

UNIQUENESS, THE IMAGE OF GOD, AND THE PROBLEM OF METHOD: ENGAGING VAN HUYSSTEEN

by Gregory R. Peterson

Abstract. Wentzel van Huyssteen's book *Alone in the World?* provides a thoughtful and nuanced account of human evolution from a theological perspective. Not only does his work provide what is perhaps the only sustained theological reflection specifically on human evolution, but his working through of many of the issues, particularly on the image of God literature in theology, has few parallels. Despite this, I focus on what I consider to be several weaknesses of the text, including areas of theological method, theological interpretation, and the central topic of human uniqueness. Addressing these weaknesses will, I propose, improve van Huyssteen's argument and lead in new and fruitful directions.

Keywords: foundationalism; human uniqueness; image of God; Wentzel van Huyssteen

Wentzel van Huyssteen's Gifford Lectures, published as *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (2006), breaks important new ground in the science-theology dialogue, exploring the evidence for and significance of human evolution for theological reflection and, particularly, for thinking about human uniqueness and the image of God. Issues of theology and evolution have been amply explored from multiple perspectives (for example, Haught 2001; Hefner 1993; Peacocke 1986), but surprisingly little has been written on the specifics of human evolution coming from paleoanthropology and the kinds of questions that this field raises for theological reflection. In engaging and interpreting this area of scientific inquiry, van Huyssteen has done the theological community a great and important service.

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At the same time, I would like to press him on a few issues that are, I feel, in need of further development and consideration. To some extent these are critiques, but more generally they are an indication of where the dialogue needs to go next.

THE QUESTION OF METHOD

Much of the first two chapters of *Alone in the World?* (hereafter *AW*) is devoted to epistemology and laying out the methodological basis of the science-theology dialogue as van Huyssteen sees it. Reflection on method has been a long-standing concern for him, dating back to his advocacy of a critical realist framework in the 1980s (van Huyssteen 1989). Since then, his position has evolved and developed considerably, culminating in his important work *The Shaping of Reality* (1999), the content of which is very much reflected in *AW*. Although he maintains his critical realism in both of these latter works, it is a critical realism that is very much informed by reflection on postmodern approaches to epistemology. Rejecting foundationalism, van Huyssteen argues that knowledge is profoundly embodied and contextual in a way that prevents or at least limits universalistic claims and assertions of certainty. Instead, he embraces a “transversal” approach that recognizes, indeed emphasizes, the fragmentation of knowledge between disciplines while at the same time trying to bridge them. This is due in part to the role that tradition plays in disciplines, not least in theology, so much so that bridging can become quite difficult. Disciplines are characterized by canons that create “galaxies of meaning,” a term van Huyssteen borrows from Delwin Brown (1994). By bridging disciplines one can create a wide but fragile “reflective equilibrium,” a tentative picture of the whole. It is the development of such a reflective equilibrium that van Huyssteen has set himself to, and what he seems to see as precisely the task of a theology-science dialogue generally.

As this position is developed in *AW*, I have two main concerns. The first deals with the very abstractness and high level of generality of the methodology as presented in *AW*. Although I find myself sympathetic with many of the themes developed by van Huyssteen, the basis for endorsing them is not always clear, and the exact implications are sometimes left unspecified. For instance, his notion of transversality implies a high level of disciplinary fragmentation that is largely assumed. There are good grounds for speaking of the fragmentation of knowledge and particularly disciplinary approaches, but these are not adequately given in his analysis, and it is not at all clear that the degree of fragmentation that he seems to envision holds as an accurate description of our state of knowledge, particularly when we look at the relation of concepts and disciplines of the natural sciences, where there is arguably a fair amount of consilience. Another example involves his endorsement of evolutionary epistemology. On his analysis, evolutionary epistemology supports his postfoundationalist methodology

because of the emphasis it places on both contextuality and embodiment (*AW*, 79–93). Yet, evolutionary epistemology seems transparently foundationalist in its approach, deriving an account of knowledge acquisition from the unquestioned truth of evolutionary theory. Furthermore, it is not clear that the kind of embodiment that evolutionary epistemologists speak of, which is informed primarily if not exclusively by the sciences, is the same as van Huyssteen's notion of embodiment, which I suspect may include experiential and nonscientific categories of understanding. Even though his presentation of evolutionary epistemology is quite extensive, these themes are not sufficiently discussed.

A second, more focused area of concern deals with the employment of tradition as an epistemological category. Van Huyssteen sees both theology and the sciences as being informed by their respective traditions so that, just as Christian theology is informed by a tradition that includes the biblical texts, creeds, and the history of theological reflection, a discipline such as biology finds itself based on and even going back to the works of Darwin. In developing his account of tradition, van Huyssteen clearly is relying on a substantial body of literature in both the philosophy of science and theology. There is much to be said for taking seriously the positive role that tradition plays in the formation of ideas. My concern is not with van Huyssteen's account of tradition but with the extent to which tradition has been sometimes uncritically endorsed as a category by theologians engaging the natural sciences. The reason for doing so is obvious: The motivations for participating in a religious tradition and committing to its view of the world are complex and often opaque, even to the believer herself or himself. Because much of theological scholarship is generated internally (read for and by fellow believers), the central concern typically is not whether and why one belongs to a religious tradition but rather with the issues that arise once one is already so committed. When theology engages the sciences, this approach often is spoken of as a theology of nature, where the tradition is largely presumed but it is the encounter with the sciences that requires reflection.

I am increasingly of the view that, at least within the science-theology literature, tradition in this sense can no longer be taken for granted but must in fact be argued for. The critical question is not simply whether we are members of a tradition (whether theological or scientific) but why we should remain members of that tradition. Van Huyssteen is very clearly aware of this issue. He speaks not only of acceptance of tradition but also of being in critical relation to it (*AW*, 46). How and in what way we are to be in critical relation to it, however, is not fully developed. In the case of *AW*, this turns out to be a crucial point, for the position of *AW* on the doctrine of the image of God, for instance, presupposes an important role for tradition. For the methodology to connect to these later arguments, further analysis is needed.

SPEAKING OF GOD

Throughout, *AW* is very clearly a work of theology, primarily within the Christian tradition, seeking to develop a “fragile equilibrium” connecting theology and the sciences of human evolution. Given this, it is somewhat surprising to find so little mention of God as the text proceeds through its argument. Certainly, there are important glimmers. Van Huyssteen embraces the category of mystery as a theological concept and is at pains to endorse a personal conception of God over and against Gordon Kaufman’s understanding of God as “serendipitous creativity” (see especially *AW*, 279–82). Here, the issue is not that what is said is wrong but that what could be said is not. This is particularly striking given that van Huyssteen has endorsed a specific conception of the image of God that includes the human bodily form as integral to it, which could suggest a strong form of pantheism. If having a certain kind of body is what makes us in the image of God, does this not imply that God also is embodied in a very particular way? If it is our specifically human body that makes us in the image of God, what does that imply about God’s body?

In a different vein, although van Huyssteen gives us a wonderfully detailed account of the narrative of human evolution as scientists are currently able to piece it together, he nowhere raises the obvious questions of causality. For the most part, he seems to assume a naturalistic account of human evolution, with no specific role for divine agency. This would imply a deistic understanding of God, or at least a God who does not intervene directly in the natural world in an obvious way. A similar question arises with respect to his account of shamanism, cave art, and the genesis of religion, developed in the last two chapters. Here, van Huyssteen does expend effort to argue that religious experiences may be understood to be genuine, but he is strangely silent on the roots of this capacity. Is it by happenstance that we evolved to be the kind of beings that can experience God? or is a deeper directionality in our own evolution at play? What does van Huyssteen think on these matters? Answering such questions would require engaging the science-and-divine-action debate, which has become voluminous and technical (for a recent summary of some of this literature, see Wildman 2004). Yet, if one is treating the subject of human evolution and one endorses belief in a personal God, it is difficult to see how this topic can be avoided. Van Huyssteen must have some commitments here, but it is not clear what they are.

Despite this reticence, *AW* is clearly dedicated to developing a doctrine of the image of God properly rooted in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures and developed through centuries of theological reflection. Indeed, one of the best features of *AW* is the thoughtful and thorough analysis it provides of the doctrine. Chapter 3, which provides an account of the scriptural sources, the history, and theological alternatives, is recommended,

perhaps even required, reading for anyone who desires to engage in further thinking about the doctrine.

Despite his cogent and careful analysis, I have some reservations about the theological conclusions that van Huyssteen draws. He argues that we should hew close to contemporary scholarly understandings of the biblical tradition and so to the original Hebrew understanding of the image of God in terms of bodily form and as royal representative. Contemporary biblical scholarship, as van Huyssteen notes, has reached a consensus that the doctrine of the image of God in its original Hebraic context was understood in terms of royal ideology, so that one who was designated as being in the image of the king was to be understood as the king's representative. In Genesis 1, this becomes manifest in the connection between the image of God and the language of dominion wherein human beings are granted responsibility for the creation. Alongside and connected to this, some Hebrew scriptures scholars argue that the idea of the image of God as found in the biblical texts involves also a physical likeness—that our very human form is also caught up in the imaging of God. Furthermore, references to the image of God in the New Testament suggest that the image of God involves imaging in the sense of imitation; by imitating God we become like God. Alternative views that understand the image of God either in terms of a cognitive capacity such as rationality, as was common in ancient theology, or in terms of relationality, best exemplified in the work of Karl Barth, are to be rejected as unfaithful to the biblical texts, overly abstract and, in van Huyssteen's words, "exotically baroque" (p. 215).

Behind this analysis is the prior methodological commitment to tradition that van Huyssteen articulated in the first chapters, and in his rendering of the doctrine of the image of God we see, at least partially, some of its implications. In this respect, his interpretation of the image of God is very conservative, for he is basing his interpretation not just on tradition but on the original layer of tradition as best we can understand it. At least tacitly implied in his approach is the old Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), for he very standardly argues that the earlier Hebrew understanding of the doctrine should take precedence over later theological interpretations, however embedded in the tradition they may be.

In theological reflection, tradition inevitably plays an important role, but I am increasingly inclined to think that the role is one of inspiration, prototype, and permission. Scriptures are important not because the original writers always got it right but because in scripture we find ourselves encountering the living God, and in them we are given the freedom and permission to entertain thoughts, ideas, and feelings that we might not otherwise have. Such encounter involves not only interpretation and acceptance but also struggle—and sometimes, perhaps, rejection or holding in abeyance implications of scriptural texts in the light of other scriptural commitments, lived experience, and later developments of the tradition.

Although the biblical texts may be understood by the Christian community to be inspired, they are by no means infallible, not only as science or history but also as theology.

At this very general level, I suspect we are not so very far apart, but stating the matter thus has specific implications for analyzing the image of God texts that are crucial to van Huyssteen's account. Scripture gives us permission to think of the image of God in the terms that van Huyssteen describes, but are these terms the ones that we should embrace? Are they fruitful, do they provide theological consilience and coherence, do they mesh with the larger scriptural tradition, and do they deepen our understanding of the human condition rather than making it shallower? In addition, if we think about the original meanings, how much do they actually conflict with the later tradition? If being in the image of God means being God's representative, are the categories of rationality and relationality prerequisites to be able to carry out this function? Is there a sense in which the later theological tradition is correct about the image of God?

The idea of the human form's making us in the image of God, while provocative and in keeping with the embracing of embodiment we now find in theology and philosophy as well as (to some extent) in the sciences, seems theologically peculiar, for it would seem to imply not only that God has a body but that God has a human, or humanlike, body from which we are imaged. Van Huyssteen never addresses the very likely reason that earlier generations of theologians did not develop this line of interpretation, even if it might be perceived to have a grounding in scripture: To claim that God has a human body is to engage in a very implausible kind of anthropomorphism—and opens the question of the sex of such a body. But if God does not have a human or humanlike body, in what sense is our specific kind of body an image of God's?

Similarly, I wish that van Huyssteen had placed more emphasis on the New Testament texts that speak in categories more of becoming than of being. To some extent he does this, speaking of the image of God as imitation of God, but more could be done here, perhaps in a way that is not so distant from the eschatological interpretations of the image of God put forth by Wolfhart Pannenberg and LeRon Shults, which he dismisses (*AW*, 139–42). Doing so would both broaden and deepen his analysis in ways that would be rich and fruitful.

ARE WE REALLY ALONE?

Throughout his Gifford Lectures van Huyssteen is wrestling, either directly or indirectly, with the question of human uniqueness. The title itself—*Alone in the World?*—indicates the centrality of this issue. As usually understood, statements about human uniqueness are statements about our differences from other animals, although hypothetically they also may be claims about potential alien life forms or artificial intelligence (two themes

that van Huyssteen does not explore). In addition, van Huyssteen's focus on paleoanthropology raises the question of our own hominid ancestors: Were they, too, in the image of God, and at what point, assuming that one can be specified, did they cross the threshold to being *human* in the morally and theologically relevant sense of the word?

In the latter chapters van Huyssteen seems to argue for a fairly strong conception of human uniqueness. Drawing on the work of Terrence Deacon (1997), among others, he emphasizes the discontinuity between human beings and other primates and adopts Deacon's view that the transition to thinking in terms of symbols was a unique event in human evolution and one that marks a radical discontinuity with our hominid ancestors. The comparatively sudden advent of cave art around 40,000 years ago is indicative of this new phase of evolution and significantly marks the transition to modern *Homo sapiens*.

Although van Huyssteen treads very carefully here, both in terms of the science as well as the theological and ethical implications, I once again find the treatment not as complete or as developed as I would wish. Scientifically, only passing reference is made to the now quite significant body of study on animal behavior and cognition, which may not in the end alter van Huyssteen's position but I believe would certainly complicate it. The ability to think symbolically is indeed a major transition and, with the possible exception of ape communities capable of some symbolic communication, does set us apart from other animals. Yet the significance of this, both theologically and ethically, is far from clear. If other animals are capable of social emotions and representation of self and other (including, in scientific terms, a theory of mind), it would seem that this has some bearing on how and whether we conceive of ourselves as unique. Ethically, it suggests that we may be required to be in ethical relationship with at least some other animals, a point that van Huyssteen seems to acknowledge, albeit briefly, in his analysis of Alasdair MacIntyre's work on the subject (AW 283–97; MacIntyre 1999). Theologically, the situation is even more complex. If animals such as chimpanzees, wolves, and perhaps dolphins are capable of complex, social interaction and even some symbolic communication, and if our hominid ancestors had similar abilities even though they fell short of the full symbolic representation of the world of which *Homo sapiens* is capable, how can we still conceive of the possession of the image of God as an all-or-nothing affair, something that we modern humans have but all other creatures lack? Is it the particularly human form of embodiment, or just embodiment itself that is important? Or is it that we are embodied spiritual beings?

CONCLUSION

In the end, it may be that van Huyssteen is correct and that from a theological perspective it makes sense to say that only human beings are in the

image of God (although I have argued otherwise; see Peterson 2002). But it is no longer obvious that this approach makes sense, and it may well be that we need to think of the doctrine of the image of God more expansively, even if in the process we are abstracting considerably from the tradition. But perhaps this fits in well with van Huyssteen's larger concern—the nature of interdisciplinary dialogue itself. *AW* seeks to engage theology transversally in a dialogue with paleoanthropology, to reconfigure our galaxy of meaning in a way that brings us greater insight and intelligibility. The problem seems to be that any investigation of claims and understandings of human uniqueness involves more than just theology and paleoanthropology. Understanding whether and how we are unique, and what that means, involves multiple sciences as well as philosophy and the history of ideas. Van Huyssteen has not been transversal enough. As such, his Gifford Lectures are not an end point but a beginning, revealing how much ground there is yet to explore.

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