattersall is describing here is the amazing human ability for introspection and self-awareness that we call *consciousness*. How does this relate to the emergence of religion and religious belief? According to Tattersall, every human society, at one stage or another, possesses religion of some sort, complete with origin myths that purportedly explain the relationship of humans to the world around them, and therefore, religion cannot be discounted from any discussion of typically human behaviours. In this sense, there is (Van Huyssteen 2006):

[A] naturalness to religious imagination that challenges any viewpoint that would want to see religion or religious imagination as esoteric, or as an isolated faculty of the human mind that developed later ... One of the major functions of religious belief has always been to provide explanations for the deep desire to deny the finality of death, and the curious reluctance of our species to accept the inevitable limitations of human experience. This is exactly the reason it is possible for us to identify so closely with Cro-Magnon rock art, and to recognise that it goes beyond mere representation and as such embodies a broadly religious symbolism. (p. 192)

Van Huyssteen concludes that paleoanthropology confirms in a very specific sense that religious belief is one of the earliest special propensities or dispositions that we are able to detect in the archaeological record of modern humans.

For me, it is interesting (and also personally significant) to note that two of my own publications during the same period covering the development of Van Huyssteen's research into and publication of *Alone in the World*, realised some inspiration and even foundation in this notion of *human uniqueness* related to the spirituality. In both *God? Geloof in 'n Postmoderne Tyd (God? Faith in a Postmodern Context, 2000 [2012])* and *Sprakeloos oor God (Speechless about God, 2005)*, I relied on my certainty, at the time, that the biological evolution of *Homo sapiens* confirmed the notion that humans were as per definition spiritual beings.

For instance, in *God? Geloof in 'n Postmoderne Tyd 2000 [2012]*, I say:

Vir die doeleindes van hierdie boek is dit 'n belangrike waarneming. Dit het meegebring dat daar 'n herwaardering gekom het vir die feit dat die mens per definisie 'n spirituele wese is. Dit volg eintlik logies uit die voorafgaande punte: Die mens en menslike optrede word eenvoudig nie slegs bepaal deur rede en logika nie. Daar moet op 'n holistiese manier na die werklikheid gekyk word – waarby die mens as organiese wese ook ingereken word. Met ander woorde, wanneer menslike gedrag beoordeel word in 'n poging om dit te verstaan, moet na die geheelprent gekyk word en nie kompartementeel nie. Daar is waarskynlik altyd iets méér as dit wat op (bekende) rasionele gronde waargeneem kan word. Daar is meer as die dinge wat sigbaar en tasbaar is. 'n Holistiese benadering ten opsigte van die mens as 'n eenheid van liggaam en gees, as fisieke en psigiese eenheid, bring 'n univoersele, hoewel besondere, eienskap na vore – wat 'n mens sou kon beskryf as die spirituele vermoë/behoefte wat uniek is aan die spesie homo sapiens. Die postmoderne tyd sien dan inderdaad ook 'n hernude belangstelling in die spirituele wêreld van godsdiens. Sodanige belangstelling word nie meer beskou as iets wat ontdaan is van intellektuele integriteit nie. Die skerp lyn tussen die natuurwetenskap en die geeste(s)wêreld het in die postmoderne tyd op 'n fassinerende manier verloeie geraak. (Du Toit 2012:64)

Likewise, the sentiment is repeated in *Sprakeloos oor God*, published 'n number of years later (Du Toit 2005):

Buitendien het ons voortbeweeg en bevind ons ons nou in die laatmoderne of postmoderne tyd, wat benevens die onsekerheid wat dit gebring het, ons darem verlos het van die doodsgreep van die modernisme op die geloof in God. Ons het dus 'n bietjie verder beweeg, verby hierdie wetenskaplike tyd waarin die rasionele denke alles oorheers. Ons leef in 'n tyd waarin daar nuwe waardering is vir die spirituele behoeftes van mense. Daar is vandag baie dissiplines wat erkenning gee aan die feit dat die mens per definisie 'n spirituele wese is. (p. 126)

Freely translated in summary, these quotes advocate a holistic approach towards the definitions of being human – not to limit *Homo sapiens* in any reductionist way to what they are, and what they present, as merely physical, biological and rational beings. There is more to what one can see and touch – and humans should be understood as an organic whole, as body and soul, a physical and psychological unit, who has

also the ability to engage in abstract, imaginative and conceptual thinking, and therefore, by definition, can also be seen as spiritual beings.

That was then and now?

But that was then, more or less 15 years ago. In the meantime, the world kept turning and moved us globally into a next (and quite different) phase of being human, of living and surviving at an incredible speed, catapulting towards spectacular advances in science and technology. This development has, of course, been happening gradually over the past three centuries; however, with the arrival of the 21st century, the entire scene escalated dramatically. The explosion in information technology especially speeds us inevitably forward and into the orbit of the *Forth Industrial Revolution*. Interestingly enough however, not only did it open up the whole world to everyone, and shared the findings of modern science in an unprecedented way, accessible by a click or a voice instruction, but it also exposed us relentlessly to a mind-boggling amount of data and knowledge. Simultaneously, and transversely so, in many instances, this explosion led to a new surge of new tribalism, nationalism, a closing of ranks and an inward journey to rediscover who we are and what we stand for.

Given the radically diverse disciplines of science (on the one hand) and religion (on the other hand), it became increasingly difficult to imagine how it could remain possible to find, 'something like a common issue, a shared problem, a kind of mutual concern, or even a shared overlapping research trajectory that might benefit precisely from interdisciplinary dialogue?' (Van Huyssteen 2006:5).

And then COVID-19 had (and still has) a profound influence on the entire world – on the human species as a whole, but also individually and diversely on each and every person on the globe. And the medical science, in all its various sub-disciplines and relating science disciplines, moved into the centre stage like at no other time in the history of *Homo sapiens*. Not the Pope, nor the Imam, or the moderator of the Church, not even the most prominent theologians, wherever they might be found, are consulted as to what to do, how to act or react, to answer the difficult and complex questions on the origin of the virus, appropriate treatment for the infected, the continued research and development of anti-vaccines and the way various countries are managing the closing down and opening up of borders and the restriction and flow of people by local and global traveling.

Some theologians and religious leaders may persist with the proposition that everything that happened, even the advances of science, has been and continues to be the work of God manifested by the intellectual craftiness of *Homo sapiens*, and that it all must be understood as signs of his intervention in our struggle for solutions to this worldwide pandemic. But then, why on earth would He be 'holding the whole world in His hands' in such a selective way? Doesn't this conviction

also inevitably make Him the author of all the misery, anxiety and terrible loss of millions of people all over the world, for all alike, those who believe in Him and those who do not? And, even more so, by aligning the progress of science with heavenly intervention, what shall be said about the faults and misjudgements which are part of the trial and error in advancing knowledge?

Religion lost its problem-solving ability

Never before has the influence of religion on the well-being of *Homo sapiens* been reduced in such a definite way and on such an unprecedented global scale. The functioning of churches or religion has been restricted in a dramatic way. And it is possible to single out religious gatherings, especially funerals, as probably the most dangerous super-spreader events during this time. The only way in which religion is actively responding to the epidemic is by offering prayers, by comforting believers in their hour of loss, with the ultimate promise of a better life after death. As part of the fibre of society in a commending way, churches, together with other social structures and benevolent societies, supported victims of this misery in a profound way, offering some condolence to the bereaved and suffering. However, one might be forgiven by comparing it to God coming from behind to pick up the pieces at the scene of an accident.

In *Alone in the World?*, Van Huyssteen (2006) cautions theologians and scientists alike, each not to reduce the other's profession from a point of arrogance, but to recognise their own limitations whilst protecting the integrity of their own viewpoints:

[B]ut I will argue that precisely by recognising the limitations of interdisciplinarity, the disciplinary integrity of both theology and the sciences should be protected. On this view, the theologian can caution the scientist to recognise the reductionism of scientific worldviews, even as the scientist can caution the theologian against constructing esoteric and imperialistic worldviews. (p. 219)

However, it seems that it is not essentially science which leads to the reduction of the influence of religion and theology with COVID-19, but life itself. And, whilst I single out the onslaught of the coronavirus on the health of the world population, this will also be applicable to any other event, not only within the life of individuals, praying for rain or healing the sick, for instance, but also on 'n global scale, such as global warming and climate change, for instance. Theology has lost its ability to act as a problem-solving agent, not only during the pandemic caused by this virus, but all over in our dramatic and vast technologically expanding world, where pre-modern solutions, such as an intervention by a metaphysical being or supernatural forces, to influence and alter the physical lives not only of individuals, but also collectively as part of the global population, do not seem to make any real difference, except, of course, as a psychological tool, for the pastoral care of those who believe in God and finding comfort in this belief.

Moreover, the Achilles heel of religion and theology has always been its inability to speak from one mouth. Who's voice, amongst the more than 4300 religions (and 45 000 Christian denominations) in the world, should science listen to – especially, when it is evident that religion forms a prominent contingent of the anti-vaxxing drive, aggressively warning its followers against the dangers of the global vaccination program, based on various conspiracy theories?

Recently I wrote in *God: Is Daar 'n Ander Antwoord? (God: Is There Another Answer?, 2020)*:

Maar, nie net het die definisie van rasionaliteit en wetenskaplikheid egter intussen verder ontwikkel nie, maar is my punt hier (saam met Harari) dat godsdiens nie meer in staat is om in ons tyd met die komplekse uitdagings wat die toekoms na ons toe aanbring, probleemoplossend te kan funksioneer nie. Uit voorafgaande behoort dit duidelik te wees dat godsdiens nie meer 'n bydrae kan lewer tot die groot uitdagings van ons tyd en die toekoms om problematiese feite en menslike werklikheidservaringe maksimaal op te los en sinvol te integreer (al la van Huyssteen) nie. Dat dit wel in die verlede, vanaf die ontstaan van godsdiens in die pre-moderne tyd, as deel van die evolusionêre ontwikkeling van die mens (se breinvermoë), wel so was, staan afgeteken in die totale kreatiewe neerslag, fisies en psigies, van Homo sapiens se geskiedenis. Dat dit 'n dominante rol in beide die verklaring van sin-gewing van gebeure en ervarings, vanaf die mikrovlak van individue en gemeenskappe se lewenservarings, tot die oorweldigende eroaring van die natuur en kosmologiese gebeure, gespeel het, is aangeteken in die anale van die mens se geskiedenis – op watter manier ook al daaraan uiting gegee is in argitektuur, kunste, geskifte en verhale van hoop en wanhoop. Maar nie meer nie. (p. 171)

What seemed ridiculous, becomes obvious

During the 1980s, Van Huyssteen (1986:63–87) introduced the *Paradigm Theory* of Thomas Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1970) to the South African theological fraternity. It caused a paradigm shift in local theological thinking and reasoning. A critical realisation of a paradigm shift is the *incommensurability of paradigms*: The recognition that the new paradigm offers some 'backward compatibility' to the old one, but that the old one has no tangent with the new – it is not forward compatible; it is impossible for the old paradigm to imagine the new one, whilst the new can still understand the precepts of the old. It is often so that the old and the new find it very difficult to engage in a meaningful way, because that which seems to be obvious to the one, appears to be ridiculous to the other.

As the late Isaac Asimov (professor in biochemistry), well-known science and fiction writer, puts it so eloquently: 'Copernicus switched from an Earth-centered planetary system to a Sun-centered one. In doing so, he switched from something that was obvious to something that was apparently ridiculous' (Asimov 1988:222).

A paradigm shift could also be described as follows: it is when that which is obvious becomes ridiculous, and that which previously were believed to be ridiculous becomes

obvious. The challenge for theology, for instance, when embracing evolutionary epistemology, is devastating: what can theology contribute to supporting palaeoanthropology's scientific endeavours in gaining knowledge of human evolution, including studies of extinct life (also including living humans and their exclusive ancestors and relatives), when theology is unable to relinquish its grand claims to the understanding of the origin of humans in the context of ancient and pre-ancient times?

My notion is to acknowledge biological evolution and the development of the human brain enabling humans to think conceptually and use their imagination creatively, in order to create a 'spiritual world' with 'spiritual beings' – a supernatural being, or forces, or spirits or gods – who allegedly are in control of human destiny and directing the course of history. However, we are now able to take biological evolution and human uniqueness even further and even more seriously.

Most of the explanatory functions religion used to offer our ancestors to make sense of the world and of life, has gradually been replaced by the various disciplines of multi-disciplinary science.

This means that the *reason* for humans to create a 'spiritual world' to explain and understand life in all its endeavours (good and bad, earth quakes, rain and drought and other so-called 'acts of God') has now changed – in fact, these reasons have now become redundant. Today, we do not live in the context of ancient and pre-modern times anymore, when a belief in a transcendent metaphysical being (called God or Allah or whatever) was believed to be in control of our lives and our future. The criteria previously used for defending the notion that humans are spiritual beings, able to respond to their environment in a meaningful and imaginative way, and offering explanations to the diverse challenges of nature for the bid of living a meaningful life (a view Van Huyssteen and I have shared for decades), those criteria are still valid, but for me now, in the vastly different contexts of the developing science (biological evolution, the findings of neurological research combined with all the other sciences), it offers dramatically different solutions to the same questions asked before. It is the same point of departure, which now helps us to understand how nature works and how everything 'in heaven and on earth' developed, and is still developing, in a natural way. The old explanatory mechanism (involving gods and spirits) has been replaced by science in all its endeavour.

In this sense, there is nothing 'in heaven' which is not created on earth. And we now know with more accuracy than before that *Homo sapiens* is definitively older than any conception of God, which was back then imagined by the ever-evolving human brain.

Indeed, we are alone in this world. There is no supernatural being, no force which controls our lives and determines the natural rhythm of life and death. And within this new

paradigm for former believers, people are increasingly finding this discovery a liberating experience – an enormous impetus for living life to its fullest.

On the shoulders of greatness

No other South African theologian did more, and spent more time and effort tirelessly engaging in research, probing and challenging the multi-disciplinary science scene on a global scale in an effort to secure a position of integrity for Christian theology in the secular context of our late-modern academic society, than Wentzel van Huyssteen. It was achieved in a career and calling lasting more than 45 years. Taking in consideration all his achievements, all his publications, all the accolades bestowed on him and prizes won by him for his work, one is overwhelmingly conscious of being in the presence of greatness. And it is a great privilege for me to be a part of this contingent of South African colleagues, paying tribute to his legacy. Personally, I am much indebted to Wentzel for believing in my intellectual ability to persevere with systematic theology. From him, I gained a critical mind, and the vision to keep on probing the epistemological quest in theology.

The title of Wentzel van Huyssteen's *magnus opus* is *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*. I am deeply indebted to him as my colleague and friend. Much is attributed to him for finding my own trajectory in reflection on the origin and meaning of life. I, however, have now arrived at a different conclusion:

Alone in the world? Indeed, and liberatingly so.

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