


A 'transversal' dialogue with Wentzel van Huyssteen's theological approach

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In this essay, I compared notes with Wentzel van Huyssteen, one of the most prominent theologians in the science–religion discussion. I followed the topics dealt with in a casual interview with Frits Gaum, in which Van Huyssteen responded to set questions: on his academic journey, God, the Bible, creation and evolution, human uniqueness, original sin, eternal life, Jesus and the relation between faith and research. Whilst there was considerable consensus between us in most respects, I would change the focus from an 'apologetic' agenda (science and theology were describing the same world from equally valid vantage points using comparable rationalities) to a 'missionary' agenda (making the Christian faith more accessible to scientists by following the approach of 'experiential realism'). Science confined its operations to different aspects of the reality that was accessible to human observation, explanation and manipulation, whilst theology concentrated on our relation to the transcendent Source and Destiny of all of reality. To make sense to a scientist, theology must shun unsupported postulates and speculations and confront the scientist with the basic alternative of claiming to be the ultimate authority over the immanent world (presuming to be the owner, master and beneficiary of reality) and being derived from, and responsible to, the ultimate Source and Destiny of reality. The confusion between immanent transcendence (aspects of immanent reality that were not accessible to our observation, explanation and manipulation) and transcendent immanence (immanent reality as a whole was open towards a higher Source and Destiny) bedeviled the interface between science and faith. Science challenged theology to provide experiential evidence; theology challenged science to be responsible to ultimate authority.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Both Wentzel van Huyssteen and I have worked consistently on an interdisciplinary basis. However, whilst Wentzel focused strongly on the natural sciences, I spent most of my time on the relation between the Christian faith and the human sciences (economics, ecology, cultural anthropology, politics, etc.) and concentrated on the natural sciences only after my retirement. In my essay, I highlighted the difference between trying to demonstrate the comparability and compatibility between theology and science on the one hand and highlighting the challenge that science posed to faith and faith posed to science on the other hand.

Keywords: creation and evolution; human uniqueness; original sin; eternal life; immanent transcendence; transcendent immanence.

Introduction

A *Festschrift* is an occasion where we recall not only the academic achievements of a senior academic but also the human encounters and relationships with him. These tend to become forgotten in the heat of our everyday occupational pursuits. When, after many years, Wentzel and I met again at a congress of the European Society for the Study of Science and Theology, we recalled our rather amusing first encounter in June 1976—and that in the home of not less than Wolfhart Pannenberg.

At the time I was a lecturer in Systematic Theology at the Lutheran Theological College, Maphumulo, I was working on my second doctorate and deeply immersed in the Theory of Science. Exploiting the occasion of a conference in Tutzing near Munich, I desperately wanted to discuss a few issues with Pannenberg whose *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie* (1973) I had studied before. However, I had to fight a formidable battle with his protective wife and was, finally, granted an interview of strictly 30 minutes.

Note: Special Collection: Festschrift for Wentzel van Huyssteen.

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As I entered the front door I was introduced to a fellow South African – Wentzel van Huyssteen! Wentzel later told me with a broad grin on his face that I turned as white as snow. I keenly remember what I felt at that moment: Here was this Afrikaner Calvinist postgraduate student from Stellenbosch as a house guest, whilst I, a German Lutheran lecturer with a doctorate from Marburg university, was granted, and only as a very special concession, not more than 30 minutes! Of course, I could not know at the time that Wentzel was a doctoral student of Pannenberg!

Amusing yes – and foreshadowing! He became the internationally acclaimed scholar that we know him to be, leaving me with reasons enough to nurture my envy. It took me some time to accept that a comparison with the fortunes of a colleague is not only vain but pointless because gifts, tasks and contexts quite naturally differ from person to person!

Having migrated not from South Africa to the United States, but from Namibia to South Africa, I had to deal with pressing local issues, such as affluence and poverty, economic systems and ideologies, ethnic identity and cultural clash, faith and apartheid. Despite my initial background and interest in the natural sciences, I gave my full attention to relation between faith and the natural sciences only deep into my retirement.

When I was invited to contribute to this *Festschrift*, I chanced upon a brief self-portrayal of Wentzel's in the form of an interview in which he responded to questions set by Frits Gaum (Claassen & Gaum 2012:113–132). I was surprised and delighted when I realised to what extent we were, over the years, marching in pretty much the same direction without taking much notice of each other. I became intrigued by the question what new insights a 'transversal' dialogue, not between science and theology, as envisaged by Wentzel, but between two theologians with vastly different backgrounds and contexts could yield.

I am aware of the fact that this rather informal interview cannot possibly reflect the richness of Wentzel's academic output. Yet I grabbed it as a convenient grid to compare notes once again and relate my own thought to that of a knowledgeable and prominent colleague. In what follows, I indicate both where our respective approaches are similar and where my stance may complement that of Wentzel. In this way, a belated informal 'chat around the fireplace' could perhaps still take place, which I had cherished for quite some time, but which never materialised. I would be eager to learn how Wentzel would have responded to my contentions had a real dialogue happened. All translations are my own.

On Wentzel's theological journey

The interview begins with a summary of Wentzel's academic identity, 'the person I have become over many years of academic activity and – perhaps the most important – the people who have contributed most to my academic personality and identity'. As a student in Stellenbosch, he immediately concentrated on philosophy, where philosophers

Hennie Roussouw and Johan Degenaar taught him how to critically say good bye to obsolete ideologies and dangerous doctrines. As doctoral student in Amsterdam, he was influenced by Gerrit Berkouwer, who taught him 'the value and discipline of intense sustained detail research'.

More important was Pannenberg in Munich 'whose theory of scientific approach to historical theology and especially also Christology prepared his later work on rationality, the nature of interdisciplinary theology' and his long-time specialisation on the relation between theology and science. French philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur and American Calvin Schrag influenced him fundamentally.

However, the 'greatest shift in his thought' was his intense contact with the work of Charles Darwin. Tackling head-on the most controversial conflict between the Christian faith and the theory of evolution he exegeted, with top masters- and doctoral students, *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, and surprisingly found 'how comfortably faith and science can live together for those who go into the trouble of wanting to understand'.

My own academic journey was quite different and much more involved. To begin with, my family had no use for God. My training as a farmer and agricultural economist made the empirical-pragmatic approach to reality part of my 'natural disposition'. Moreover, before I abandoned this career to become a missionary and theologian, I was a 'junior professional officer' in the Department of Native Affairs engaged in rural development planning. This raised my keen interest in economic development and made me experience the theory and practice of the apartheid state from within its operations – both of which would haunt me henceforth.

My theological formation in Germany was strongly impacted by the (initially quite traumatic) encounter with the historical-critical approach to the Bible and the Bultmann school. The missiologist Walter Freytag introduced me to the phenomenology of religion. My keen interest in the relation between religious assumptions, economic development and ideologies such as apartheid set me firmly on the track of an interdisciplinary approach.

Carl Heinz Ratschow – a captivating Lutheran theologian and expert in Ancient Near Eastern religions – became my mentor. In my doctoral thesis, I was to investigate the relation between Karl Barth's stance on religion as self-justification and idolatry and that of Ludwig Feuerbach as a projection of irrational wishes and unrealised potentials into a non-existent heaven. As could be expected, the inductive (experiential) approach of the Luther Renaissance appealed to me more than the deductive approach of Karl Barth and his followers. In fact, the latter would have made progress in my basic problem illusory.

As a missionary in a remote black rural community, I encountered a traditionalist African worldview on the one

hand and the depth of poverty in all dimensions of life on the other hand. As a seminary lecturer, I was confronted with the nascent Black Consciousness Movement, subsequently with black theology, liberation theology and Marxism – all of them in deadly conflict with the ethnic nationalism of the apartheid era. The demise of the latter came as an incredible relief and gave me the freedom to throw my nets wider – including my previously dormant interest in the faith–science interface.¹

On God

Back to Wentzel's interview! Faith is based primarily not on a carefully constructed doctrine of God, but the doctrine of God is based on faith experience.² In explaining the latter, Wentzel refers to Schleiermacher's 'awareness of ultimate dependence' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:115).³ I agree with this concept, further developing it as the impact of the gospel message on our consciousness when it *responds* to existential experiences that call for the awareness of an overarching authority of some kind. I analysed these experiences as follows:

- (1) The awareness of derivation, dependence, vulnerability and mortality;
- (2) the awareness of accountability and culpability and thus the need for forgiveness and reconciliation and
- (3) a sense of the whole, at least of one's life world, if not of all that exists and one's identity and place within that whole in relation to those of others including one's family, community, society and embeddedness in the world of nature.

This would not be possible, Wentzel contends, without the 'overwhelming presence of God in Jesus of Nazareth' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:115). Again I agree, but in which sense is it true? I distinguish between the *experience* of God's creative power in the way reality functions and the *proclamation* of God's unconditional benevolence based on the biblical tradition. Although located at a higher level of emergence than physical and biological phenomena, the latter is also part of cosmic evolution, hailing from prehistoric beginnings and Ancient Near Eastern backgrounds and culminating in the Christ event and its aftermath.

If cosmic evolution is the manifestation of God's creative power, as we both assume, it follows for me that, expressed in scientific terms, this 'divine power' is identical with the cosmic energy that manifests itself in the form of waves organised in electromagnetic fields (Greene 2003:329–335; Hawking & Mlodinow 2010:88–95, 179–180; Mann & Mann 2017:149–158), which follow regularities and contingencies at different levels in the hierarchy of emergences.⁴

1. Most recently, the extraordinary perspectives and historical horizons of Yuval Noah Harari captured my imagination. Despite some superficialities, misjudgements and generalisations, I think that his penetrating and detached bird's eye view of the history of *homo sapiens* presents faith and theology with the greatest challenge ever.

2. As I see it, this is the valid reason for adopting a post-foundational approach. This does not mean that faith is not based on certainties that define its specific character.

3. In my view, 'awareness' of ultimate dependence is a more appropriate translation of Schleiermacher's stance than 'feeling', because 'feeling' has irrational connotations, whilst awareness registers an 'external given' that demands acknowledgement and commitment. Wentzel speaks of a 'comprehensive and embodied feeling of what happens'.

4. For the theory of emergence, see, amongst others, Clayton ([2004] 2006), Kauffman (2008). For my own interpretation, see Nürnberg (2020:4).

The affinity of faith experiences to the neurological and cognitive sciences, Wentzel contends, leads to a kind of 'epistemic humility', which leads to an apophatic theology. Apophatic theology is open for both the riches of different Christian articulations and the insights gained from science, the arts and politics (Claassen & Gaum 2012:116). I agree, but I would add a rider: Whilst it is open to various interpretations, God's redeeming love, communicated through the life, ministry and death of Jesus of Nazareth, cannot be apophatic, because it refers to the defining core of the Christian faith.

On the Bible

Concerning the authority of the Bible, Wentzel considers biblical fundamentalism as 'one of the most fatal aspects of the history of theology' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:116). Yes, indeed! I maintained again and again that biblical inerrancy is *not* a biblical contention, but (in the Protestant case), a construct of the Protestant Orthodoxy of the 17th century. These theologians had to develop a theological system that could measure up to the scope and sophistication of the (Catholic) Council of Trent. For that, they needed a solid foundation comparable to the apostolic authority claimed by the Catholic hierarchy. Biblical inerrancy, ostensibly based on the 'sola Scriptura' principle of the Reformation, seemed to be the obvious candidate.⁵

Even today, Wentzel says, this leads to an 'obstinate, stiff-necked and defensive unorthodox interpretation of the Bible and a consistent misinterpretation of the Christian tradition' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:117). Ironically, the 'new atheists' react precisely against this conservative, literal version of theism, which is in fact the exact mirror image of the kind of divine service and God concept that they reject. They too read the Bible in a literal way and believe that they are in sole possession of the truth (Claassen & Gaum 2012:117). However, the Bible is not a scientific, historical or ethical handbook and does not contain a ready-made bunch of 'truths of faith' but is written in the languages and the conceptual worlds of the time (Claassen & Gaum 2012:118).

Obviously, this stance leads to a historical-critical use of the Bible, an awareness of the complexity of the formation of the canonical Scriptures and the intricacies of the hermeneutical process. Today, all this can be taken for granted in main line theological scholarship. Like Wentzel, I have wholeheartedly bought into an evolutionary hermeneutic and tried to show how the biblical tradition presents us with an example of the evolutionary dynamic at the spiritual level of emergence.⁶ The Bible thus 'opens a unique access to the reality of God' and is, as such, an irreplaceable book of faith' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:118). Again, I add a rider: it is this *particular* divine reality to which it gives access in contrast to innumerable alternative contenders.

5. Based on Platonic idealism, the logic was entirely deductive: the point of departure was the *definition* of God as the 'Infinite Spiritual Essence' or the 'Most Perfect Essence' (Schmid [1875] 1961:112, 117), from which a series of inferences were drawn: the eternal Word of God had to be perfect, so the inspiration of the Bible by the divine Spirit had to be perfect and the imperfections of its human authors could not have influenced the outcome.

6. Nürnberg (2002:56–61, 2004:36–39). Further developed in chapter 4 in both books, respectively.

On the creation narratives in Genesis

The creation narratives of all religions are always directly concerned with the most fundamental and urgent questions of the origins of our existence ... These creation narratives (in Genesis) are a wonderful example of how symbolic language and mythological language are used in a text that is fully embedded in its origins in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures of the time ... and especially how the Jewish authors gave a unique and own identity to a symbolic context (Claassen & Gaum 2012:118–119).

At the centre of these narratives is the unique Adamitic myth – with ‘myth’ meaning an explanatory narrative and the core of the myth being the special relationship between God and all human beings (Claassen & Gaum 2012:119), which is further specified as humans being the representatives of God on earth – not more important than other creatures, but with the additional task of looking after other people, our world and all our sister species in the world (Claassen & Gaum 2012:119).

All these contentions are in line with my own thoughts – especially in view of the social–ethical and ecological consequences of this interpretation. I also draw out the Christological implications: According to Paul, Christ is, in contrast with Adam (Rm 5:12–21), the true image of God into whose image we, the believers, are to be transformed (2 Cor 3:18, 4:4).

Going deeper into the concept ‘image of God’, Wentzel draws attention to Genesis 3:22a, where after the fall God says to the other gods ‘See, the human being has become like one of us, knowing good and evil’. Whilst the Hebrew word for God is always in the plural, Wentzel interprets the appellation *Yahweh Elohim* as Yahweh speaking to the *other* gods: ‘See the human being has become like one of us, knowing good and evil ...’ and states that the fall was an evolutionary ‘fall upwards’ into a state of moral awareness, which animals do not have (Claassen & Gaum 2012:120).

To match the biblical text with the scientific evolutionary story, therefore, Wentzel follows a rather ingenious procedure. It reverses the historical order between Genesis 1 (Priestly Source) and Genesis 3 (Yahwist Source) and puts the original meaning in Genesis 3 upon its head. Ironically, the coincidence that Genesis 3 is older than Genesis 1 could be used to underpin this construction: the narrative found in Genesis 3 does not (yet) have the concept ‘image of God’, whilst the narrative found in Genesis 1 has (no more) a fall into sin! So, the seemingly catastrophic fall away from God in fact led to a human being who could figure as the representative of God.

Whilst I agree with Wentzel’s evolutionary story, I would be more committed to a strict historical-critical exegesis of the ancient texts (Nürnberg 2021:2–3). The two Genesis narratives have different agendas responding to different historical situations and, strictly speaking, do not belong to

the same story, let alone to the theory of cosmic evolution. Of course, beginning with later biblical authors (including Paul), theologians have always felt free to manipulate inherited texts to substantiate their new theological insights.

Has God used evolution in the process of creation?

Wentzel’s answer to this question is an unambiguous ‘Yes’, However, he goes further saying that the evolutionary process is *identical* with the process of creation (Claassen & Gaum 2012:120). I agree! For Wentzel, this implies that theology and science can make independent, yet valid statements on the same reality, thus reconciling the two disciplines with each other (Claassen & Gaum 2012:120). That again can liberate us from cul-de-sacs such as evolution or creation, radical contingency or providence, naturalism or supernaturalism (Claassen & Gaum 2012:121). For me, however, the question whether we can make independent yet valid statements about the same reality is slightly more involved, although Wentzel may agree with most of the points that I will make in what follows.

The problem is that faith and theology make statements on the (1) transcendent and (2) personal ‘author’ of the evolutionary process, whilst science deals with (1) immanent and (2) impersonal mechanisms that simply unfold according to certain regularities and (embedded) contingencies. God is not part of the world of the sciences and cannot be. So measured against which criteria can theological and scientific interpretations of reality be deemed equally valid? I spent considerable thought on why the assumption of a transcendent and personal God is not only appropriate and valid but also essential from an experiential point of view.

Concerning transcendence, I came to distinguish between *immanent transcendence* (there are aspects of immanent reality that are not (yet) accessible to our observation, explanation and manipulation, which even the new atheists readily concede) and *transcendent immanence* (the assumption that immanent reality is not closed in upon itself, but open towards a higher Authority, Source and Destiny, a contention that naturalists amongst the scientists dismiss).

God therefore cannot be a part or aspect of immanent reality that can cooperate or compete with other such parts or aspects, but the transcendent Source and Destiny of the whole of reality including everything that exists and happens. The assumption of atheists and naïve believers alike that the word ‘God’ refers to a ‘supernatural’ part of immanent reality bedevils much of the interlocution between science and faith.

Concerning God as a person, emergence theory provided me with the solution: With the appearance of humankind, cosmic evolution has reached the personal (spiritual) level of emergence. This is the level at which intentionality and agency, purpose and meaning and ethics and morality come into the picture. If God is taken to be the wherefrom of the evolutionary process as a whole, God must be present and

active at this level of emergence as much as at the impersonal levels of emergence lower down. Anything else would be reductionist.

According to the biblical tradition, God became a person for humans because humans are persons. In fact, God is the great 'Other' towards whom human beings transcend themselves as persons. It can even be argued that humans only become true humans, rather than arrogant and self-deceiving quasi-deities, if they transcend themselves towards such a higher Other.

However, as the transcendent Source and Destiny of all of reality, including the impersonal levels of emergence lower down, God must be much more than a person, just as humans are much more than persons. They are also quanta and atoms and molecules and organic mechanisms and synaptic networks that follow natural laws. If God is thought of as a purely personal agent who is not constrained by any regularity whatsoever (*actus purus*), as traditional theism does, this is reductionism in reverse and wishful thinking.

If divine creation is identical with cosmic evolution, therefore, God's agency is constrained by the regularities obtaining in evolutionary reality. Or better, God creates through regularities as much as through (embedded) contingencies.⁷ The laws of nature are God's laws; they are valid; they are necessary; they are part of God's creative love, because without them, reality could not exist and function the way it does.

Wentzel agrees with the 'main current in the science-theology debate today' that 'God achieves God's purposes through the natural processes of evolution' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:121). For me, this too is not so easy. Do scientists agree? Which purposes are achieved? God's creative power may indeed be driving the evolutionary process, but the latter does not unambiguously reflect God's benevolent intentionality – just think of natural catastrophes, suffering and death. This is the thorny issue of theodicy, which has always been the Achilles heel of the biblical faith.

In my view, the impasse of theodicy can only be overcome by abandoning the theist idea of God's perfection, from which the idea that God's intentionality and agency are unconstrained is derived. I argued that this idea is rooted in Platonic idealism rather than biblical tradition or the experience of faith. Hard pressed by uncomfortable constraints, I suspect, we project our desire to get rid of constraints into a God not fettered by constraints. We then appeal to this God and are puzzled that God does not remove all natural and moral evil with a single all-mighty decree.

7.I argued (in Nürnberger 2020:47–49) that contingency is not the absence of regularity, but the open space created when the (deterministic) forces impacting a process are sufficiently balanced to allow the introduction of an additional force to influence the power and direction of the process. Because the hierarchy of emergences is characterised by an exponential increase in the constitutive factors making up wholes at ever higher levels, thus by a greater complexity of the resultant networks, the occurrences of contingency rise exponentially as we move up the hierarchy of emergences. So it is the interplay between deterministic forces that automatically creates the open spaces in which chance, novelty, intentionality and agency can materialise.

Instead, the biblical reassurance of God's benevolent intentionality leads us to a recognition of God's redeeming action, aiming at a vision of comprehensive optimal well-being, but *within the confines* of a universe operating through built-in regularities and (embedded) contingencies. Whilst the latter indeed opens the space for 'creative, original newness', it is rather opportunistic to hope for a world without entropy, destruction, suffering and death. God would indeed have to start from scratch and create an entirely different universe, as apocalyptic eschatology assumes, including a radical recreation of the human being.⁸

Apocalyptic is a highly idealised vision of what ought to be, responding to the experience of an unbearable situation. It is meant to reassure and open a barricaded future, but it does not reflect even the most extreme possibilities of the world we know. Let us rather sober up! Theologically speaking, the laws of nature are God's laws; they are valid; they are essential; they are part of God's benevolence – as the biblical tradition indeed maintains. Not everything is possible; not everything is desirable! God acts constructively and redemptively as much through contingencies as through the laws of nature. This is a telling example of why 'theology and with it any believing Christian cannot afford not to be in dialogue with the world' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:121).

Moreover, one must recognise that, if God is the transcendent Source and Destiny of the whole of reality, God's action in the world is always mediated through worldly processes. In the Old Testament, God acts through physical and social structures, natural calamities, historical dynamics (such as the emergence of great empires), animals, humans, political leaders and prophets. In the New Testament, God acts through Jesus of Nazareth, then the apostles, the believers ... These entities seem to follow their own determinisms, contingencies, intentionalities and actions. So, how does God come into the picture? 'God is either everything, or nothing!' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:122). Indeed, but in which sense? God either works through God's creation or there is no God.

Alone in the world?

This topic refers to Wentzel's book with the same title (2006). Whilst both the sciences and theology 'have struggled with the idea that we humans of the species *Homo sapiens* are reasonably unique and sometimes even differ dramatically from our most proximate hominid and primate families', Wentzel says, primatology, palaeontology and evolutionary biology have now unambiguously established that Charles Darwin was correct: our difference from other species is one of 'degree', not a difference in 'kind' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:122f) and concerns the beginning of protolanguage, empathy, social life, morality and consciousness. I agree.

Wentzel concentrates on the 'surprising human ability of creativity and the creation of culture'. He analyses the way 'how practically every generation of theologians has come

8.Hawking and Mlodinov (2010:159–163). I have argued this point in Nürnberger (2012:974–976).

up with new and shifting interpretations' of the 'key concept of *imago Dei* (image of God)'. He focuses on the earliest uniquely human creativity found in the prehistoric stone paintings of 32 000 years ago, which reveals not only the transition from biology to culture but also that religion was part of the very earliest forms of human communities. Evolution thus gives us an exciting new perspective on the traditional concept of 'image of God,' namely, that the human being as *imago Dei* has emerged physically through a long evolutionary history'.

Working through Wentzel's book *Alone in the Universe?* (2006), I was deeply impressed by his vast interdisciplinary horizons, his perceptive analyses and his bold theological moves and tried to relate my own evolving stance to his.⁹ It soon dawned upon me that there was a difference in our respective agendas. Wentzel wanted to reveal a common rationality operative in both theology and science.¹⁰ This would make the two approaches equally valid and comparable. In contrast, I battled to find the entry points of the Christian gospel to different dimensions of life and the respective academic pursuits.

This 'missionary' drive was strongly provoked by Richard Dawkins' universal bestseller *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006), which demonstrated, once again, how seemingly unbridgeable the gap between science and faith had become.¹¹ As I ploughed through the work of theologians engaged in the encounter between science and theology, I could never avoid the question of how likely it was that their arguments would make an impression on their secular counterparts – and my verdict was, in most cases, fairly negative.

In the case of *Alone in the World?* I was not convinced that a positive 'transversal' relationship between the two concepts used as an outstanding example could be established. I argued that the concept of the image of God (1) is marginal in the biblical tradition and that (2) its meaning is not comparable with the concept of the uniqueness of the human being, as used by the sciences.¹²

9.The result was a review that was both appreciative and critical. It was meant to be one appendix amongst others to my manuscript *Regaining sanity for the World: Why science needs best faith to be responsible, why faith needs best science to be credible* (2011). However, in the end, I abandoned all envisaged appendices and the review never got published.

10.Analysed in greater detail by Veldsman (2008).

11.In my response to Dawkins (Nürnberg 2010), I pointed out the bias, superficiality and reductionism of the latter, but my critique could not brush the fact under the carpet that hard core scientists are (and have to be) empiricists, geared exclusively to immanent reality, whilst theologians deal with (and have to deal with) the relation of humans to an intuited transcendent Source and Destiny of reality.

12.Wentzel discerns that the original meaning of the 'image of God' is the 'authorised representative of God', with which I agree. But the sciences have no use for such an idea. Where do we obtain it from? The metaphor may hark back to the practice of ANE emperors to erect images in far flung provinces that represent the sovereign. It was then applied to the king as representative of God, then to the expected Jewish messianic King and from there to Jesus as the Messiah (parallel to the 'Son of God', the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Anointed, etc., all of which are royal titles). This again means that Christ was (and is) the authentic human being through whom God manifests God's righteousness and redeeming love. In Genesis 1, the concept has two further critically important connotations: (1) all human beings, including women and low class humans, are 'kings and queens', rather than slaves (as the Babylonian myth of creation, the *enuma elish*, suggested). (2) God entrusts the whole rest of creation to human beings, which makes them accountable to God for what they do with it. But all these are assumptions and conclusions that elude the scientist.

However, this consideration does not yet lead to the core of the problem. If Wentzel's 'transversal' comparability, compatibility and complementarity between theology and the sciences lead to the recognition amongst believers and theologians that we are living in the same world, must face the same physical, biological, psychological, social and ecological problems and try to use our brains in doing so, this would surely be a giant step forward. It would mean that, as believers and theologians, we have much to learn from and little to contribute to the various fields of scientific expertise.

However, is this enough? Grappling with the presuppositions of Wentzel's approach in this book, a more adversarial direction crystallised out for me. On the one hand, I too want to be taken seriously as an academician when amongst other academicians. I have often been ashamed to admit that I am a theologian, adding sheepishly that I am also an agricultural economist. So apologetics is not foreign to me. How wonderful would it be if theology and the sciences could complement each other and cooperate with each other in the public sphere such as economics and sociology or biology and psychology.

On the other hand, once it comes to the most fundamental assumptions of both pursuits, this may prove to be wishful thinking. Practical empiricists in whose lives the transcendent plays no role and naturalists for whom the transcendent does not even exist inevitably see religion as a private preoccupation with myths, metaphysical speculations, superstitions and even dangerous delusions. Just introduce a theological consideration into an argument and experience the awkward silence that follows!

An anecdote may illustrate the point. When I told my senior lecturer in agricultural economics in 1956 that I was going to quit, study theology and become a missionary, he burst out in exasperation: 'Wat? – tog nie jy nie, Klaus! Jy is mos 'n intelligente mens!' (What? Surely not you, Klaus! You are an intelligent person after all!). Even at the University of Pretoria, by all counts a conservative Afrikaner institution at the time, theologians were dismissively called 'tokolokke'.

In short, what theologians are busy with is intrinsically foreign to all mainline scientific disciplines.¹³ So, we are perhaps not meant to justify ourselves for being believers or theologians so much as to witness to Christ in a world where he seems to have no space to become 'real'. If so, we must become 'scientists to the scientists' (1 Cor 9:18–23) – surely not to impose our faith on them, but to present the gospel to them in a form that can challenge and change their lives.

What we do and how we behave may perhaps be more persuasive than sharing our theological formulations. However, when it comes to the latter, we must respond

13.The more circumspect amongst scientists leaves the question of transcendence open, whilst naturalists comfortably deny that there is a transcendent reality in the first place, which is not a scientific finding but a metaphysical decision. But in both cases, we are not part of the party.

credibly to their basic criterion of what can be taken for real. For scientists, the criterion of a 'fact' is not just the stringency of a rational argument but experiential evidence. Even the most rigorous mathematical theories await their experimental substantiation.

We must indicate, at the very least, which human experiences make us stick so obstinately to the intuition and notion of a transcendent Source and Destiny of immanent reality and why we consider this to be an essential part of being human. I have adopted the approach of 'experiential realism' precisely because, as I see it, that is the approach of the sciences and I want to articulate the Christian faith within their world of meaning. Because this also happens to be my own 'natural' world of meaning, I also owe this to my own integrity as a believer.

It has now become easier than it was. By now, old style physical reductionism has been rendered obsolete by the new theory of cosmic evolution happening in stages of emergence. Synaptic networks in our brains, which are the infrastructure of all mental constructs, must be considered as real as physical or biological processes.

However, there is a more fundamental obstacle, namely, the confrontation between two contradictory truth claims: Is the universe closed in upon itself or open towards a transcendent Source and Destiny? Is the human being, who is arguably the provisional peak of cosmic evolution, the highest authority, owner, master and beneficiary of reality, or the authorised representative of a higher authority on whom humans depend and to whom they are responsible? That is the core of the problem – and it is of earth-shattering significance and consequence – personal, social and ecological!¹⁴

On original sin

Under this heading Wentzel boldly and radically clears away a tradition that presents one of the insurmountable obstacles in the science–faith interface. In the interdisciplinary dialogue between the Christian theology and the evolutionary sciences, Wentzel says, the problem of original sin 'was always an unavoidable and central point of discussion' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:124). For main line theology, the concept was linked to a 'historical moment of the disobedience and sin of Adam and Eve, the first human beings'. Specifically, the church father Augustine was responsible for linking the concept with sexuality and selfishness and further with the phenomenon of death (Claassen & Gaum 2012:124).

14. I concede that all human convictions are part of immanent reality, operating at the same level of emergence. Theologically speaking, they are 'products' of the creative power of God. In this sense, the claim that the Christian faith is the true religion, whilst all other convictions are idolatry and self-justification (Karl Barth), is presumptuous. However, just as there are qualitative differences between a slug, a whale and a cheetah, which are all located at the biological level of emergence, there are qualitative differences between different convictions such as those of Hitler or Stalin on the one hand and Maria Theresa or Gandhi on the other hand. They are all located on the 'spiritual' level of emergence, yet they have dramatically different consequences. The most fundamental theological questions and struggles should not concern ontology, therefore, but validity, not just degrees of rationality, but soteriology!

Today, the strong mythological character of these narratives is generally accepted in the theological discussion (Claassen & Gaum 2012):

A historical fall into sin through which the entire human race has fallen into total depravity, in sin conceived, fallen and born and punished with death has become totally unacceptable in the light of what today we know thanks to the scientific insight into the origins of the human being and the cosmos. (p. 124f)

A sinless paradise is out of the question. 'Violent struggles, suffering and death have existed as integral parts of nature long before humans appeared on the scene' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:125).

I fully agree. Going deeper, I believe that, in terms of developmental psychology, the elementary foetal experience of an ideal world in the womb of the mother and the traumatic encounter with a dangerous and unpredictable world after birth can explain the human longing for a world without hardship, suffering, conflict and death – thus the envisaged solution of the problem of original sin. This dream is projected mythologically to both the first beginning (proctology) and the ultimate end (eschatology).

Wentzel repeats his reference to Genesis 3:22 and the idea of a 'fall upwards' and says that at this point in hominid evolution 'the human being as *Homo sapiens* arrived', with a strong sense of self-identity, historical consciousness and – above all – a moral consciousness, a sense of good and evil' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:125). As stated here, in my view, the idea of a 'fall upwards' into responsibility may be true in evolutionary terms, but its link with the biblical texts is rather artificial.

Instead of trying to recoup a theological heritage that has never really happened, we move towards a meaningful idea of moral responsibility that still (Claassen & Gaum 2012):

[F]lows together with the heart of the Christian message, because the knowledge of good and evil and thus the inclination towards good as well as evil, for the Christian finds a final resolution in Christ. (p. 125)

I agree and would like to add that much of what the concept of 'original sin' covered in the tradition (uncontrolled sexual drives, oppressive gender roles, consuming avarice, hatred of competitors and brutal violence) can be explained in paleontological terms as part of the survival instincts programmed into the human psyche at a time when a relatively defenceless humanity was in danger of extinction.¹⁵

Focusing on death, Wentzel says that 'in the evolutionary process the evolution of more complex forms of life is in principle built upon the death and extinction of other forms of life and species' (p. 126). So through the process of evolution, which, in principle and to a large extent, presupposes death, suffering, conflict and competition, the human being ultimately arrived in the world (Claassen & Gaum 2012:126).

15. Durand (2010). For the immense complexity of these developments, see Small (2008:112–156).

This view of original sin liberates us from the feeling of being victims of a fate brought upon us through the 'first human beings', worse than that we are powerlessly bound into the struggle between a 'Satan' or evil, which battles with God in Christ to gain control over us. Instead, sin and redemption must rather be seen as part of being engulfed in the evolving natural process which, for believers, will ultimately find completion in the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself the completion of the nature of the human being and indeed represents the completion of an 'upward fall' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:126).

Really? In which sense? For a natural scientist to follow the argument, we must state unambiguously that Jesus of Nazareth was a real human being who has suffered an irreversible biological death on the cross and that the assumption of a 'bodily resurrected' Christ belongs not to the biological but to the spiritual level of emergence. It is the symbol or prototype of the authentic human being whose new life in fellowship of God has become universally accessible to participation.¹⁶

If God is taken to be the transcendent Source and Destiny of experienced reality, these immanent explanations do not threaten my faith in God. On the contrary, I am fascinated by the ways in which the creative power of God works within experienced reality.

On eternal life

The question posed to Wentzel was, whether there is a place for the Christian hope for an eternal life from an evolutionary perspective. This is another sticky point in the interface between faith and science. In his response, Wentzel returns to the nature of death. He says that the Bible has a particularly negative view of death, whilst for evolutionary biology, death is an entirely natural phenomenon that has existed since the beginning of life on earth, which is not only necessary and inescapable but also an ecological necessity and the precondition of new life. So the construction of a responsible theology of death has become one of the greatest tasks of any interdisciplinary theology.

Wentzel agrees with Arthur Peacocke's argument that death can only be understood if seen against the role it played from the outset in God's creation, manifested in the regulated processes of nature, rather than as divine punishment for human sin. Peacocke's view that the resurrection of Christ is a metaphor for a process of recreation in which we will be united with God after our deaths in a novel, inexpressible way offers possibilities for a more apophatic theology in which we can accept and honour the reality of pain and death precisely because we can assume the 'sacramental' presence of God in the evolutionary process.¹⁷

16. Despite his apocalyptic eschatology, this is clear for Paul. John jettisons apocalyptic eschatology and uses deliberately exaggerated stories at the physical-biological level as pointers to spiritual truths.

17. Peacocke's stance is developed fully in Peacocke and Clayton (2007).

For me, this does not clear away the real problem with faith in a life after death from an evolutionary perspective. It cannot be a resuscitation of the biological body because the body dissolves after death into its myriad constituents. It cannot be a purely spiritual entity because spiritual reality emerges from a biological-neurological infrastructure and cannot subsist without the latter. If 'eternal' means 'timeless', it cannot be an eternal life because life is a process and every process presupposes time.

The Bible does not know of a timeless eternity. The Hebrew word *òlam* means the time from the deep past into the far future and throughout the different 'ages' – thus all the time. It refers to the reliable presence of the God of justice and love. Timeless eternity is a Platonic rather than a biblical concept, although the Greek word *àion* originally also meant an 'age'.¹⁸

Only the completed *lived life* of a deceased person is timeless in the sense that its time has come to an end. Nothing can be added, nothing can be taken away and nothing additional can happen. This lived life does not allow for a continuation of our personal consciousness after death. However, it can never be erased from its place in cosmic history, thus from the record of God's creative and redemptive action in the world. Moreover, its consequences continue to impact the cosmic process both negatively and positively. That is all that counts whilst we are alive: What kind of legacy do we leave behind when we go? Were we part of God's creative and redemptive project or an obstacle to it? It is significant that the 'Last Judgment' always and exclusively focuses on what happened before one's death, not on what a risen and transformed body could do after death.

Where does Jesus fit into the evolutionary process?

Wentzel says that 'our faith in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ presupposes that God's presence in this world is mediated through (human) history' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:128). This implies that it is subject to the ambiguity of history and the tentative and provisional nature of our understanding of nature. These specific but distant events can only be perceived (Claassen & Gaum 2012):

[T]hrough the lenses of many and successive hermeneutical interpretations of the Gospels throughout the centuries. And what we try to understand is the incarnation, the embodiment of God in Jesus. (p. 128).

However, no single interpretation can provide us with a final knowledge of God. It is always impacted by the ambiguities and uncertainties of history.

Yet, we have the capacity to gain a deeper understanding of this embodiment. Long before Darwin, Schleiermacher maintained that the long history of our evolving bodies provided the basis for spirituality and faith in God. In this

18. For John, eternal life means an 'authentic life' lived already here and now with Christ in fellowship with God. For Paul, the Spirit of Christ is operative in the biological-social 'Body of Christ', the community of believers, albeit as a down payment of the eschatological 'age to come'.

sense, our survival instinct played a central role – our self-consciousness and self-centredness made a typically human God-consciousness possible (Claassen & Gaum 2012:129). Wentzel then expands on Schleiermacher's differentiation between animal consciousness, sensual consciousness and consciousness of ultimate dependence (God consciousness).

At the level of sensual consciousness, we are 'permanently torn apart between good and evil and none of us can overcome our leaning towards evil,' which leads to the idea that God self-solved the problem through sending the Redeemer. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being in all respects but in his own process of development he achieved what eludes all other people, namely, a perfect God consciousness, 'through which he could perform God's pure act of love' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:130).

Schleiermacher's Christology, Wentzel argues in the interview with Claassen and Gaum (2012):

[P]rovides us with the possibility of recognising Jesus as Redeemer – fully embedded in the evolutionary history of the human species. At the same time this is a completely traditional Christology because a perfect God-consciousness means that in his act of love for humanity, he makes God's existence present through his own perfect link with God. (p. 130)

This approach liberates us from an outdated substantive concept of Jesus' identity and makes it possible for us to see him as totally anchored in evolutionary history as we are, yet different from us in his embodied self-consciousness of direct relationship with God.

My own stance is similar. The classical Christological doctrine says that a complete divine nature and a complete human nature in a single person, neither confused with each other nor torn apart (Chalcedon 451). The Hellenistic ontological framework makes this statement contradictory. Rendered in experiential terms, the followers of Christ experienced the authentic God acting through the authentic human being – the authentic God being the God of self-giving love and the authentic human being one who lived in an undisturbed relationship with the God of self-giving love.

However, to root this interpretation in history, we must go back to the conflict between Jesus of Nazareth and the Jewish leaders of the time, namely, the conflict between two perceptions of the nature of the God of Israel: conditional acceptance mellowed by occasional acts of mercy and unconditional but transforming acceptance. According to the Gospels, the real issue at the time was whether Jesus had the messianic authority to proclaim and enact such a God, seemingly undermining the self-revelation of God in the Mosaic law.

How do you reconcile your faith and your academic research?

Right through his academic career, Wentzel saw his research 'as most profoundly defined by the interdisciplinarity of his

work' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:130f), more specifically the conversation of theology with archaeology, paleontology and the neural sciences. The 'deeper motivation' behind his quest for a 'real interdisciplinary theology' was his conviction that Christian theology must be, 'in the most fundamental sense of the word, public theology'. For Wentzel, 'public' means that theology can claim, 'in a legitimate, democratic sense, to be present in the interdisciplinary, political, cultural and ethical discussions that characterise our public discourses today' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:131). This again implies that, whilst the church is the natural context of theology, it is not the only one.

In a more philosophical sense, this means that theology is a 'pragmatic skill in terms of which we try to resolve existential problems – conceptually and experientially – so that we can come forth with the best reasons for what we think, feel and believe' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:131). In this sense, the wide spectrum of traditional academic disciplines is embedded in the evolutionary history of the most basic cognitive and emotional ways by which we reach out to our reality (Claassen & Gaum 2012:131).

This again means that our specialised epistemologies such as science and theology only differ in degree, focus and problem-solving and that theology and science – and all other disciplines – 'use the same interpretative and evaluative procedures when we try to better understand nature, humans and the sociohistorical and religious aspects of our life' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:131).

In fact, public and interdisciplinary theology makes it possible, for both theology and science, to focus on common problems such as the origin of the universe, the meaning of life, pain and suffering, and what it means to be human (Claassen & Gaum 2012:131f). Against this background, there can be no long-term tension between faith and science. In fact, the dialogue between theology and science makes it possible to develop different but equally valid ways in which divergent voices can be heard in a common attempt to bring together the rich dimensions of both science and theology' (Claassen & Gaum 2012:132).

I have sketched my own position under the heading of 'Alone in the World?' here and do not have to repeat it here. Suffice it to say that I am as committed to an interdisciplinary and public theology as Wentzel is. I also agree with Wentzel that Christians cannot afford not to be in dialogue with the sciences, although my upbringing and social and historical context made me focus more on socioeconomic processes and ideologies, political oppression and liberation and the clash between cultures and worldviews, rather than the disciplines on whom Wentzel focused his attention.

However, underlying all my endeavours was the haunting realisation that, with its dogged pursuit of emancipation from, and control over reality, modernity has abandoned a committed relationship with a transcendent Other, becomes

enslaved by new masters and creates massive problems for us all as a result. Moreover, the practical life-determining assumption that humanity is in fact, its own highest authority and to become authentically human, ought to emancipate itself from any would-be higher authority must of necessity call the faith of believers into question.

My theological journey has never been without this challenge, whether emanating from the dismissive indifference of my family, the historical-critical approach to the Bible, the incongruencies of our classical doctrines, the blatant historical and current failures of the Christian church, the multiplicity of truth claims made by alternative religious convictions, formidable thinkers such as Darwin, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Dawkins and Harari or the fact that the inestimable suffering throughout human, animal and cosmic history does not reflect the benevolence of an all-powerful God. I have learnt to understand why Luther maintained that the Christian faith is always, and *constitutively*, an afflicted faith, because it represents a defiant and activating protest against an unforgiving reality in the name of a loving God.¹⁹ Put differently, God's word must overcome the world in us first, before it can begin to overcome the world through us.

Conclusion

This essay was meant to be an informal, friendly chat around the fireplace – nothing serious, nothing final and nothing conclusive. Despite their imperfections, such casual encounters often trigger new insights and open new avenues. At the very least, they provide us with the joy of a working relationship with a treasured colleague, which was my aim in this essay. But in contrast to an oral discussion between two people present at the same time in the same space, this little contribution is rather one-sided! I wish I could know how Wentzel would have responded to each of my observations and contentions. In fact, implicitly, he may already have made so in his extensive literary output.

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Author's contributions

K.N. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

¹⁹Persuasively developed in Ratschow (1960:Chapter IV). I have utilised this insight in my interpretation of Theodicy and the Trinity. Nürnbergger (2016:Chapter 19).

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