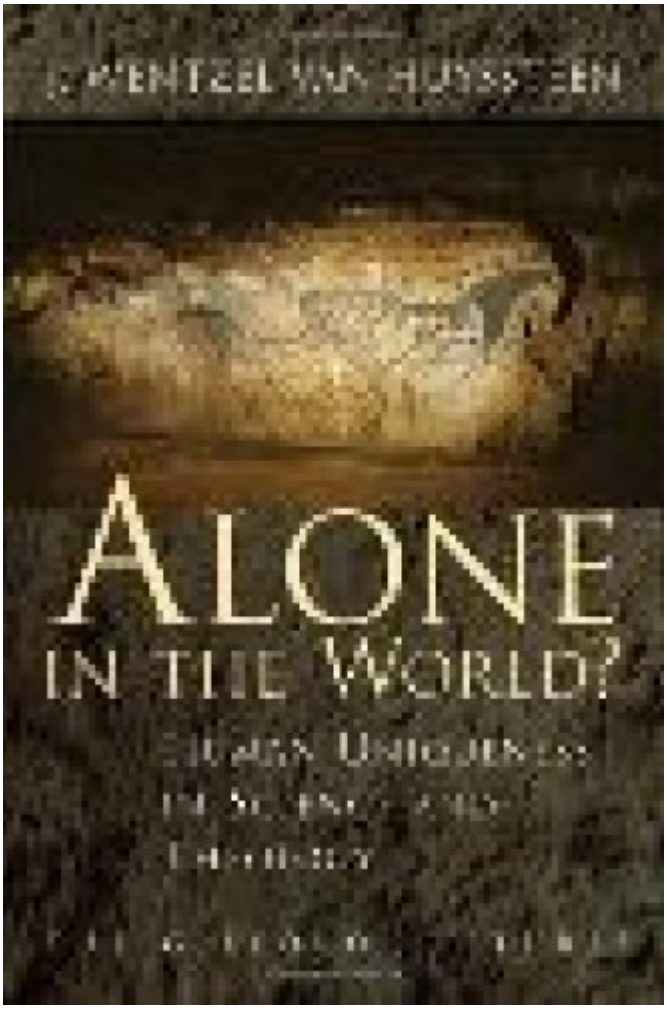
Wired to believe

By Walter Brueggemann in the December 25, 2007 issue

In Review



Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology

J. Wentzel van Huyssteen
Eerdmans

The current conversation concerning science and religion is urgent, but it is neither obvious nor easy. On the surface, that conversation is vexed by shrill advocates on

both sides who contribute nothing to the conversation and are not really interested in serious engagement. For example, the “intelligent design” perspective is answered by the scientism of Richard Dawkins, who is, like his know-nothing adversaries, interested only in prevailing.

Even among more responsible and disciplined thinkers the approach to this topic is difficult. Thomas Torrance, on the one hand, has labored mightily as a theologian on the topic but has rarely come close to the real work of science. John Polkinghorne, on the other hand, is deeply rooted in science, but his theological reflections can be rather light. The conversation goes round and round, seemingly to little effect.

In this context, the Gifford Lectures of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen are breathtaking in their scope, depth and seriousness as he moves knowingly between serious theological thought and informed scientific work. The outcome is a complex argument—so complex that this reviewer surely has not fully probed or grasped it all.

The title is something of a tease. It seems to be asking whether humankind is without God and alone in the world. Instead, van Huyssteen is pointing to the staggering reality that *Homo sapiens* is alone among the species—the only one equipped with the capacities that mark it as being made in the image of God.

Given Adam Lord Gifford’s mandate for the Gifford Lectures, it is necessary for van Huyssteen to redefine and recharacterize the lectures in ways appropriate to contemporary critical thought. That means eschewing the simple positivism that was the order of the day in the 19th century, when the lectures were established. So van Huyssteen takes great pains at the outset to establish an interpretive perspective that will permit him to make his argument.

Seeking a way beyond scientism and theological imperialism, van Huyssteen proceeds with a postfoundational argument that rejects both the overly confident objectivity of “universal rationality” and the excessive ease of postmodern relativism, which is “mere communal consensus and local contextuality.”

Van Huyssteen proposes and practices “tranversality”: a dialogic engagement between disciplines that assumes no discipline provides the master key but instead respects the claims of every discipline and invites every discipline to contribute. Regarding theology, van Huyssteen argues against “abstract, esoteric” thought that remains exclusively within its own discipline, and he makes the same critique of

scientific projects that hide in the safety of scientism and disregard larger dynamics of rationality.

Given that perspective, van Huyssteen focuses on “evolutionary epistemology,” the biological process of natural selection whereby the species achieved ever-increasing sophistication in the capacity to know and to understand. That epistemological capacity is limited to or expanded by biological development, so that over time symbolic representation and moral consequences are permitted in advanced ways of knowing that are crucial for the survival and well-being of the species. Humans’ evolved knowing capacity is thus a response to environmental requirements.

From that linkage between biology and knowing, van Huyssteen moves in two directions that he keeps clearly connected to each other. Moving in one direction, he probes recent accounts of the theological notion that humans are made in the image of God, and he considers, in the long history of interpretation, understandings of that notion in substantive, functional and relational categories. While he shows that the concept has developed over time, he stresses that in contemporary interpretation it refers to a bodied self that is capable of imaginative self- transcendence and is manifested as a self-awareness that leads to rational discernment and concern for others. Thus humans, alone among all species, are capable of mythmaking and so may function as God’s co- creators.

Moving in another direction, van Huyssteen offers an extended foray into paleontology that provides the core scientific data with which he will advance his argument. His extended reflection on the cave drawings of the Upper Paleolithic period in Southwest Europe is accompanied by remarkable colored presentations of the drawings so the reader can follow his analysis in detail.

He makes a compelling case that the drawings are not simply examples of “primitive art,” but are evidence that at the very dawn of reflective human consciousness, human imagination pondered the mystery and the intimacy that reaches beyond the unreflective self. While he is careful not to claim too much of a religious dimension for the drawings, he does believe that the intent of such art was myth-making by people who pursued a symbolic reality beyond themselves.

Van Huyssteen judges that this capacity came with some suddenness in the evolutionary process, so we are able to perceive the emergence of the image of God in the longer process of natural selection. He sees evidence in the cave drawings

that *Homo sapiens* reached a new level of interpretive capacity and engagement that was made possible by bodily developments in the brain and by resulting linguistic capacity. That newly emerged mental and linguistic capacity was immediately pressed into the service of mythmaking—of articulating mystery and ultimacy of a theological dimension. Biological and theological capacities were twinned in these earlier practitioners of human agency and self-transcendence. "Essential elements of religion," he concludes (with reference to David Lewis-Williams), "are thus 'wired into the brain.'"

Having made that bold and, to this reviewer, compelling connection, van Huyssteen concludes with a reflection on human uniqueness: rooted in bodily reality and in the evolution of epistemological capacity, human language and symbolization possessed a deep propensity toward meaning of a religious kind. This meaning had an acute communal, moral dimension:

> Human persons nearly universally live in social worlds that are thickly webbed with moral assumptions, beliefs, commitments, and obligations. The relational ties that hold human lives together are glued together with moral premises, convictions, and obligations. In this sense Smith is correct: there is no way to be human except through moral order.

Finally, van Huyssteen engages Martin Buber, Abraham Heschel and Emmanuel Levinas—all thinkers situated in the Jewish tradition who have best understood the thick interactive reality of the human. By the time he finishes, van Huyssteen has transformed and enriched our notion of humanness.

For those who work on the theological end of the conversation, van Huyssteen has two main points. Negatively, he rejects abstract and esoteric thought, indicting Edward Farley in particular among contemporary thinkers. Positively, he urges that attention be paid to issues "that may not be empirically accessible." His last word is to insist on the theological: in the end, he argues, "religious belief" provided for our distant ancestors, as it provides for us, dimensions of hope, redemption and grace.

This is a grace-filled book. As I read, I thought of how our current religious-theological-liturgical-ecclesial practices are in continuity with the activities of these earlier artists of the spirit. In a culture that wants to turn communication into technospeak and to kill utterance with psychobabble, perhaps it is in the embrace of word and sacrament that we are most fully human, most fully in continuity with our forebears, most fully enacting the image of God and most fully resistant to the

dehumanization that would deny transcendence in the interest of control and security. Van Huyssteen’s book is a powerful summons and a compelling invitation to rethink science and religion in a way that refuses to be adversarial.