

“I came from where? Approaching the science of human Origins from religious perspectives” – Why are humans religious?

This video was recorded at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History on March 28, 2011

Audience member: 00:21

Thank you. Bravo to the science teacher, the biology teacher, and all the work you do in keeping science in the classroom. One of the issues that I never understood about even evolution today is how many generations it takes for this to happen. And that's not in any of the scale used upstairs or in any of the books I've read. And maybe that would help people understand how long it really took for this to happen. But my question involves the question of the topic today, and the question from the exhibit upstairs. What does it mean to be human? And I think from the exhibit, it's clear that one of the biggest distinguishing characteristics is the larger human brain and the functions that it performs. And that is the distinguishing human characteristic. And I wonder if perhaps we should relook at human behavior. And can we, in fact, using science, explain where religion and theism comes from and using science instead of scripture. And can we answer the question, I am religion. Where did I come from? Why are humans religious?

Connie Bertka: 01:33

Wentzel.

J. Wetzal Van Huyssteen: 01:35

Thank you. I hope I heard you well. But that was a really fascinating issue that you brought up. My instinct as a non-scientist, but a philosopher and theologian who is deeply committed to this, is always to take a more holistic, comprehensive approach to what it means to be human. I think it is very tempting to lift up traits like empathy and morality and language and imagination and consciousness. And they're all part of this package. But I think in our species, they've come together. You know what Steven Mithen calls a kind of a cognitive fluidity that really flips on the switch, where everything changes. (02:20) What I have found helpful, not only from a philosophical, but also from a scientific, but also from a religious viewpoint, is to find a term that somehow encompasses all of that. What does it mean to be self-aware? What does it mean to be a self?

What does it mean to be a person? And I think when one moves to that kind of terminology, then the kind of exclusiveness only science can answer this, or only philosophy or only a religion. But it brings, if you want, kind of a shared to reign where various interdisciplinary voices cannot only be heard, but can add to answer the human uniqueness or distinctiveness questioned in a kind of a non-hierarchical way. Because we are unique, but that doesn't make us better, but it certainly makes us different. (03:19) So what does it mean to be a self-aware person? As for me, getting more and more traction in this discussion.

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