

1-1-2011

## Book Review: Alone In The World: Human Uniqueness In Science And Theology

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### Recommended Citation

Sharpe, Kevin (2011) "Book Review: Alone In The World: Human Uniqueness In Science And Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol28/iss1/14>

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raises for Gschwandtner several suspicions about Marion's phenomenology of love. Marion writes, for example, that a declaration of love is like a declaration of war in being beyond reason and calculation, and in being performative and not descriptive, initiating a total commitment and abandonment of any hope of returning to the equilibrium of exchange. Marion adds that the language of love also parallels—and indeed can only be expressed by means of—the language of mystical theology, and that love is univocal insofar as all types of love (including divine and human love) function in the same way. Gschwandtner highlights the problematic, if not extreme, character of these aspects of Marion's recent work, concluding that Marion's love "just seems a bit too overwhelming" (p. 195).

I was reminded of a play I recently saw, called *Grace* and co-written by the philosopher and critic of religion A. C. Grayling. In this play, a young man has a religious awakening and decides to become a priest, to the bewilderment of his skeptical parents and girlfriend. He nevertheless persists in his decision to follow his calling and shortly after asking his girlfriend to marry him he is killed by religious fundamentalists. His girlfriend, who is as unsure about the marriage proposal as she is about God, is devastated by the death of her partner, whom she clearly loved greatly. In anger she protests that love, the love (of God) that killed her partner and the love (of her partner) that is killing her, is just too much to bear, too overwhelming, too blind and too violent. Her solution: kindness. Kindness is measured, thoughtful, not spiteful and not liable to abuse. I left the play wondering whether kindness, and not the violent torrents of love depicted by Zizek and Marion, is what religiously inclined philosophers should be advocating today.

*Alone in the World?: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. University of Edinburgh, 2004. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. 347 pp. \$40.00

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For this book, van Huyssteen won in 2007 the first Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize for the Best Christian and Theological book by a South African. Van Huyssteen has held the James I. McCord Chair of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary since 1992, and deserves congratulations on his interdisciplinary scholarship; it is important to contribute to the interaction between theology (however conceived) and science (whatever branch).

The book discusses human uniqueness from both theological and scientific points of view. "We are indeed alone [van Huyssteen concludes], formed by biological processes such as natural selection yet, unlike all other species . . . we alone appear to have attained the capacity for self-consciousness and

symbolic thought [—our uniqueness—], which makes complex language and art possible.”<sup>1</sup>

When does human uniqueness emerge? What is meant by ‘human’? Is the ‘human’ the uniqueness? Does the term ‘human’ encompass not only *Homo sapiens sapiens*, but also earlier *Homo sapiens*, *Homo neanderthalensis*, *Homo erectus*, and *Homo floresis*? If Van Huyssteen does not include non-*Homo sapiens* species, what essentially differentiates us from them, in what ways are we unique? Neanderthals had large brains and lived beside our *Homo sapiens* ancestors. (But see page 322 where he admits that *imago Dei* may not be limited to *Homo sapiens*. It might, many would add, not even be limited to the human lineage, but appear in some ways in other animals.) The relationship between human uniqueness and the *imago Dei* requires clarification.

Van Huyssteen supports his argument by looking at human behavior in the Upper Paleolithic: it holds an all-important and intriguing key, he thinks, to the naturalness of the evolution of religion, to the credibility of the earliest forms of religious faith, and to what it means for humans to be spiritual.<sup>2</sup> The cultural explosion of the Upper Paleolithic saw rapid developments in artifacts, both functional and symbolic. Indisputably the most powerful and compelling examples of Paleolithic symbolic imagery are the cave paintings (some of which date to at least 30,000 years ago). They are “among the earliest artifacts to exhibit symbolic awareness . . . [putting] us face to face with the earliest expressions of our spiritual nature.”<sup>3</sup> One of their functions may have been to represent or even induce altered states of awareness. “[T]he rock face was like a veil suspended between this world and the spirit world . . . that seethed behind it,” van Huyssteen writes.<sup>4</sup> The art results from shamanic religion.

Van Huyssteen unfortunately does not—or at least his source on the cave art, David Lewis-Williams, does not—establish this shamanic thesis beyond saying that it forms a speculative hypothesis or a good story. It is contentious, rejected by the majority of scholars in the field (a point van Huyssteen does not tell his readers); persuasively hard evidence has not so far emerged to support it. For example, finger flutings (lines drawn with fingers on soft surfaces) in Rouffignac and Gargas caves are artifacts that, by the amount of wall and ceiling space they cover, constitute the dominant forms of expression in each cave; but they are probably not shamanic, and simpler and therefore preferable explanations suffice.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Cole-Turner, “Review of *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*,” by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27.3 (2006): 263.

<sup>2</sup> J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology: The Gifford Lectures*, University of Edinburgh, 2004 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), xvii.

<sup>3</sup>Cole-Turner, “Review of *Alone in the World*,” 263.

<sup>4</sup>Van Huyssteen, J. Wentzel, *Alone in the World*, 209.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Sharpe and Leslie Van Gelder, “Human Uniqueness and Upper Paleolithic ‘Art’: An Archaeologist’s Reaction to Wentzel van Huyssteen’s Gifford Lectures,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 28.3 (September 2007): 311–345.

symbolic tectiforms in Rouffignac and, though not fluted, the stenciled hands in Gargas, both of which van Huyssteen points to as supporting his thesis, also succumb to this conclusion.

That van Huyssteen senses the correctness of the shamanic idea may reflect his predisposition, not the reality of the cave 'art.' In fact, van Huyssteen pursues a circular argument, wanting to find religion in Paleolithic times and pulling heavily on writers who seem to share the same view. One can say that humans are possibly unique. And that notational activity, perhaps even symbolic activity, probably did exist in the European Paleolithic. But one has to be careful not to overindulge in romanticizing possible evidence for religion.

Van Huyssteen continues his argument and writes that the *imago Dei* "is found not in some narrow intellectual or spiritual capacity but in the whole human being, 'body and soul.' In fact, the image of God is not found in humans, but the image is the human."<sup>6</sup> The human features that constitute the *imago Dei* emerge from biology.<sup>7</sup> "Our evolutionarily developed bodies" constitute "the background and bearers of human uniqueness."<sup>8</sup>

He then argues for not only the naturalness of religion, but also the necessity, meaningfulness, and even rationality ['plausibility'<sup>9</sup>] of religious belief. He even tries to establish the cognitive autonomy of religion: its evolved character, he concludes, lends support to the hypothesis that it and its characteristics must be adapted and therefore have their own truth. But many paleoanthropologists would argue that the cognitive religious functions comprise only side effects of other, more general human characteristics, possibly cognitive, that nature selected for other purposes. The religious functions are not themselves adapted. One could ask, for instance, whether God specifically created the spiritual-moral propensity or whether it emerged because "of the relatively large brains our species acquired through evolutionary history" (p. 214). "God used natural history for religion," answers van Huyssteen flying his true colors, to make religious belief emerge "as a natural phenomenon" (p. 218). In other words, God inserted into us at some point the seeds necessary for the emergence of religion. But, interjects Neil Spurway, "for the thorough-going Darwinian that's a sky-hook—tantamount to mental, as against physical, Creationism."<sup>10</sup> Divine implantation assumes God's intervention in the physical universe and soon hits the wall of chance; biological evolution requires random/chance mutations of genes, something God would not know about until it happened.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, "Theology, Science, and Human Nature," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27.3 (2006): 202.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 218.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 206.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Spurway, "Review of *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen," *ESSSAT News* 16.3 (September, 2006): 17.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 17.

The possibility of the rationality of religious beliefs given their role in human evolution raises the issue of their truth. Does human religious imagination relate to reality in some way? What is tested by natural selection is behavior, not the existence of a supernatural being.<sup>11</sup> Religious beliefs' advantageousness to survival—even if they were—does not imply their truth.

The *imago Dei*, an opponent of van Huyssteen might suggest, no matter what anyone thinks it comprises, probably builds from an anthropomorphic projection onto a supposed supernatural reality, then reads it off as applying to humans. Van Huyssteen needs to establish that there is an empirically describable *Deus* so that one can really try to discern an *imago Dei*. Otherwise nothing can distinguish circular and wishful thinking from the genuine truth.

The points above highlight the limits of van Huyssteen's method. He wants close similarities between theology and science methodologically, and he wants significant differences in their 'epistemological [foci], experiential scope, and heuristic structures.'<sup>12</sup> Though theology and science may overlap at the level of epistemology, he presumably intends also for science and theology not to overlap too much on the knowledge itself. Why?

Theological reflection, in spite of important epistemological overlaps with scientific reflection . . . in many ways [does not resemble] . . . science at all: . . . faith involves not just a way of looking at the world, but also a personal trust in God. An ultimate faith commitment to God [resembles] . . . , in this respect, . . . trust in a friend or a spouse [more] than . . . belief in a scientific theory.<sup>13</sup>

Van Huyssteen thinks theology and its method derive not so much from the search for truth (reality viewed theologically), but from 'the realist assumptions and faith commitments of experienced Christian faith.'<sup>14</sup> He seeks to serve orthodox liberal beliefs and church structures, seeing theology from the liberal tradition of emphasizing religious experience as the basic datum. He attempts to justify his branch of theology as it stands, with the assumptions it makes, as a valid way of knowing truth. His underlying aim stretches around his argument to make it say what he really wants it to say.

However, if factual meaningfulness with respect to claims for what actually occurs makes an important requirement—and it does—van Huyssteen's dualistic scheme does not suffice. The similarities in method place requirements on the content of theology that conflict with the significant differences.<sup>15</sup> The commonalities in method must generate significant

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>12</sup>J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, "Postfoundationalism in Theology and Science," in *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen and J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 44.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 45–46.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 41.

<sup>15</sup>See Kevin Sharpe, *Science of God: Truth in the Age of Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

overlap in the content of the two systems of thought. Van Huyssteen's method protects the two spheres and does not sufficiently stress the shared knowledge. It accents confirming connections rather than disconfirming possibilities. The science should not be so interpreted that it supports a pre-accepted theology.

Does theology wish to move closer to truth or does it wish further to refine church doctrines once given, always to support them and never to remove or replace them with more truthful insights? Is its main intent apologetics, trying to justify its doctrines with ideas from modern science? Van Huyssteen attempts to save Christian theology in the face of science and not to be honest to the data of science. I encourage him to emerge further from the security of his fideist cave.