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# INTERDISCIPLINARY THEOLOGY AS PUBLIC THEOLOGY

## ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue for a revisioning of public theology as interdisciplinary theology. In this way an interdisciplinary space is cleared where the notion of the *imago Dei*, in theology, and human uniqueness, in the sciences, can be brought into a fruitful integrative dialogue. This opens up the possibility for converging arguments, from both theology and paleoanthropology, that ever since prehistory symbolic behavior in *Homo sapiens* has always included religious awareness. For theologians, this opens up an interdisciplinary possibility to rethink what human uniqueness may mean for the human person. In this way the notion of the *imago Dei* could be powerfully redefined as emerging from nature itself. Moreover, the liberating character of the *imago Dei* at its core reveals an ethics of care, a solidarity for the marginalized, and a powerful thrust towards justice and human rights.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE TASK OF PUBLIC THEOLOGY

I have always, first in my earlier work on methodology, then later in my work on epistemology, rationality and hermeneutics, and finally in my more recent work in theology and science, and theological anthropology, seen my own work as fundamentally defined by its interdisciplinary nature: a theology on a journey, if you want, to find its public voice. In this sense I have argued quite specifically for a public theology: a theology that can and should claim the right to a democratic presence in the interdisciplinary, political and cross-contextual conversation that constitutes our public discourse, including the discourse in the secular academy (cf. Brown 2001:88f.). In this form of public inquiry I see the church, or rather specific, contextualized churches, as the natural context, but not the only context for theological inquiry (cf. van Huyssteen 2010).

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For me this has required a revisioning of the concept of theological rationality, a notion of rationality that is deeply embedded in, informs, and is present in all our everyday goal-directed, embodied actions. This idea of rationality is not seen as narrowly rationalistic or even exclusively cognitive, but takes diverse forms and is manifested at many levels, including our passionate commitments and non-discursive actions. As such it comprehends and includes discursive dimensions (the performance of articulation in language, conversation, intellectual reflection), as well as non-discursive dimensions (the performance of rationality beyond the realm of the spoken word, the time and space of embodied communication, action, mood, and desire, or what Calvin Schrag has called the vast arena of nondiscursive dispositions and practices that also exhibit a strong articulatory function; cf. Schrag 1992:83). For an interdisciplinary, public theology the realization is precisely that our events of articulation lie transversally across both discursive and nondiscursive actions in time and space.

This common sense rationality, however, is always deeply embedded in the very human drive to pursue clarity, intelligibility, and optimal ways of understanding, as ways to cope with ourselves and our world. For theology this implies that here too, as in everyday life, rationality is a pragmatic skill as we seek to solve specific empirical and conceptual problems, be accountable to experience, and attempt to give the very best reasons for what we think feel and believe. On this view, then, rationality is a deeply social practice, embedded in the experiences and narratives of our daily lives as these are contextualized by the radically interpretative nature of all our experiences. Importantly, this practical, common sense rationality not only serves us in our everyday interaction with the world, it also grounds the more 'manicured' rationalities that constitute our various disciplines, which as such is also embedded then in the evolutionary history of our most basic cognitive and emotional ways of relating to the world.

In sum, our interdisciplinary reflection and the specialized forms of knowing it presupposes in reasoning strategies like theology and the sciences, differ from other ways of knowing and every day knowing only in degree and emphasis. All our knowing is grounded in interpreted experience and is accountable to interpreted experience, and the adequacy of this accountability is subject to rational justification as justification through interpersonal expertise. These problem-solving judgments apply to both theology and the sciences as we use the same kinds of interpretative and evaluative procedures to understand nature, humans, and the social historical, and religious aspects of our lives. And in this fact is found the deepest epistemological and hermeneutical reasons why theology by its very nature should be seen as public theology (cf. van Huyssteen 2010:144-145).

Against this background it hopefully should be clear now why, as a Christian theologian interested in human origins and the controversial issue of human 'uniqueness', I have been increasingly drawn to the contributions of paleoanthropologists and archeologists to this challenging problem of what it means to be human. In my own recent work I have been deeply involved in trying to construct plausible ways for theology to enter into this important interdisciplinary conversation. As a way of facilitating this kind of cross-disciplinary dialogue I have argued for a *postfoundationalist* approach to interdisciplinary dialogue, which implies three important moves for theological reflection. *First*, as theologians we should acknowledge the radical contextuality of all our intellectual work, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that disciplinary traditions shape the values that inform our reflection about God and what we believe to be God's presence in the world. *Second*, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality should open our eyes to an epistemic obligation that points beyond the boundaries of our own discipline, our local communities, groups, or cultures, toward plausible forms of *interdisciplinary dialogue* (cf. van Huyssteen 1999). Against this background I have argued for distinct and important differences between reasoning strategies used by theologians and scientists. I have also, argued, however, that some important shared rational resources may actually be identified for these very different cognitive domains of our mental lives (cf. van Huyssteen 2006). *Thirdly*, it is precisely these shared rational resources that enable interdisciplinary dialogue, and are expressed most clearly by the notion of *transversal rationality*. In the dialogue between theology and other disciplines, transversal reasoning promotes different, non-hierarchical but equally legitimate ways of viewing specific topics, problems, traditions, or disciplines, and creates the kind of space where different voices need not always be in contradiction, or in danger of assimilating one another, but are in fact dynamically interactive with one another. This notion of transversality thus provides a philosophical window to our wider world of communication through thought and action (cf. Schrag 1992:148ff.; Welsch 1996:764ff.), and teaches us to construct bridge theories between disciplines, while respecting the disciplinary integrity of reasoning strategies as different as theology and the sciences. In this way an interdisciplinary approach, carefully thought through, can help us to identify these shared resources in different modes of knowledge so as to reach beyond the boundaries of our own traditional disciplines in cross-contextual, cross-disciplinary conversation. It can also enable us to identify possible shared conceptual problems as we negotiate the porous boundaries of our different disciplines.

One such shared interdisciplinary problem is the concern for 'what makes us human', for human uniqueness, and how that may, or may not, relate to human origins and the evolution of religious awareness. It is, therefore, precisely in the problem of 'human uniqueness' that theology and the sciences may find

a shared research trajectory. Our very human capacity (or mania?) for self-definition can most probably be seen as one of the ‘crowning achievements’ of our species. As we all know today, however, no one trait or accomplishment should ever be taken as the single defining characteristic of what it means to be human. Moreover, what we see as our humanness, or even our distinct human ‘uniqueness’, ultimately implies a deeply moral choice: we are not just biological creatures, but as cultural creatures we have the remarkable but dangerous ability to determine whom we are going to include, or not, as part of ‘us’(cf. Proctor 2003:228f.). Talking about human uniqueness in reasoning strategies as different as theology and the sciences, therefore, will always have a crucially important moral dimension

An interesting part of our self-perception is that it is often the less material aspects of the history of our species that fascinates us most in the evolution of modern humans. We seem to grasp at an intuitive level that issues like language, self-awareness, consciousness, moral awareness, symbolic behavior and mythology, are probably the defining elements that really make us human (cf. Lewin 1993:44). Yet exactly these elements that most suggest humanness are often the least visible in the prehistoric record. For this reason paleoanthropologists correctly have focused on more indirect, but equally plausible material pointers to the presence of the symbolic human mind in early human prehistory. Arguably the most spectacular of the earliest evidences of symbolic behaviour in humans are the paleolithic cave paintings in South West France and the Basque Country, painted toward the end of the last Ice Age. The haunting beauty of these prehistoric images, and the creative cultural explosion that they represent, should indeed fascinate any theologian interested in human origins (cf. van Huyssteen 2006).

## 2. CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: THE EMBODIED SELF

At first blush there does in fact seem to be a rather remarkable convergence between the evolutionary emergence of *Homo sapiens*, and Christian beliefs in the origins of the human creature (cf. García-Rivera 2003:9). In a sense the famous cultural explosion of the Upper-Paleolithic, roughly 35 thousand years ago, marks the beginning of a new species much as the creation myths of the Abrahamic religions refer to the arrival of a new species, created in the ‘image of God’<sup>1</sup>. But easy comparisons stop here, for in the classic texts of the ancient

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1 The first, and most important biblical reference to the *imago Dei*, is found in Gen. 1:26-28, set within the so-called Priestly creation narrative of Gen. 1:1-2:4a: 26 God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the skies, and over the

Near East the primal human being is seen as the significant forerunner of humanity, and as such defines the emerging relationship between humanity and the deity. The theologian, therefore, needs to be aware that the Genesis 1 texts are meant as clear expressions of the uniqueness of the primal human being, who occupies a position between the deity and humanity, and who is the only one who can lay claim to this distinction (cf. Callender 2000:206f.). Theologically, then, being created 'in the image of God' highlights the extraordinary importance of human beings: human beings are in fact walking representations of God, and as such of exquisite value and importance (cf. Towner 2001:26), a tradition that has been augmented centuries later by a very specific focus on the rational abilities and moral awareness of humans.

Therefore, easy comparisons between theology and paleoanthropology do indeed stop here, and over against two thousand years of complex conceptual evolution in the history of ideas of theology, the treasures from the Upper-Paleolithic today seem to have become almost impossible to interpret, their 'true meaning' so elusive that it is virtually impossible to recreate any 'original' context of meaning in which they were first created. Yet we join paleoanthropologists in sensing that these products of ancient imagery may hold the key to what it means to be human, which for theology may significantly broaden and enrich what is meant today by 'human uniqueness', especially if we shift our focus of inquiry to accommodate more contextual and particularist interpretations.

In April/May 2004, I had the privilege of delivering the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. The overall title for this lecture series on human uniqueness and evolution was *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*<sup>2</sup>. In this research venture I explored the interdisciplinary dialogue between theology, archeology, and paleoanthropology on questions of human uniqueness, and focused especially on the meaning of prehistoric European cave paintings as some of the oldest surviving expressions of human symbolic activity in the world. Through a multi-layered transversal conversation with various scientists, philosophers, and theologians, I was

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cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

27 So God created humanity in his image:  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.

28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the skies and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth."

In: W. Sibley Towner, *Genesis*. Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2001, 21ff.).

2 Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 2006.

able to explore converging hermeneutical and epistemological dimensions of the problem of human uniqueness and translate that back to a specific and radical reconstruction of a more embodied, moral, historical revisioning of the theological notion of the *image of God*.<sup>3</sup>

In the interdisciplinary conversation between theology and the sciences the boundaries between our disciplines and reasoning strategies are indeed shifting and porous, and deep theological convictions cannot be easily transferred to philosophy, or to science, to function as 'data' in foreign disciplinary systems. In the same manner, transversal reasoning does not imply that scientific data, paradigms, or worldviews, can be transported into theology to there set the agenda for theological reasoning.

These mutually critical tasks presuppose, however, the richness of the transversal moment in which theology and paleoanthropology may indeed find amazing connections on issues of human origins and uniqueness. Furthermore, I believe that the most responsible Christian theological way to look at human uniqueness requires, first of all, a move away from esoteric and baroquely abstract notions of human uniqueness, and second, a return to embodied notions of humanness, where our sexuality and embodied moral awareness are tied directly to our embodied self-transcendence as creatures who are predisposed to religious belief. I would further argue that, also from a paleoanthropological point of view, human uniqueness has emerged as a highly contextualized, embodied notion and is directly tied to the embodied, symbolizing minds of our prehistoric ancestors as physically manifested in the spectacularly painted cave walls of the Upper-Paleolithic. This not only opens up the possibility for converging arguments, from both theology and paleoanthropology, for the presence of religious awareness in our earliest Cro-Magon ancestors, but also for the plausibility of the larger argument: since the very beginning of the emergence of *Homo sapiens*, the evolution of those characteristics that made humans uniquely different from even their closest sister species, i.e., characteristics like consciousness, language, imagination, symbolic minds and symbolic behavior, has always included religious awareness and religious behavior.

Paleontologist Ian Tattersall has argued exactly this point: because every human society, at one stage or another, has possessed religion of some sort, complete with origin myths that purportedly explain the relationship of humans to the world around them, religion cannot be discounted from any discussion of typically human behaviors (1998:201). There is indeed a naturalness to religious imagination that challenges any viewpoint that would want to see

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3 For the publication of my Gifford Lectures in the United States of America and in Germany, and a translation in Swedish, see [www.vanhuyssteen.org](http://www.vanhuyssteen.org).

religion or religious imagination as an arbitrary or esoteric faculty of the human mind.

What has emerged from the work of scientists as diverse as Mithen (1996, 2006), Noble (Noble & Davidson 1996) and Davidson (1997), Donald (1993, 2002), Tattersall and Deacon, and should be of primary interest to theologians working on anthropology, is that human mental life includes biologically unprecedented ways of experiencing and understanding the world, from aesthetic experiences to spiritual contemplation (cf. van Huyssteen 2010). In a recent article, Terence Deacon makes the important point that the spectacular paleolithic imagery and the burial of the dead, though not final guarantees of shamanistic or religious activities, do suggest strongly the existence of sophisticated symbolic reasoning and a religious disposition of the human mind (cf. Deacon 2003:504ff.). The symbolic nature of *Homo sapiens* also explains why mystical or religious inclinations can even be regarded as an essentially universal attribute of human culture (cf. Deacon 1997:436), and opens up an important space for Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams's argument for a shamanistic interpretation of some of the most famous of the paleolithic imagery (cf. Lewis-Williams 1997; 2002; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998). There is in fact no culture that lacks a rich mythical, mystical, and religious tradition. The co-evolution of language and brain not only implies, however, that human brains could have been reorganized in response to language, but also alerts us to the fact that the consequences of this unprecedented evolutionary transition for human religious and spiritual development must be understood on many levels as well.

The idea that religious imagination might not be an isolated faculty of human rationality, and that mystical or religious inclinations can indeed be regarded as an essentially universal attribute of the human mind, has recently also been taken up in interdisciplinary discussion by some theologians. In a recent paper Niels Gregersen argues that imagination, and therefore also religious imagination, is not an isolated faculty of human rationality, but can be found at the very heart of human rationality. On this view, then, the same 'naturalness' of imagination also applies to religious imagination, and religious imagination should not be seen as something extra or esoteric that can be added, or subtracted, from other mental states (cf. Gregersen 2003:1f.,23). More importantly, though, a theory about the emergence of religious imagination and religious concepts does not at all answer the philosophical question about the validity of religion, or the even more complex theological question whether, and in what form, religious imagination refers to some form of reality or not. As an *interdisciplinary* problem, however, the reasons that may undergird the unreasonable effectiveness of religious belief and thought may transcend the scope of any one discipline when it comes to evaluating the integrity of religious belief. In this specific conversation we

can hopefully reach an interdisciplinary agreement that religious imagination and religious concepts should be treated equally with all other sorts of human reflection. Religious imagination should, therefore, be treated as an integral part of human cognition, not separable from our other cognitive endeavours. What became clear, then, is that *the potential arose in the mind* to undertake science, create art, and to discover the need and ability for religious belief. Clearly early human behavior is not understood if we do not take this religious dimension into account.

I suggest that a theological appropriation of these rich and complex results of science at the very least should inspire the public theologian carefully to trace and rethink the complex evolution of the notion of human uniqueness, or the *imago Dei*, in theology. Interpretations of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* have indeed varied dramatically throughout the long history of Christianity (cf. van Huyssteen 2006:111-162). Theologians are now challenged to rethink what human uniqueness might mean for the human person, a being that has emerged biologically as a center of self-awareness, identity, and moral responsibility. Personhood, when reconceived in terms of embodied imagination, symbolic propensities, and cognitive fluidity, may enable theology to revision its notion of the *imago Dei* as an idea that does not imply superiority or a greater value than animals or earlier hominids, but which might express a specific task and purpose to set forth the presence of God in this world (cf. Hefner 1998:88). I would therefore call for a revisioning of the notion of the *imago Dei* in ways that would not be overly abstract and exotically baroque, that instead acknowledges our embodied existence, our close ties to the animal world and *its* uniqueness, and to those hominid ancestors that came before us, while at the same time focusing on what our symbolic and cognitively fluid minds might tell us about the emergence of an embodied human uniqueness, consciousness, and personhood, and the propensity for religious awareness and experience.

The most challenging aspect of an interdisciplinary dialogue between theology and paleoanthropology, however, may be for theology to lift up the specific limitations of this conversation. This implies a quite specific appeal from theology to the sciences: an appeal for a sensitivity to that which is particular to the broader, non-empirical or philosophical dimensions of theological discourse. This kind of disciplinary integrity means that Christian theology has an obligation to explore other issues that are crucial for understanding human uniqueness, issues that may not be empirically accessible. My argument for interdisciplinarity has been precisely about the fact that Christian theology is answerable to canons of inquiry defensible within the various domains of our common discourse (cf. Brown 1994:4ff.). And in this open, interdisciplinary dialogue we can learn that criteria for human uniqueness, whether in theology or the sciences, should never be the sole possession of a single perspective or

discipline. Because of the transversal rationality of interdisciplinary discourse, not only shared interests and common concerns, but also criteria from other reasoning strategies can be appropriated. This certainly is one way in which a multidisciplinary approach to the problem of human uniqueness can lead to interdisciplinary results when we discover that criteria not only overlap, but can ultimately be shared in reasoning strategies as diverse as theology and science.

In this kind of interdisciplinary conversation theology can actually help to significantly broaden the scope of what is meant by 'human uniqueness.' *Homo sapiens* is not only distinguished by its remarkable embodied brain, by a stunning mental cognitive fluidity expressed in imagination, creativity, linguistic abilities, and symbolic propensities. As real-life, embodied persons of flesh and blood we humans are also affected by hostility, arrogance, ruthlessness and cunning, and therefore are inescapably caught between what we have come to call 'good and evil'. This experience of good and evil, and theological distinctions between evil, moral failure, sin, tragedy, and redemption, lie beyond the empirical scope of the fossil record, and therefore beyond the scope of science. It certainly is our evolutionarily developed bodies that are the bearers of human uniqueness, and it is precisely this embodied existence that confronts us with the realities of vulnerability, tragedy, and affliction. For the scientist drawn to the more comprehensive, complementary picture of the dimension of meaning in which *Homo sapiens* has existed since its very beginning, theology may provide a key to understanding the profound tragic dimensions of human existence, but also why religious belief has provided our distant ancestors, and us, with dimensions of hope, redemption and grace.

### 3. A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST APPROACH TO INTERDISCIPLINARY PROBLEMS

What we have certainly learned from this interdisciplinary project, is that we should not underestimate the transversal capacity of a tradition to absorb novelty and author new forms of understanding in cross-disciplinary conversation. For an interdisciplinary theology there is no return possible to a premodern notion of tradition as a repository of privileged data and specially protected, exclusive criteria. My argument for interdisciplinarity has been precisely about the fact that Christian theology, as quintessentially public theology, should be answerable to canons of inquiry defensible within, and across the various domains of our common discourse. And in this open, interdisciplinary dialogue we have learned that criteria for human uniqueness, whether in theology or the sciences, can never be the sole possession of one discipline, or exclusively shaped by a one disciplinary perspective only. Because of the transversal rationality of interdisciplinary discourse, not only shared interests and common concerns,

but also criteria from other reasoning strategies can indeed be appropriated, precisely to enrich and enhance our understanding of that which has been identified as an interdisciplinary problem. And as far as the interdisciplinary problem of human uniqueness is concerned, this has certainly proved to be one way in which a multidisciplinary approach can lead to interdisciplinary results when we discover that criteria not only overlap, but can ultimately be shared in reasoning strategies as diverse as theology and science. Clearly, if no criteria are acceptable beyond the boundaries of a discipline, then the giving of reasons for arguments beyond the boundaries of that discipline would become impossible. If, however, there are interdisciplinary criteria, even if just limited to that brief but shared transversal overlap between disciplines, then a carefully demarcated interdisciplinary dialogue indeed becomes possible. And in this interdisciplinary dialogue, then, our accountability for the giving of reasons, the providing of warrants for our views, becomes a cross-disciplinary obligation (cf. van Huyssteen 2006:308f.).

A multi-dimensional or interdisciplinary understanding of rationality should enable us to move away from abstract, over-generalized models or blue-prints for doing interdisciplinary work, and specifically for engaging in the dialogue between Christian theology and the sciences. This should enable us to focus on developing, first contextually, then transversally, the merits of each concrete interdisciplinary problem in terms of the very specific science or theology involved. In exactly this sense, then, I have argued that an awareness of the radical social and historical contextuality of our rational reflection should always imply that the rather vague terms 'theology and science' should be replaced by a focus on specific theologians who are trying to develop very specific kinds of theologies, and who are attempting to enter into disciplinary dialogue with very specific scientists working within the disciplinary context of specified sciences on clearly defined, shared problems or even research trajectories.

A postfoundationalist approach to interdisciplinary problems helps us to understand that we are rational agents situated in the rich, narrative texture of our social practices and traditions, and that our self-awareness and self-conceptions are indispensable starting points for interdisciplinary dialogue. And precisely because we are so embedded in the narrative structure of our social practices and traditions, the overall patterns of our experience reach back transversally in time to experiential patterns, contexts, and traditions of the past. And it is against this background that I have argued for the epistemic importance of thinking of social context in terms of the very diverse research traditions in theology and the sciences. What this means in real-life interdisciplinary conversations is that our embeddedness in cultural and other traditions in a sense is unavoidable: a specific research tradition, however, is unavoidable only as a starting point, and never as a final destination. On this

view a postfoundationalist approach helps to realize that we are not intellectual prisoners of our contexts or traditions, but that we are actually epistemically empowered to cross contextual, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries to explore critically the theories, meanings, and beliefs that we and others construct of our worlds.

I have, then, argued, for a revisioning of theology's public voice, and for the clearing of an interdisciplinary space where not only the diverse and pluralist forms of theological reflection, but also important voices from the sciences might explore possible overlapping epistemological patterns as well as shared problems in ongoing interdisciplinary conversation. A postfoundationalist notion of rationality enables us to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, to move transversally from disciplinary context to disciplinary context, from one discipline to another. The tentative and shared mutual understanding we achieve through this I have named, following others, a wide reflective equilibrium. And it is in this fragile, communal understanding that we may discover the strengths and limitations of interdisciplinary dialogue (cf. van Huyssteen 1999; 2006:310).

If the origin of the human mind is indeed closely tied to the kind of cognitive fluidity that includes symbolic and mythical dimensions, then the origins of our cognitive behavior is indeed not fully understood unless we also take seriously the origins of religious behavior. On this view, as I have argued, the prehistory of the human mind points to the naturalness of religions, and supports the broader argument for the rationality and plausibility of religious belief. For the theologian engaged in interdisciplinary dialogue this will not provide any argument for the existence of God, but the naturalness of religious belief might give more credibility to the way theologians express themselves in more contextual ways when presupposing the reality of God within the disciplinary boundaries of theology itself.

In my recent book (2006) an analysis of the Genesis 1:26-28 texts revealed that these texts not only recognize the primal human symbolically as the first human and as the significant forerunner of humanity, but more importantly, as the link that as such defines the relationship between God and humanity. Against this background every human is created in the image of God, and these ancient texts are clear expressions of the uniqueness of human beings as walking representations of God on earth. In this ancient creation story we humans are indeed seen as the culminating achievement of God: alone of all creatures we are said to be made in God's image and invited into a personal relationship with God. When read within the rich context of other Genesis texts (Gen. 3:22; Gen. 9:1-7) and also Psalm 8, the notion of the human as the *imago Dei*, crowned in glory, now also emerges with a deeper and more sinister second meaning: humans are revealed as not only 'crowned in glory', but as also deeply distorted, affected by hostility, affliction, arrogance,

ruthlessness and cunning, and as inescapably caught between good and evil. In the Old Testament texts the first humans thus emerge as real-life, embodied persons of flesh and blood, and within the holism of Hebrew anthropology the notion of the *imago Dei* finally and strikingly functions like a hologram where the original image is visible from certain perspectives, but at other times the reality of sin and evil is revealed and the tragic dimensions of human existence dominate. This is also the reason why I argued that the meaning of the 'image of God' texts are not only powerfully interactive with one another, but have to be linked directly to Gen 3:22. Here the image of God, theologically at least, achieves an enigmatic and ambiguous new level of meaning, when in addition to the original created likeness, 'knowing good and evil', a 'falling upwards' into moral awareness (cf. Petersen 2003:179), now emerges as a new and profound way of imaging God.

In the New Testament, the image of God is tied directly to Jesus Christ. Moreover, Jesus so absolutely preempts the role of the image of God that the vocation and destiny of human beings can be realized only through a redemptive transformation of their spirit. In the long history of theological thought the notion of the *imago Dei* had a mosaic, chequered history that sometimes expressed important dimensions of the original ancient texts, and sometimes soared free from the deepest intentions of these texts as it progressively evolved from substantive interpretations that highlight reason, intellect, and rationality; functionalist interpretations that express our tasks as humans to be God's stewards on earth; androcentric interpretations that ignored the role and place of women; existentialist or relational interpretations that focus on our relationship with God and with one another; trinitarian notions that claim to ground this relationality; and eschatological notions that focus on our openness to others and on the proleptic destiny of our finally becoming the image of God in the arrival of God's future.

In my critique of these many interpretations of the *imago Dei* in the history of Christianity, I tried to highlight the continuity of the core ideas of this central Christian doctrine, and how they functioned as the gravitational pull of this powerful tradition. At the same time I tried to show how many of these notions lured us into the 'twilight zone of abstraction' where unembodied theological notions of human uniqueness floated above body and nature in exotically baroque, overly abstract, metaphysical speculations. I also argued, however, that exciting recent developments in theological anthropology point to a retrieval of exactly the earthy, embodied dimensions of humanness that we encountered in the ancient texts. In a striking image Robert Jenson sees *Homo sapiens* as the praying animal, and Adam and Eve as the first hominid group that, in whatever form of religion or language, by ritual action were embodied before God. On this view Christian theology is liberated from the obligation to stipulate morphological characteristics that would absolutely distinguish

prehumans from humans in the process of evolutionary succession (cf. Jenson 1999:59). In Philip Hefner's work, the human being, as a product of biocultural evolution, emerges within natural evolutionary processes as a symbiosis of genes and culture, as a fully embodied being, as God's created co-creator (cf. Hefner 1993:277). In Phyllis Bird and Michael Welker's writings there is a very conscious move away from theological abstraction towards seeing the *imago Dei* in a highly contextualized, embodied sense that respects the sexual differentiation between men and women, even as they exercise responsible care and multiply and spread over the earth (cf. Welker 1999:68).

It also became clear how easy it would be to criticize the notion of the *imago Dei* for missing the powerful thrust it should have had towards justice, human rights, and especially on issues of sexism and heterosexism. In my historical overview of the history of the idea of the image of God in my recent book (2006), it became clear that already in Calvin's work there was a strong suggestion that the image of God has important ethical implications, and as such directly requiring human justice and mercy. For a number of theologians our 'human uniqueness' is in fact powerfully exemplified by the fact that we image God concretely in our love for others, and for the world for which we are responsible. This crucial idea was developed further in the work of Richard Middleton where, instead of the traditional picture of the *imago Dei* as a mirror reflecting God, this canonical notion now emerges as a prism refracting God's presence through a multitude of sociocultural responsibilities and activities. For Middleton the *imago Dei* correctly implies an ethic of interhuman relationships and ecological practice, an idea powerfully resonating with George Newlands' argument for the radical ethical dimension of all interdisciplinary work in theology and science. Newlands ultimately roots ethics in the liberating character of the *imago Dei*, and rightly claims that an ethics of care implies care for, and solidarity with the marginalized at a fundamental, interdisciplinary level. Thus conceived, the *imago Dei* points to reconciliation, justice, and liberation, and strikingly reveals the issue of human rights to be at the very heart of any discussion of the *imago Dei* (cf. van Huyssteen 2006: 132-162).

#### 4. IN CONCLUSION

In the final chapter of my *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (2006), I argued that in the work of scholars as diverse as Gordon Kaufman, Christian Smith, Abraham Heschel, Edward Farley, and Alasdair MacIntyre, the theme of human embodiment has been even more powerfully developed in ways that enhance and complement what has been argued by theologians Robert Jenson, Philip Hefner, Phyllis Bird, and Michael Welker. And in this chapter, it became clear that also in Edward Farley's interdisciplinary argument human uniqueness can never be defined as an

abstract, intellectual or spiritual capacity, because our embodied existence directly implies that our human specificity is the specificity of a species. And, for both Farley and Alasdair MacIntyre, whatever our degree of difference from other animals may be, it is *our evolutionary developed bodies* that are the bearers of human uniqueness, and it is this embodied existence that confronts us with the realities of vulnerability and affliction. For Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, exactly this vulnerability is deeply embedded in our bodily existence. For this reason the image of God is not found in some intellectual or spiritual capacity, but in the whole embodied human being, 'body and soul'. In fact, the image of God is not found *in* humans, but the image *is* the human, and for this reason *imago Dei* can only be read as *imitatio Dei*: to be created in God's image means we should act like God, and so attain holiness by caring for others and for the world.

What we find in the work of these scholars is a rediscovery of the meaning of embodiment for theological anthropology, and the beginnings of a revisioning of notions of human uniqueness and the *imago Dei* that not only resonate powerfully with the embodied, flesh-and-blood primal humans we encounter in the Genesis texts, but also with the embodied symbolic minds of our prehistoric ancestors, who in a burst of creativity and imagination left for us a spectacular material heritage in the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic. What is clear, then is that personhood, when richly reconceived in terms of imagination, symbolic propensities, and cognitive fluidity, may enable theology also to revision its notion of the *imago Dei* as a concept that acknowledges our close ties to our sister species in the animal world while at the same time challenging us to rethink our own species specificity, and in that sense our difference from other species, and what our symbolic and cognitively fluid minds might tell us about the emergence of the typically human propensity for religious awareness and experience. This brings me to what I see as probably the most important interdisciplinary result of the multidisciplinary conversation between public theology and paleoanthropology: if scientific contributions to understanding the issue of human uniqueness is taken seriously, the theological notion of the *imago Dei* is powerfully revisioned as *emerging from nature itself*. For the theologian this interdisciplinary move implies that God used natural history for religion and for religious belief to emerge as a natural phenomenon. To think of the 'image of God' as having emerged from nature by natural evolutionary processes emphasizes our vital connection with nature precisely by focusing on our species specificity. In addition, this transversal, interpretative move also honors the intention of the classical biblical texts and does not necessarily imply that nature as a whole should now be seen as 'created in the image of God', but, for theological reasons that are fair and compassionate, limits the notion of the *imago Dei* to *Homo sapiens*.

Therefore, I would conclude that public, interdisciplinary reasoning has here negotiated a shared, transversal space where theologians and scientists can explore a wide reflective equilibrium of agreement on what embodied existence means, and why it may have different, but equally important consequences for different disciplines. In sharing this transversal moment, the theologian may be immeasurably enriched by taking on board the scientific implications of human embodiment for imagination, for creativity, and for our propensities symbolic awareness and religious fulfillment. The scientist may be enriched by learning how these powerful symbolic and religious propensities cannot be discussed generically for all religions, but only come alive in the living faith of specific religious systems where they are augmented in ways that scientific methodology cannot anticipate. On this view the nuanced, sympathetic scientist would want to acknowledge that there is more to embodied human uniqueness than paleoanthropology or neuroscience could explain. The public theologian should have learned, however, that overly abstract, disembodied notions of human uniqueness not only betray the heart of his or her own canonical, textual traditions, but also dangerously isolate theological discourse by destroying the possibility of interdisciplinary dialogue.

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