

“I came from where? Approaching the science of human origins from religious perspectives” – Dr. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen introduction & personal statement

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J. Wentzel van Huyssteen: 00:20 Thank you very much, Nancy, and all my colleagues who have spoken. I am indeed very happy to share with you this moment, and I thank the organizers. (00:30) In terms of the question, I come from where. I think I can proudly say twice over, Africa. Not only in terms of our long natural history but also because I'm a ninth generation South African, as you most probably can hear, who has been in this country now for almost 20 years. After going to the Free University to do my doctorate and philosophical theology and a lot of detours, finally, in the late eighties, Princeton Theological Seminary established the first chair in science and theology in this country. Soon after, I was incredibly fortunate to be invited to take that up, which we did. So we've been here for almost 20 years. And from that day on my work became my hobby as it were. (01:20)

I've been very fortunate to teach a wide array of interdisciplinary issues. Since I am speaking also about seminary education and the religion and science discourse at the seminary, many too many to mention, but courses like Theology and Cosmology, Theology in the New Physics. And more importantly, nowadays for me, Theology and Neuroscience, and very importantly, Theology and Evolution and on human evolution. (01:48)

Now, around 2003, I was invited to do a series of lectures in Edinburgh, The Gifford Lectures, and the quite specific invitation was to what Nancy has just called here to talk about human uniqueness. Is there a way that we can say that when scientists talk about species specificity or human distinctiveness, could that be anything like what for Christians and those of the Jewish faith could mean something like the image of God? So that was a wonderful journey. And during that time, I got to know Rick Potts who has been very influential in my life in terms of getting to know the archeology and the paleontology. (02:30) And I published a book a few years ago called, Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology. So

that put me firmly on the track of what we have today in this museum, human origins of The Human Origins Hall, which I am proud to say, since I didn't do it, that it must be one of the best that I've seen anywhere. So at the moment I have benefited tremendously from this challenging topic. (03:00) I'm teaching at Princeton Theological Seminary, two courses, for instance, this semester. The one is a course on Darwin, Darwin's Challenge to Theology and in this course, I handle it on three levels, three hours a week. For the first hours, the students deeply read and very carefully learn to read large chunks first from the Origin of species, and then the same from the Descent of Man. (03:31) In the second hour of the week, we do presentations from secondary literature. We have read Michael Ruse's book, Can a Darwinian be a Christian? Francisco Ayala's book, Darwin's Gift. And our two case studies, which we've studied started with the first is, How should Christians think about the evolution of religion? And one of the books that we've read there is Nicholas Wade, from the New York times, his new book, The Faith Instinct. (04:02) And we'll end the course in a few weeks, by going to the problem of evil and suffering. What does evolution and what is the Christian faith in my case, teach us about the so-called theodicy problem, the problem of evil and suffering? So this is a very challenging, a very interesting course in which we try to show that there are not just two simplistic ways to think about evolution and science. It's either a very anti-theistic science that reductionistly claim to explain everything, or it is equally reductionist way of believing in God, which is anti-scientific and excludes that. But that there are all kinds of options that show the compatibility and the exciting influence of science on theology. And on a philosophical level, I believe also theology on the worldviews that infuse science. (05:02) The other course is very close to what our committee here has been doing and working on is a course on what I call, The Roots of Theological Anthropology, and it is deeply about human auditors and what that means for people of faith. And Nancy has mentioned some of this in her talk, but we are reading various people on the fascinating evolution of attachment in neurological attachment between mothers and children, and humans in adult lives. That how that evolved to empathy, how empathy goes a fascinating route to come to a moral

awareness and finally in humans, morality and ethics, the ethics that we construct. (05:53) But what I have found fascinating is to place these questions within broader evolutionary question, why do we have the kind of bodies that we have? And what does that tell us about the evolution of sexuality, the evolution of language, the evolution of consciousness, the evolution of music, and ultimately yes, the evolution of morality and religion? This is a tremendously exciting field that we all learn from when we look back in our history and ask, where do we come from? (06:29) And then finally, I do want to say, just very briefly, that at Princeton Theological Seminary, we have also had the good fortune of winning a grant, two years ago, that has enabled us to put together a three-year program that we are calling, Science for Ministry. And in this program, we invite teams of two people assigned a pastor or a minister with his or her a scientist from the area or a congregation that come over to Princeton four times a year for courses in theology and science or religion and science. And then the next year for all kinds of electives like what I've just been talking about on human evolution, on cosmology and many other questions. So I thank you all for coming.

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