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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/23099089/actat.v42i2.18

ISSN: 1015-8758 (Print)

ISSN: 2309-9089 (Online)

Acta Theologica 2022
42(2):276-293

Date received:
15 June 2022

Date accepted:
05 October 2022

Date published:
14 December 2022

On being uniquely human in the world: a reflection on the contributions of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen[1]

ABSTRACT

This article recognises the suspicion and tension between theology and modern science as two distinct areas of discipline. In this instance, the contributions of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen are taken seriously, in order to illustrate how a bridge has been constructed instead of a separating wall between these disiplines. Van Huyssteen spent his life in the pursuit of the love of life and the uniqueness of being human in the world. He used an interdisciplinary approach to stimulate the interface between theology and modern science. Van Huyssteen's life and work have revolutionised the discussion on human life, the origin of religion, the quest for religion, and the constructive sense of rationality and spirituality as important ways of understanding the meaning and function of human uniqueness in terms of the reality of the image of God (imago Dei) in human beings. This article was initially meant to celebrate Prof. van Huyssteen's 80th birthday on 29 April 2022. Now it remains a token of appreciation in memory of his admirable life and lasting legacy.

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at

1 This essay remains my hearty expression of deep appreciation and respect for the life of Prof. J.W. van Huyssteen (1942-2022), whom I will continually remember fondly.

1. INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

How can Christian theology relate with modern science? Can theology make any sense of human sciences? What could be the boundaries and convergences between the two disciplines? This article addresses these questions that have been variously answered by many theologians with an interest in sciences, and by many scientists with an interest in theology. The turn of the 20th century presents a kind of aversion to modern science, especially by dogmatic theologians such as Karl Barth, among others. From exchanges with one of his teachers, Adolf von Harnack, the chapter of human sciences and experiences nearly closed forever as an example of human rebellion against the revelation of God. This trend caused a huge gap between theology and science. Science and technology opened a new world, the modern world. Everything was subjected to the scrutiny and celebration of human sciences. The idea of God's revelation became old fashioned and even more of a suspect than what could or should be accepted as the truth.

Nevertheless, this gap was later bridged by the ongoing exchange of ideas between theology and the sciences. In this interface, there was no feeling of fundamentalism that only destroyed the actual coexistence of these two fields and where it existed. The aim was not to harmonise everything and clear out possible tensions, but rather to stimulate some necessary interface that should be viewed as organic to the rise and development of human knowledge and selfhood. There is no need for total separation, rejection or condemnation of one by the other. There is always the need for close collaboration and combination of ideas that may lead to healthy corrections of extremisms. Science became the key to the new life of modern humanity. Theology continued to be the old mother of human sustenance from, and beyond itself. The reality of God in theology was not the product of theology as a field or of theologians as wise thinkers. The reality of God is both pre-theological and pre-scientific. In this article, I closely reflect on some of the notable contributions by Prof. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, who would have turned 80 on 29 April 2022. It was so striking that he left this world on 18 February 2022 after his last message to me on 15 January:

> Dear Hassan:
> Thank you again for your wonderful message! I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your kindness. I retired from beautiful Princeton a few years ago – a very painful and tasking position after 25 year of teaching all over the world. We now live in Cape Town. I have settled down and actually will turn 80 in April. Thanks again for your good understanding of my work. It has always been my whole life!
> With my warmest regards,
> Wentzel van Huyssteen

To me, personally, this is a way of further learning and actual celebration of the life of Prof. Van Huyssteen who spent his life bridging the gap between theology and modern science. Van Huyssteen wrote as much throughout his life and academic career as he wrote to me on the connecting factors or meeting points of theology and science. Modern science and modern theology are still very different fields of learning and reasoning; yet there are some areas of deep common interest and critical engagement. I do not intend to smoothen the differences; yet, it would be my interest to continue the conversation.

One aspect that makes this study very significant for me is that it has an existential turn and thrust within it for the life of humanity in the world. This life has been envisaged as the life of harmony, trust, and care for one another. I write as an African who lives in an African context of great chaos and disharmony. The history of apartheid in South Africa reminds us often of human misunderstanding and misuse of the gift of creation and the gift of life as a blessing for the other. The idea of human segregation was but an act of human self-interest, self-centredness, and self-worship. This made some people think that they are so special and so superior to others. This idea of segregation became the racial embarrassment of the modern world. It was the root problem of the holocaust in Germany, the civil unrest in America, the terrible servitude of the Africans, and so on. It is still sad that the idolatrous "gods" of Africa, namely tribalism, ethnicity, racism, xenophobia, and so on are still being worshipped by many in different parts of Africa, where life would have been truly free, loved, and honoured (Turaki 1997).

I will explore and reflect on the contributions of J. Wentzel van Huyssteen in search for the uniqueness of humanity and the natural call and task of not only seeing the other, but seeing the other with dignity, as an object of love, as the reflection and representation of God (Mouton 2007; 2013; Smit 1995). It is hoped that this paradigm will stimulate anew some new challenges on the interface between theology and science as well as the wisdom and sacredness of being human.

2. WHAT MAKES US HUMAN?

Van Huyssteen attempted to strike the balance between the human removed from the world of sciences and the scientific human removed from the world of the religious and the issue of God. He raised the issue of the basic reason or giftedness of being human in the world. The question, "What makes us human?", is a legitimate adventure into the new discovery of humanity in the modern world against and beyond all extremity, with the hope of reminding us of our interconnection as God's creation (Van Huyssteen 2010b). Van Huyssteen recognised and picked the challenge of our being human seriously

from a theological anthropological starting point into a new sense of being created in Christ, namely in the Christological light of being human. In his opinion, he viewed his task more as one of public theology than as a witness to the truth of humanity in relation to God and oneself and other selves. For, this is

> 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 (Van Huyssteen 2010b:143).

This basically leads to a combination of ideas rather than the actual negation of the possible interaction that should be noted and promoted between them. The secular academy is also a sacred aspect for the church. The entire sphere of life as the creation of God cannot be fragmented, in order to fit the choices and the will of humankind. Rather, all of these spheres must be critically recognised as the spheres of life, not in terms of either/or, but in terms of both/and. This is when the sacred and the secular become the basic spheres of life and not simply spheres of human choices.

The method for this kind of public theological engagement has been explained as "interdisciplinary", not only in terms of its style, but more so in terms of its critical texture.

> For an interdisciplinary, public theology the realization is precisely that our events of articulation lie transversally across both discursive and non-discursive actions in time and space (Van Huyssteen 2010b:144).

One of the central notions that van Huyssteen has closely read and attempted to articulate in most of his works is the uniqueness of humanity as being "created in the image of God" and this is the presentation of "the human self as the embodied self." Van Huyssteen (2010b:146) argues:

> 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.

For me, the contention does not lie in the origins, as science has tried to describe it since the 19th century, but rather in the actual being of humanity in terms of both its origin and critical engagement with the science of being in the world. The idea of the being of *Homo sapiens* and the scientific doctrine of evolution has been the human quest for the harmonisation of the world through biological means. This has been the critical result of human observation and theoretical understanding of the world from a certain sense of origin, especially when what is original has totally eluded all scientific methods of

critical experimentation. The scientific philosophical reconstruction of history, which gives it its own kind of origin, remained. Nevertheless, Van Huyssteen continually kept the biblical narrative of creation and the principle of general and specific creation order in perspective, not in terms of the fragmentation of creation towards ideological fundamentalism that led to the construction of social and scientific theories, due to human speculation. This led to the differentiation of humankind and the remainder of creation, which generally produced the competitive chaos of elimination and the constant tensions in the world. Van Huyssteen (2010b:149) took the idea of a radical split of Christians between human beings created in the image of God and other creatures seriously, not to point out the distinctive uniqueness of humanity as a means of destruction of other creatures, but rather to bring a sense of awareness and interconnectedness, which this articles endeavours to emphasise, with special interest in the African context.

Van Huyssteen (2010b:150) provides a radical move from theological anthropology to Christology. For me, this move is one from a specific origin to a specific reconstructed destination. This may not be a smooth journey from beginning to end, mainly because of the fallenness or the limitation of the nature of humanity, which, at some point, gave rise to the history of evil and the chaos of rebellion. This has been viewed as a major challenge of the interface between Christian theological thinking and scientific reasoning.

> The interdisciplinary conversation between paleoanthropology and Christian theology will then show that this holistic approach to an integrated, embodied self will present special challenges, but also exciting possibilities for theological anthropology (Van Huyssteen 2010b:151).

Such a critical recognition involves and leaves open the idea of conversation or close engagement, not because one field of learning and presentation is out to eliminate the other, but mainly because there is a need for mutual engagement between, and enrichment of one from the other. The challenges of theology may not be from its original sense of limitation or inadequacy, but are rather located in the limitation or the inadequacy of human understanding and application of its principles.

> Against this background any theological discussion of anthropology and Christology should start with an interdisciplinary conversation with the sciences and philosophy on what we are learning today about the evolution of consciousness and morality (Van Huyssteen 2010b:151).

This could be a testimony to the complexity of being human in the world and to the complexity of behavioural science of life as a particular self and as a community of selves. The idea of evolution, in this context, would specifically

mean the process and science of development from one stage of awareness or consciousness to another. I would call this inner evolution, which is primarily the evolution of ideas. This could be traced from one point of being human to another.

The idea of evolution, as the science of inner development, is also related to the theological notion of the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ, as noted in the contributions by Gregersen (2015; 2016) and Urbaniak (2018), among others. The idea of the knowledge of God is far beyond a particular scientific discovery or observation. Rather, it is mainly the discernment of the being of God in God's own revelation by means of God's incarnation.

> If thus the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ is deeply incarnational, that is, embodied in Jesus and embedded in the history of Jesus, then no single interpretation of Christ can claim to be final knowledge of God, or even final knowledge of what God has done for us in Christ (Van Huyssteen 2010b:152).

This limitation is viewed in terms of human scientific knowledge and not in terms of the reality of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The incarnation of God in Jesus has been the leading testimony of the Gospels in that Jesus of Nazareth is, in fact, God dwelling in the flesh among humanity (John 1:14). This implies divine intrusion into the fixed reality of the world but always beyond that fixity. This is the realisation of the incarnation, not as the limitation of God, but rather as the beauty of divine power of love and creativity.

Human new self-consciousness and God consciousness are also found in this sense of new knowledge of God, not as a separated being from the world, but as God who is involved (Van Huyssteen 2010b:153). In light of this new manifestation of God in the flesh, the idea of following Jesus is a moral imperative (Van Huyssteen 2010b:155).

> Learning to follow Jesus, learning 'to do what Jesus did', is to learn to find the trajectory on which others preceded us in interpretation and action by internalizing what we interpretatively recognize as normative for our current contexts (Van Huyssteen 2010b:157).

3. THE EMERGENCE OF PERSONHOOD

Van Huyssteen also creatively traces the scientific and theological patterns to the discovery of the "personhood" of human beings. This is done within the notion of human evolutionary embodiment (Van Huyssteen 2010a; 2011). The evolution of morality and religion were the primary areas of concern in his

correlation of human beingness with human behaviour or ethical action (Van Huyssteen 2014: 1036):

> The evolution of the human self has been discovered as a necessary movement of humanity into the social and moral aspect.

This is observed, not only in the human knowledge of other things and other persons apart from oneself, but also in that which brings them together in proper recognition and celebration of their togetherness. This point of contact from human beings to other creatures of the world has become one of the most seminal findings and open-ended points of interest in the life and work of Van Huyssteen.

Van Huyssteen drew from the wealth of knowledge of critical scientific scholars such as Sheets-Johnstone (1990) who relate the evolutionary experience of humanity with the "evolution of empathy into moral awareness and a rationality of care" (Van Huyssteen 2014:1038; see Sheets-Johnstone 2008). Louw (2008), a South African practical theologian, also discovers the contours of being human in the rationality of care for life and the construction of a spirituality of care in the world. For Louw, as in Van Huyssteen and Sheets-Johnstone, the idea of care has been the central connection, from the perspective of empathy, as the essence of recognition and contact. Human beings become truly human when they come into contact with other human beings. This is surely the celebration of the African notion of *ubuntu*, the philosophy of human connectedness which naturally leads to the relations of love and care for the other. The contradiction of the moral and ethical response to the needy and the vulnerable at the point of contact in history becomes the denial of our humanity before the open humanity of others.

Van Huyssteen also discussed the uniqueness of human rationality and embodiment as an ongoing revealing and connecting aspect. In embodiment, the humanity of others becomes visible and new features of human cultures and ethical paradigms also evolve. This is when the theory of being becomes the action of being. In the process of embodiment, we observe and sense the need for adjustment, expansion, and accommodation for the sake of the other.

The notion of embodiment also becomes evident to neuroscience. This has been examined from the perspective of "embodied cognitive neuroscience" (Van Huyssteen 2014:1038). According to Van Huyssteen (2014:1040),

> [e]mbodiment here means both the embedding of cognitive processes in brain circuitry and the origins of these processes in an organism's sensory-motor experience.

The brain remains the faculty of receiving and processing information for action in and from the human self. This faculty remains actively integrated in its connections. Van Huyssteen (2014:1040) further explains that

> the embodied cognitive perspective sees mind and brain as a biological system that is rooted in body experience and interaction with other individuals.

Van Huyssteen further follows Sheets-Johnstone to discuss the idea of "transparent bodies", which remains a general moral and even spiritual possibility. This idea of transparent bodies does not lie outside the human sense of being, but in its centre. This is the possibility of seeing through the body into the self. This sense of transparency is found at the heart of human embodiment. This is why we do not simply "have bodies", but in our being human, we "are bodies". This sense of being is no doubt embedded in our sense of human subjectivity, in which the "human subjectivity is embedded in the world, with the body acting as its mediator" (Van Huyssteen 2014:1040). The idea of being and mediation remains the intersubjective interface of the possibility for human communication. Without this interface or relationality, the human self remains mute from within and makes no sense from without.

Van Huyssteen also identifies the notion of "mirror neurons and intentions" from within the human self. He argued that

> there is an implicit resonance with the expressions of others, while our own body and emotional reactions through emotional contagion show how the body works as a tacitly 'felt mirror' of the other (Van Huyssteen 2014:1041).

Following Fuchs (2005a; 2005b), Van Huyssteen (2014:1041) argues that "we use the operative intentionality of our own bodies as instruments for understanding the other's intentions".

The human self does not remain isolated and distant from within itself; rather, it remains close and connected as well as open to communicate with other selves. This connection in communication is found in the behavioural aspects of human emotions and willpower. The emotions of "empathy and attachment" are obvious aspects of this connection. Van Huyssteen examines the theory of attachment in conversation with Kirkpatrick (2005). According to this theory, human behaviour becomes and remains communicable in terms of "[a]ttachment and relationships" (Van Huyssteen 2014:1041). The idea of relationship coming in and from human attachment remains as broad as possible. Yet it can be subdivided into categories of thinking and examination, which correlate with the idea of "[a]ttachment and religion". In this instance, the consciousness of the human being is awakened to the consciousness of

God. God in relation to the human being thus remains an attachment figure, namely that which can be accessed cognitively, that is, in the process of thinking as the process of being and trusting.

> Seeing God as an attachment figure offers new ways of thinking about such core religious phenomena/conceptions such as the image of God, prayer, religious development, and conversion (Van Huyssteen 2014:1041).

Van Huyssteen (2014:1043) reflects on religious beliefs and scientific explanations and concludes on the impossibility for human final distinction on what is true or false about them. This does not mean accepting any or every religious claim as valid or inconclusive. It points to the possibility and impossibility of our understanding of the other's ultimate notions or motives on their religious views. Yet, as Jesus mentioned, "by their fruit you shall know them". This keeps the correlation between religion and ethics or being and action.

Another distinguishing mark in personhood is the workings of the inner logic of human beings. The human brain/mind is naturally adaptive. From an evolutionary scientific point of view, the idea of being adaptive is being correct (Van Huyssteen 2014:1043). This may not be a means or pattern of excusing any or every human action on the ground of some kind of automatic correctness. It remains an open question to search, wait, see, and discern. The human mind moves by time, space, and the actions of others. This surely leads to the moral and spiritual correlation of the mind or the brain into producing what is required, given the time and space in question. According to Van Huyssteen (2014:1043),

> [o]nce this is acknowledged, there is no *a priori* reason to believe that any particular kind of belief, whether religious or not, should be expected to be correct or incorrect.

At this point, Van Huyssteen turns to the notion of religious relativity. This does not mean the end of truth in or of every religion; rather, it calls attention to a certain space and time in what Derrida (1967) would call "difference", in order to closely examine the depth of any given idea without quick acceptance or uncritical dismissal. The potentiality of religions should be closely and critically examined, so that the goodness they bear may be viewed and accepted, irrespective of the distance in time and space. Van Huyssteen turns the argument the other way, in order not to directly assume the human mind/brain as something automatically perfect but rather as open to critical scrutiny and examination especially by ourselves.

> The mind is designed in such a way that, depending on any number of factors, it sometimes draws correct inferences and sometimes incorrect ones (Van Huyssteen 2014:1043).

The relationship of neuroscience and religious experience is also another aspect of Van Huyssteen's contributions. He ventures into neuroscientific studies in conversation with Patrick McNamara (2009), among others. In his correlation of religion and neuroscience, Van Huyssteen (2014:1043) appealed to McNamara when he explains that

> [f]or McNamara, it is exactly the deep religious propensities of the human mind that cannot be explained by naturalistic evolutionary accounts of human nature and behavior.

From his observation of McNamara's submission, Van Huyssteen noted a sense of depth and distance in religion compared to that which evolves naturally. No doubt from a scientific point of view, there must always be something natural, even in that which is religious.

> As a neuroscientist, McNamara wants to develop his own central conviction that religion is a defining mark of what it means to be human, as emblematic of its bearer as the web of the spider (Van Huyssteen 2014:1043; McNamara 2009:ix).

Van Huyssteen points us to the normal function of religions when he argues that "when religions are operating normally, they tend to create a healthy, unified and integrated sense of self".

Van Huyssteen (2014:1044) discovered that religion is essential for the creation and maintenance of the "executive self" (see McNamara 2009):

> As for the evolutionary status of religion, this implies that religion is not, as is often argued, an unfortunate by-product of more useful cognitive capacities of the human mind.

The disenchantment with religious world views often comes from a kind of heartbrokenness of humanity from the abuse of religion. This sense of inner human conflict could be viewed as the problem of "the divided self" (Van Huyssteen 2014:1044). This is the crisis of the human will and desire when the self becomes the king of the body in terms of the will. The notion of sensitivity to the needs of the self is deeply neglected or suppressed by the self-imposed power of the will. This is when the human being becomes conflictual from within.[2]

2 Derrida: "I am at war with myself." (cf. Cohen 2012:239-257).

I now briefly explore some paradigms in Van Huyssteen's interests and contribution, especially in his attempt to build a bridge between theology and modern science.

4. HUMAN UNIQUENESS IN THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE?

It is hardly surprising that human distinctiveness is taken as a theological problem between theology and science. At best, this is a quest within which the meaning and the function of human life are discerned and oriented towards its good goals. At worst, it is only an ideological battle of the mind between theologians and scientists. Van Huyssteen moved beyond the crisis situation and its ideological interest to a more balanced approach in his "interdisciplinary approach", in order to lead and guide useful conversations between the two fields of learning and life (Van Huyssteen 1998; Brown 1994). In his own words, Van Huyssteen (2014:1044; 1999; 2006a) argues that, 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 system.

From his interdisciplinary approach, Van Huyssteen (2014:1044) moved to the notion of "transversal reasoning":

> Transversal reasoning does mean that theology and science can share concerns and converge on commonly identified conceptual problems such as the problem of human uniqueness.

This further leads to the distinctive characters of human beings and other creatures. Both science and theology, in their intersubjective reasoning, present the distinctive features of humanity among other creatures. Van Huyssteen (2014:1045; 2006) explains that these

> characteristics like consciousness, language, imagination, moral awareness, symbolic minds and symbolic behavior, have always included religious awareness and religious behavior.

From a theological doctrinal perspective, human beings are created from, with, and for the image of God (*imago Dei*). There have been various understandings and proposals on the meaning and function of the image of God in human beings, but it has been the leading pointer to the uniqueness of humanity in both scientific and theological analysis (see below). Theology, in this instance, does not need to be a removed or isolating field of knowledge but rather one that has a public interest for the enrichment of other disciplines.

> Theologians are now challenged to rethink what human uniqueness might mean for the human person, a being that has emerged biologically as a centre of self-awareness, identity and moral responsibility (Van Huyssteen 2014:1046).

Muray (2007:299-310) reflects on and summarises the prestigious Gifford lectures presented by Van Huyssteen, in which he helps explain his trajectories in theology and science. According to Muray (2007:299),

> Van Huyssteen's book is a sweeping, swirling, panoramic dance of an interdisciplinary dialogue between science and theology on the issue of human uniqueness.

In his attempt to outline the idea of human uniqueness in the world, Van Huyssteen presented his lectures in six chapters. I briefly summarise these, as outlined by Muray (2007). In Chapter 1, Van Huyssteen sets his agenda for the study:

> to engage, with full awareness of the radical social and historical contextuality of all rational reflection, in a multidisciplinary dialogue between theology and science that hopefully will lead to interdisciplinary results centering on the concrete issue of human uniqueness (Muray 2007:300).

In Chapter 2,

> [V]an Huyssteen begins to develop the scientific side of the argument for human uniqueness by appropriating the insights of contemporary paleontology, e.g. 'Darwin's theory of evolution' (Muray 2007:300).

Evolution in Van Huyssteen has received a new casting as the achievement of knowledge (Muray 2007:300). This, for me, has radically redefined the theory of evolution from a flabbergasting theory of the development of things into other things to a straightforward idea of the wisdom of learning. Van Huyssteen, in this new thought, solved the contentious problem of isolationism that heightens the tension between theology and science. His thought remains an invitation for an open and progressive engagement of the fields.

In Chapter 3,

> the author engages the theological side of the issue of human uniqueness, i.e. how it connects to the doctrine of the *imago Dei* … For [V]an Huyssteen, the notion that humans are made in the image and likeness of God is one of the core traditions of Christianity (Muray 2007:301).

Although the idea of the image of God has been understood and presented differently, Van Huyssteen seems to agree with the notion of human beings as "representative of God" in the world (see Von Rad 1961).

In Chapter 4, Van Huyssteen discusses the human uniqueness and human origins.

In Chapter 5, "he moved to human uniqueness and symbolization" (Muray 2007:303). This move helps us view another paradigm in religious awareness. Religion becomes evident in not only what human convictions are but also in what they symbolise and how that symbolic action is actualised or being anticipated to be actualised in the future.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, Van Huyssteen concludes with human uniqueness in science and theology. He makes his argument clear and distinctive and moves it from a theoretical aspect to a sense of praxis. This is the move from *imago Dei* to *imitatio Dei.* In other words, being like God means to act like God (Muray 2007:303). Ethics develops from theology; thus we attain holiness through our acts of love (Muray 2007:303).

Van Huyssteen's aesthetic discussion on theology and science deeply scrutinises what it means to be human from an unscientific perspective, when he compares being human to being "fallen angels" (Van Huyssteen 2003:161-178). Van Huyssteen (2003:162) identifies the historic isolationism between theology and science and invites a move beyond it:

> Should we not, however, seriously avoid the insular comfort of this kind of methodological isolationism, where what we see as our comfortable and preferred tradition(s) can easily become a rather restrictive prison for theological reflection?.

This can be done, as noted in his life and work, as an essential move from fundamentalism to nonfundamentalism and, finally, to postfundamentalism, and so on (Van Huyssteen 2003:162). This move avoids the limitations of personal interest or ideological insensitivity but it remains open to the possibility of knowledge and its application for the goodness of life.

Van Huyssteen (2003:162-163) examines the notions of experience, critical thinking, and contextual analysis as key elements in his move beyond fundamentalism in search of a creative balance in the acquisition of knowledge. Van Huyssteen (2003:163) argues that theologians have neglected "the pervasive influence of the sciences on the values that shape theological rationality". Most of this kind of "negligence" is because of the response of faith to the power of scientific reasoning, which, in the modern world, attempted to totally nullify theology as an unnecessary ideology. Another move has been in "[r]ethinking tradition":

> Given the embeddedness of all our knowledge in tradition(s), it seems rather logical to me that if we want to reflect critically on the nature of theological reflection, we will have to be willing and ready to reflect critically on exactly those traditions that underlie our theological knowledge claims (Van Huyssteen 2003:163).

This critical thinking leads to new reconstructions and adjustments of the boundaries of life, learning, and faith. This is the creative move into "dynamic interaction" in search of useful knowledge.

> Through the dynamic interaction of construction and constraint in the historical evolution of our traditions, these galaxies of meanings creatively give way to interpretative constellations of meaning that we construct to direct interaction with the different challenges presented to theology by contemporary culture (Van Huyssteen 2003:166).

Van Huyssteen also emphasises the need for "[g]iving care to the *imago Dei*" in the world:

> These central biblical concepts clearly reveal how crucial biblical texts have been received, experienced, interpreted, and negotiated in the multifaceted history of Christian ideas (Van Huyssteen 2003:166).

Van Huyssteen further appeals to some of the influences on his thought on the centrality of *imago Dei* in human experience. He (2003:166-167) argues that

> Substantive views on imago Dei have now been eclipsed by more pronounced and rational views of the imago Dei. Certainly, the most influential theologian on this view has been Karl Barth; for Barth the image of God does not consist of anything humans are or do, but rather of the amazing ability to be in a relationship with God.

Van Huyssteen (2003:168) also relates *imago Dei* to active relationship and not simply to representation or reflection:

> Theologically, the argument for this relational interpretation of the *imago Dei* is conceptually embedded in God's nature as Trinity. So, the *imago Dei* here is not just the capacity for relationship, but the relationship itself, first our relationship with God, and then our relationship with each other (both vertical and horizontal dimensions), most clearly exemplified in Jesus, who alone is directly the image of God.

In his conclusion on this point of interest, Van Huyssteen (2003:169) explains that

> [u]ltimately, it is in love, then, that we find the true *imago Dei,* thus weaving together all the complex historical components of the history of ideas behind this powerful symbol.

It is only in light of the *imago Dei* that love becomes an enduring imperative that remains open and expectant of all human beings. In his scientific view, Van Huyssteen (2003:170) points out that "we are not superior to animal or having greater value". Nevertheless, animals and other creatures are given to humanity as food and as objects of love through which to glorify God. This does not make the human being a tyrant over creation but rather a responsible steward in the presence of God.

Van Huyssteen ends his argument with more emphasis on human uniqueness and the *imago Dei*. This is viewed largely from a correlational perspective. In Van Huysteen's argument, the reality of being created in the image of God is not a reason for human tyranny against the remainder of creation, but rather it would be a familiar point of contact for healthy and necessary interaction and interdependence to the glory of God (Van Huyssteen 2003:170).

Van Huyssteen (2003:171-173) views the evolution of religious belief from a scientifically rational perspective:

> every human society, at one stage or another, possesses 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.

He (2003:173) explains that

> religious belief is one of the earliest special propensities or dispositions that we are able to detect in the archaeological record of modern humans.

It is agreeable that

> [c]learly, Christian theology has traditionally assumed a radical split between human beings (created in the image of God) and the rest of creation (Van Huyssteen 2003:176).

Van Huyssteen has worked so tirelessly to articulate and promote this primal harmony and interdependence. Modern science is an aspect of "cultural evolution" (Van Huyssteen 2003:176) that gave rise to the new world of humanity without God. But ironically, the quest for the reality of God beyond that which is scientific cannot be eliminated from human history, no matter how

much it may be denied or suppressed. In his creative move for harmonisation, Van Huyssteen (2003:177) states:

> I would therefore, call for a revision of the notion of the *imago Dei* that acknowledges our close ties to the animal world and its uniqueness, while at the same time focusing on what our symbolic and cognitive fluid minds might tell us about the emergence of human uniqueness, consciousness, personhood, and the propensity for religious awareness and experience.

5. CONCLUSION: ON BEING HUMAN WITH RESPONSIBLE DIGNITY

In conclusion, the idea of being human is a unique act of creation that has been marked with an indelible distinctiveness. This is the concept and reality of the image of God in human beings. This sense of distinctiveness, as noted in the above arguments, has not been given as a mark of human superiority over other human beings or the sense of right to tyrannical subjugation of God's creation. From an interdisciplinary perspective, Van Huyssteen provides very engaging contributions for the interactive interest and service of theology and science, which remains instructive to the sense of human responsibility. The fact that human beings are the image of God in the world implies the following: no human being should oppress or dehumanise the other; all human beings have dignity and freedom to life and to love the lives of others; human beings are the representatives (stewards) of God's creation, and all human beings are expected to reflect the ethics of God's nature of justice, love and righteousness in the world (Jer. 9:24). J.W. van Huyssteen's contributions will continually remain instructive, inviting us in Africa and the world at large to work for a better life of healthy responsibility with dignity and justice for all.

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Keywords
Imago Dei
J. Wentzel van Huyssteen
Human Beings

Trefwoorde
Imago Dei
J. Wentzel van Huyssteen
Menslike wese