

What have our genes to do with religion?

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Introduction

The echo of Tertullian's 3rd century dismissal of any connection between Athens and Jerusalem forms the background to my title. Having been unmasked in time as unfounded (Jerusalem had everything to do with Athens), I trust that I will nonetheless be able not only to substantiate my choice of a title, which suggests that our genes have a lot to do with religion, but also to propose a re-imagining of the concept of revelation in terms of the genes-religion relationship.

Why specifically revelation? Because all theology-science debates are preoccupied with the question of divine action and in my opinion the concept of revelation is highly pertinent to that question. I base this on two presuppositions. Firstly, with Eberhard Jüngel I believe that we need to be told what God is like, and secondly: Wentzel van Huyssteen has convinced me that our mental capacities are constrained by their own history, and that biological theory of evolution does not tell us everything about the way we know our world. To subsequently avoid the untenable position that humanity can know God without God's willing to be known entails adopting the Christian view that God chooses to be known, and consequently that humanity needs to be told what God is like.

In this paper I first give a general overview of what I would like to call the winds of change. Then I identify models of revelation that have proved influential, and highlight relevant features – for my discussion – of two of these. Thirdly, I take Wentzel van Huyssteen's exciting recent post-foundationalist contribution on the *imago Dei* as an exercise in transversal reasoning. Lastly, against this background, I propose a tentative framework, in which the concept of revelation can be re-imagined from a post-foundationalist perspective.

Winds of change

It would be a great pity if theologians fail to notice the winds of change that have swept over the divorced landscapes of theological reflection and the natural sciences in the 21st century – over both of them!ⁱ On the one hand there is a matured theological awareness that theology cannot abandon natural theology and, by implication, leave the physical world to the natural sciences. That is no longer an option, and many exciting and insightful ways of engagement are being sought and have already been established (see e.g. Barbour, Peacocke, Gregerson and Polkinghorne). On the other hand, theologians have to understand the crucial changes that have taken place in the natural sciences. The reductionist programme has collapsed (e.g. everything is “matter in motion” – Thomas Hobbes!). It is a way of ‘scientific’ thinking which Hefner (2008:6) characterises as follows: “It is only reductionistic thinking, ‘scientism’ that claims that the penultimate is all there is and all that matters, and thinkers who argue in this fashion, even if they are scientists, are engaging not in scientific thinking but in their own kind of ‘theology’.” Keith Ward (1992:9) made the same point more than a decade earlier, stating: “Something has gone terribly wrong, and it is basically, that the popularizers of science have misconceived both the nature and proper limits of scientific truth. It is they, and not

the religious, who are the dogmatists and high priests of orthodoxy now.” Their ‘parochial arrogance’ has been exposed.

Many causes can be identified (see Clayton 2005:344ff). I name but a few. Physics encountered what appeared to be insurmountable limits to the dream of a single system which can explain all the world’s phenomena. As Clayton (2005:344) puts it, the setbacks were multiple and decisive: relativity theory introduced the speed of light as the absolute limit of velocity, and thus the temporal limit of communication and causation in the universe. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle put mathematical limits on the knowability of both the location and momentum of subatomic particles. The Copenhagen theorists came to the startling conclusion that quantum mechanical indeterminacy was not merely a temporary epistemic problem but reflected an inherent indeterminacy of the physical world itself. So-called chaos theory showed that future states of complex systems quickly become incomputable because of their sensitive dependence on initial conditions – a dependence so sensitive that a finite knower could never predict the evolution of the system. The list can easily be extended.

Other, more recent developments have contributed greatly to the winds of change: an increased emphasis on holistic factors in the philosophy of science, the birth of the history and sociology of science, the waning influence of analytic philosophy, the collapse of ‘foundationalism’ in epistemology, new data in support of emergence in the natural world, and increasing awareness of the influence of metaphysical presuppositions on the actual practice of science. In short, the winds of change can, in my opinion, be taken as an exciting, open invitation to take up anew the task of systematising the various segments of human knowledge and belief.

In taking the invitation seriously, theological reflection should – and that is the purpose of this paper – reconsider, and consequently re-imagine, its understanding of revelation, ruling out absolutist claims to knowledge, in which it presents neither an unacceptable pretension nor a violent appeal, but a welcoming address – and does so with rational truthfulness.

Re-imagining revelation

In his short article on revelation in the *Encyclopedia of science and religion*, Christopher Knight (2003:737) comes to the following conclusion:

It is perhaps in the context of post-foundationalist understandings of rationality that the concept of revelation will most markedly affect the dialogue of science and theology in the near future. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen’s approach, for example, is one that assumes, in the view of some, too great a distinction between theological and scientific rationality. Nevertheless, his way of acknowledging crucial areas of overlap provides a challenge to the simplistic distinction between empirical problems and God’s revelation, which is often still held to separate science and theology. This acknowledgement is likely to be of considerable influence in an era profoundly influenced by postmodernist perspectives. A more subtle understanding of revelation than is yet common can, arguably, allow the implications of his insights to be fully explored.

Can such a subtle understanding of revelation be re-imagined in terms of Van Huyssteen’s post-foundationalist approach? If one examines contemporary Western theological discourse on revelation, a number of influential models can be identified (cf. Avery Dulles 1983; Alister McGrath 2001:200ff), including the following five:

- Revelation as information (or doctrine). This model is characteristic of conservative evangelical and Catholic neo-scholastic schools, in which

Scripture and tradition – also the church's teaching office – form the bases of their respective understandings of revelation in propositional form.

- Revelation as self-presentation. This model is characteristic of the German dialectical school of theology influenced by the dialogical personalism of Buber, which sees revelation as God's personal communication.
- Revelation as experience. This model is characteristic of German liberal Protestantism, which centres on human experience, leading to the conclusion that God is revealed through individuals' experience.
- Revelation as poetic discourse. This model is characteristic of the philosophical-theological model of Paul Ricoeur, in which he proceeds from an a-religious sense of revelation to an understanding of biblical revelation as poetics and testimony in order to refute the pretension of consciousness to constitute itself.
- Revelation as history. This model is characteristic of the distinctive approach of the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg, in which history – and specifically universal and accessible history – is understood as revelation.

Since I find the models of Ricoeur and Pannenberg especially insightful and fruitful for the purpose of this paper, I elaborate briefly on them.

Paul Ricoeur

For Ricoeur (1980:73ff) revelation poses a formidable problem, not only because it may be seen as the first and last question for faith, but also because it has been obscured by so many false debates. By developing a hermeneutics of revelation using the categories of poetics (on the objective side) and testimony (on the subjective side) he endeavours to unmask these false debates. He aims, furthermore, to establish an understanding of dependence without heteronomy. In response to an approach that opposes an authoritarian, opaque concept of revelation ('revealed truths') with reason, which claims to be its own master and transparent to itself, he argues that we should trace the notion of revelation back to its origins: the discourses of faith, namely prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom and hymnic discourse.

Regarding prophetic discourse, Ricoeur (1980:75) states that the original nucleus of the traditional idea of revelation can be found in prophetic discourse, in which the prophet presents himself as speaking, not in his own name but in the name of Yahweh: revelation is the speech of another behind the speech of the prophet. In narrative discourse, the events tell themselves, hence are history-making events. In such instances speaking of revelation is to qualify the events in question as transcendent (acts of God) in contrast with the ordinary course of history (Ricoeur 1980:77). For Ricoeur (1980:84-85) prescriptive discourse represents the ethical dimension of revelation, characterised by the aims of perfection and holiness. If we speak of revelation as historical, it is not only in the sense that traces of God may be discerned in the founding events of the past or in a coming conclusion to history, but also in the sense that it orients the history of our practical actions and engenders the dynamics of our institutions. Wisdom literature knits together ethos and cosmos – that is, the sphere of human action and the sphere of the world – at the very point where they conflict, namely unjust suffering. In this regard Ricoeur (1980:88) states in a beautiful exposition of wisdom as pathos: "Intimacy with Wisdom is not to be distinguished from intimacy with God." With regard to hymnic discourse, Ricoeur (1980:88) distinguishes hymns of praise, supplication and thanksgiving as three major genres and states: "[C]elebration elevates the story and turns it into an invocation."

Since the form conveys its very meaning, Ricoeur emphasises that the notion of revelation may no longer be formulated in a uniform, monotonous fashion, nor may its various modalities be included in and dominated by knowledge. He argues: "In this regard the idea of something secret is the limit-idea of revelation. The idea of

revelation is a twofold idea. The God who reveals himself is a hidden God and hidden things belong to him" (Ricoeur 1980:93). For Ricoeur this implies that revelation can never constitute a body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing. From such a differentiated concept of revelation, Ricoeur (1980:95ff) proceeds to unfold a notion of revelation which corresponds with the twofold claim of philosophical discourse to transparent objectivity and subjective autonomy. The former is covered by the "space of the manifestation of things" (i.e. the world of the text and the new being), whereas the latter is represented by the "understanding of themselves that humans gain when they allow themselves to be governed by what is manifested and said" (i.e. mediating reflection and testimony).

Firstly: Ricoeur analyses the space of the manifestation of things under the heading of poetics, hence not as a specific literary genre but rather the totality of these genres inasmuch as they fulfil a referential function that differs from the descriptive referential function of ordinary language and, above all, of scientific discourse. For Ricoeur (cf. 1980:102) the poetic dimension of language is to be understood as the conjunction of fiction and re-description, of mythos and mimesis, to which - in a recapitalisation of the text (its autonomy), the work (its externality) and the world of the text (its transcendence) - the poetic function adds a split reference. It is this split reference which Ricoeur calls revelatory, since the poetic function incarnates a concept of truth that no longer means verification, but manifestation ('letting that which shows itself be'). It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation. This a-religious sense of revelation, according to Ricoeur, helps to restore the concept of biblical revelation (i.e. the new being it unfolds before us) to its full dignity.

Secondly: In order to oppose and dismantle the pretension of consciousness to constitute itself (which Ricoeur sees as the most formidable obstacle to the idea of revelation), he turns to *testimony* as the category which for him best signifies the self-implication of the subject in this discourse. On the basis of his conviction that (1) all reflection is mediated and there is no immediate self-consciousness; (2) testimony (as second order reflection) is bound up with the consciousness of belonging-to (that confers its properly historical character on consciousness); and (3) appropriation as self-understanding before the text (i.e. the self constituted by the issue explored in the text), Ricoeur (1980:108-9) argues that this compels consciousness to abandon its pretension to constitute every signification in and origin from itself. It is testimony that introduces the dimension of historical contingency. Testimony as 'originary' affirmation is the "act that accomplishes the negation of those limitations which affect an individual's destiny. It is the letting go ... of self" (Ricoeur 1980:110). For Ricoeur testimony entails three dialectical elements, namely those of event and meaning, the trial of false testimony and testimony about what is seen, and life. These elements - that is, 'originary' affirmation in relation to historical presentation - bring consciousness to renounce its sovereignty. How? Not of itself (i.e. not through reflection), but by confessing its total dependence on the historical manifestation of the divine. As Ricoeur (1980:117) puts it: "[T]he experience of testimony can only provide the horizon for a specifically religious and biblical experience of revelation, without ever being able to derive that experience from the purely philosophical categories of truth as manifestation and reflection as testimony."

To conclude: how does this understanding of revelation bring about dependence without heteronomy? Ricoeur (1980:117) sums it up thus:

Why ... is it so difficult for us to conceive of a dependence without heteronomy? Is it not because we too often and too quickly think of a will that submits and not enough of an imagination that opens itself? ... For what are the poems of the Exodus and the poem of the resurrection ... addressed to if not to our imagination rather than our obedience? And what is the historical testimony that our reflection would like to internalize addressed to if not to our imagination? If to understand oneself is to

understand oneself in front of the text, must we not say that the reader's understanding is suspended, derealized, made potential just as the world itself is metamorphosized by the poem? If this is true, we must say that the imagination is that part of ourselves that responds to the text as Poem, and that alone can encounter revelation no longer as an unacceptable pretension, but as non-violent appeal.

Wolffhart Pannenberg

For Pannenberg (1977:50ff) asking how God is revealed to us already implies that God's reality is not equally accessible everywhere and always. God is hidden. He writes: "It is because our time is characterized by this experience of the hidden character of God that the question of the course of events by which his deity is revealed has assumed such decisive weight in present-day theological discussion and for many individual Christians" (Pannenberg 1977:52). Furthermore, knowing God is not part of our natural lives. The true answer to the question of God we find neither in ourselves nor in the everyday world around us. According to him the ancient Greeks, modern natural piety, and modern belief in evolution consider revelation an unnecessary concept. Christian theology, however, given the presupposition of the hidden God, differs fundamentally in its understanding of revelation. According to Pannenberg Christian theology is based on an analysis of universal and publicly accessible history rather than on the inner subjectivity of personal human existence or on a special interpretation of that history. Revelation is essentially a public and universal historical event, which is recognised and interpreted as an 'act of God' (cf. McGrath 2001:207). How, then, is this act of God to be understood as revelation?

In Pannenberg's concept of revelation (cf. Pannenberg 1970:50ff, 87ff; McGrath 2001:207) the following theses are of importance:

- 1 God's self-revelation (which implies disclosure of his actual being) in Scripture did not take the direct form of a theophany (i.e. miraculous appearances of Yahweh), but occurred indirectly through his acts in history. For Pannenberg (1977:52) those ancient manifestations of Yahweh are wrapped in mysterious obscurity. Although Israel lived in a relationship with Yahweh, they still had to wait for him to be revealed. That – the revelation of God's divinity – came much later!
- 2 Revelation is not completely apprehended at the beginning, but only at the end of revelation history. The question is, how was revelation understood in the early history of Israel? According to the biblical traditions, argues Pannenberg (1977:53), the mysterious being, who in the earliest period did not even possess a name of his own but was designated as the God of Abraham, the Fear of Isaac, or the Mighty One of Jacob, and then appeared to Moses as Yahweh, showed himself to be God through the historical deeds he performed. He showed himself through the fact that events announced in his name did actually take place, that is, that he was not a figment of the biblical authors' imagination, but a real power. Thus Pannenberg (1977:56-57) identifies two cardinal features of the concept of revelation: Israel saw God's revelation as indirect (i.e. his deeds shed light on him indirectly and could only be understood via particular events at a particular time); and secondly, that only after their completion could the revelatory events yield knowledge of Yahweh's divinity and be ascribed to whole patterns of events.

- 3 God's universal revelation is not fully realised in the history of Israel. It was first realised in the destiny of Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as the end of history is anticipated in that destiny. Thus Jesus' resurrection is to be understood as a central act of divine revelation in history. By contemplating Jesus' resurrection, we perceive our own ultimate future. By identifying with his teachings, actions and suffering we can hope eventually to share in the life which has already appeared in him (Pannenberg 1977:58). In Jesus' resurrection the God of Israel is revealed as the God of power over all that happens in history, for he who holds the end of all things in his hands is also the master of the things themselves. From the end, which is the resurrection, he is revealed as the God also of the beginning – he who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist (Pannenberg 1977:59). However, Jesus' resurrection reveals not only God's power but also his love for us.
- 4 The Christ event in isolation cannot be regarded as revealing God; it is set in the context of the history of God's dealings with Israel.
- 5 God's revelation of his ultimate intention and so of his innermost being does not mean that he has become fully intelligible to us. No-one can understand the full import of what the Christ event tells us about God. God's incomprehensibility in his very revelation means that for Christians, too, the future is still open and full of possibilities.
- 6 In contrast to special divine manifestations, God's revelation in history is publicly and universally accessible and open to anyone who has eyes to see it. In this regard Pannenberg (1977:61) refers to the prophecies of the exilic period, which announced that Yahweh will manifest himself as the sole, true God, not only to the Israelites but to all nations. For Pannenberg this applies to the Christ event as well, and the news should be conveyed to the gentiles. The gentiles' acknowledgment of the divinity of the God of Israel is the sign of his definitive revelation, and through Christian mission it has become a fact of world history. The events of Jesus' history which reveal God, and the message of these events, bring us to knowledge that we do not have of ourselves!

Before turning to Van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist approach, it is necessary – given the scope of this paper – to note another development in concepts of revelation. Within theological circles another debate developed and has become increasingly important, especially on account of the growing interest in dialogue between Christian theology and the natural sciences. It concerns natural theology, the reason being that here the doctrine of creation is of crucial importance. A few remarks on Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and the Reformed tradition (cf. McGrath 2001:208ff) will have to suffice.

In his *Summa contra Gentiles* Thomas argues that the created order displays a fundamental 'likeness to God' as a consequence of God being, in a sense, the cause of all created things. Because no created thing can be said to come into existence spontaneously, its existence can be considered a consequence of causal dependence of creation on its creator. This implies that the characteristics of a created thing could serve to identify its cause. There are, so to speak, physical or metaphysical fingerprints on what is caused, on which one can base an inductive argument to establish the existence of that cause and at least some aspects of its nature. If God made the world, God's signature may be found in the created order (McGrath 2001:208-9).

In his *Institutes* Calvin argues that general knowledge of God may be obtained from the whole of creation – from humanity, the natural order and the historical process. Such knowledge is based on two grounds: a 'sense of divinity', and

experience of and reflection on the ordering of the world. The **first ground** posits that God has endowed human beings with some inbuilt sense or presentiment of the divine. It is as if something of God has been engraved on the heart of every human being, which implies the universality of religion, a troubled conscience and a servile fear of God. The **second ground** posits that knowledge of God as the creator, together with appreciation of his wisdom and justice, may be gained from an inspection of the created order, culminating in humanity itself. The created order, as a theatre or mirror reflecting the divine presence, nature and attributes, is open to all ('reflective') eyes and enables us to form an idea of God. Although God is invisible and incomprehensible, he wills to be known from the forms of created and visible things by donning the garment of creation (cf. McGrath 2001:210).

In both the *Gallic Confession of Faith* (1559) and the *Belgic Confession* (1561) it is argued that knowledge of God comes by two means: God's works and, more clearly, God's Word. The Belgic Confession talks about creation, preservation and government of the universe, lying before our eyes as a most beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are like so many characters that lead us to contemplate the invisible things of God. All these, according to the *Belgic Confession*, are sufficient to convince humanity, and leave it with no excuse for ignorance about God. However, God is known more clearly and fully through his Word (cf. McGrath 2001:212). The so-called 'two books' tradition which arose in Reformed theology, to the effect that nature and Scripture are two complementary sources of knowledge of God, has been influential in wider scholarly circles. In the 17th century; for instance, Francis Bacon talked about "the book of God's word" and the "book of God's works". Not much later Robert Boyle remarked that, since the two great books of nature and of scripture have the same author, the study of the latter does not at all hinder an inquisitive man's delight in the study of the former. He calls the former "God's epistle written to mankind". Another example is Sir Thomas Browne, who states that there are two books from which we can gather his divinity, namely God's written word and – as he calls it – another written by his servant, nature. For Browne the latter is a universal, public manuscript that lies exposed to the eyes of all, so that those who never saw him in the one will have discovered him in the other (see McGrath 2001:212).

Against the background of these models of revelation I now turn to Van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist approach to explore the possibility of an interdisciplinary re-visioning of the concept of revelation.

Our genes and religion

Contemporary cosmology explicitly advocates treating the observable universe as a single object. Presiding over the feast of this argumentative discourse is a self-appointed, rational master-of-interdisciplinary-ceremonies, evolutionary epistemology – self-appointed, since we cannot be content with a plurality of fragmented and unrelated forms of knowledge. I now introduce one of the influential 'guests' at the ceremony: Wentzel van Huyssteen and his post-foundationalist approach.

Wentzel van Huyssteen

In his *Alone in the world?* (2006) Van Huyssteen's understanding of rationality, evolved over a period of more than three decades, brought him up against the evolutionary origins of human rationality itself. This is the concrete unfolding of his argument¹ in his earlier *Duet or duel* (1998), in which he writes:

Evolutionary epistemology ... reveals the biological roots of all human rationality and should therefore lead precisely to an interdisciplinary account of our epistemic activities. The basic assumption of evolutionary epistemology is that we humans, like all other beings, result from

evolutionary processes and that, consequently, our mental capacities are constrained and shaped by the mechanism of biological evolution (Van Huyssteen 1998:xiii-iv).

This interdisciplinary account finds expression in two related endeavours, culminating in two specific epistemological liberations: (a) his attempt at developing a comprehensive epistemology rooted in the biological origins of human rationality as understood by evolutionary epistemologists, and (b) his exploration of human uniqueness from both a theological and a scientific perspective.

The **first endeavour** opens up the conviction that all knowledge is biologically rooted and grounded in human evolution. This common biological origin of all forms of knowledge reveals a universal intent that interlinks all our diverse and complex epistemic activities. Thus this endeavour culminates in liberation from epistemic narcissism. In the **second (related) endeavour** Van Huyssteen grapples with the problem that the process of human evolution poses for our understanding of human uniqueness.ⁱⁱⁱ This endeavour culminates in liberation from epistemological 'tribulism'. He worked it out in his Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh (2004), published in 2006 as *Alone in the world?*

From the vantage point of his now substantiated and established conviction that the domains of religious faith and scientific thought both share in the resources of human rationality and are therefore able to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue (Van Huyssteen 2006:1-43), he links^{iv} the question of human uniqueness to evolutionary epistemology (focusing especially on the prehistory of the human mind). It unfolds as a multidimensional interdisciplinary discourse, in which perspectives from theology, epistemology and the sciences converge in diverse, intersecting lines (Van Huyssteen 2006:45-109). He argues conclusively that evolutionary epistemology shows that the human propensity for metaphysical and religious belief is the result of specific interactions between early humans and their life worlds.^v He then shifts the focus to one of the core traditions of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* (Van Huyssteen 2006: 111-162), arguing that the porousness of the boundaries between theology and the sciences allows for a creative (two-pronged) rethink of this notion in Christian theology. On the one hand the relative convergence of theological and scientific arguments on the issue of human uniqueness permits us, according to him, to argue for the plausibility and comprehensive nature of religious and theological explanations of a phenomenon as complex as *Homo Sapiens* (Van Huyssteen 2006:113ff). Simultaneously he argues that scientific notions of human uniqueness help us to ground theological notions of human distinctiveness in the reality of flesh and blood, real-life, embodied experiences, and thus protect theological reflection from overly complex abstractions when trying to re-vision the notion of the *imago Dei*. Taking his own argument seriously, he then directs his revisioning to a neglected perspective on this crucial issue – that of contemporary paleoanthropology (Van Huyssteen 2006: 163-215). He shows that the prehistory of the human mind (including the evolution of consciousness and self-awareness) reveals the remarkable cognitive fluidity (a concept deriving from Steven Mithen) of our mental abilities. With three distinct disciplinary lines of argument on human uniqueness (evolutionary biology, theology and paleoanthropology) now intersecting transversally, Van Huyssteen (2006:217ff) not only evaluates the intersections of the three lines, but "thickens the [intersecting] plot" with new interdisciplinary proposals (drawn from linguistics, neuroscience and neuropsychology). On the basis of this evaluation he arrives at the following conclusions:

- (a) The capacity for spirituality is an emergent consequence of the symbolic transformation of cognition and emotions, thus explaining why the propensity for religion and religious experience can be regarded as an essentially universal human attribute (Van Huyssteen 2006:233ff).

- (b) A post-foundationalist approach to human uniqueness as an interdisciplinary problem should make us realise that religious imagination cannot be discussed abstractly or treated as a generic given, but can be discussed and evaluated only in the context of specific religions and concrete theologies (Van Huyssteen 2006: 261ff).
- (c) Theologians should revisit the way notions of the *imago Dei* are constructed, since interpretations have varied dramatically throughout the long history of Christianity (Van Huyssteen 2006: 267-270; 271ff).

In his interdisciplinary approach to human uniqueness Van Huyssteen argues that theologians must rethink personhood in terms of imagination, symbolic propensities, and cognitive fluidity, acknowledging humanity's close ties with the animal world. According to his theories of the *imago Dei* this is a product of natural evolutionary processes, which leads him to suggest that we reconceive of the *imago Dei* in a highly contextualised, embodied^{vi} sense (see Van Huyssteen 2006:276ff). Sticking to his post-foundationalist, interdisciplinary methodological position, and freed from epistemic narcissism and epistemological tribulism, Van Huyssteen thus ultimately substantiates his transversal exercise: theology *can* engage in rational discourse across interdisciplinary lines.

What does such an evolutionary connection between our genes and belief imply for re-imagining the concept of revelation?

Tentative framework for an interdisciplinary re-imagining of the concept of revelation

In light of the foregoing exposition, I tentatively propose the following theses:

- 1 From the overview of models of revelation it is clearly a key concept in theological reflection. If we take its most simplified definitions, "to uncover/make known something which was previously unknown" and, in the context of Christian theology, 'God's self-revelation', it implies some kind or form of knowledge claim. If such a theological knowledge claim wishes to maintain its identity without retreating into an esoteric world of private, insular knowledge, it should consciously seat itself at the interdisciplinary table of reflection on the genesis of knowledge.
- 2 At this interdisciplinary table theological reflection will find a justification for sitting at the table, as well as pointers to knowledge claims. The **justification** for sitting at the table lies in evolutionary epistemology. The **pointers** are formulated in the interdisciplinary space that creatively opens up in the dialogue with evolutionary epistemology. Regarding the justification, evolutionary epistemology as a theory of cognition reveals the biological roots of all human rationality, and thus the shared resources of human rationality for both scientific and theological reflection. It also permits an interdisciplinary account of our epistemic activities and a post-foundationalist notion of rationality (i.e. it takes us beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries). Regarding the formulation of pointers, theological reflection is made aware of being shaped not only by its cultural, social and historical contexts, but also by the biological roots of human rationality. However, although it is a cultural achievement intimately intertwined with biological evolution, theological reflection is not determined by it. In the words of Keith Ward, it is designed to lead to levels of explanation and reality beyond itself.
- 3 If our genes do not completely determine our culture and our rational abilities, it follows that our genes, our culture and our rational abilities may also not completely determine the continuing appeal of metaphysics, and ultimately of life transforming faith. This awareness enables theological reflection to move

- beyond narrow either/or options, for example naturalism/supernaturalism. This is prompted by the common focus (of scientific and theological reflection) on life processes, but theology is interested in more than that: it also wants to interpret existence, because nature is not designed to answer all metaphysical questions. When it comes to interpreting existence, evolutionary epistemology tells us that some kind of metaphysics seems to be a general human characteristic, hence the naturalness of religion and belief.
- 4 In religious belief we find a drive (the element of hope?) towards something transcending human powers as reflected in the fabric of the universe, a reality greater than, and transcending empirical reality. Over centuries this drive finds a natural witness in the phylogenetic memory of humankind. Phylogenetic memory represents – in my opinion – one of the exciting lines to pursue, a new way of crossing disciplinary boundaries when re-imagining the concept of revelation from a post-foundationalist perspective. The theological line which I consider fruitful for the interdisciplinary conversation combines Pannenberg's emphasis on a proleptic understanding of revelation and Christian theology as an analysis of universal and publicly accessible history (whilst specifically acknowledging the provisional nature of our historical understanding and culturally conditioned explanations of the Christian tradition and religious experience), and Ricoeur's focus on the poetic dimension of language (i.e. the conjunction of mythos and mimesis) and the category of testimony, which speaks to our imagination. For me this evolutionary perspective yields three constitutive dimensions for understanding revelation: remembering, imagination and hope.
 - 5 The historical-poetical 'testament' (i.e. Scripture and nature) can then be re-imagined as an emerging 'one book' (albeit differentiated in respect of 'information') in the ongoing evolutionary process, in which our capacity for rational knowledge and humanity's endless quest for ultimate meaning finds an existential village. A re-imagined 'one book' can open up ways for redefining 'divine action', and thus revelation, which can tell us in very different (new and dazzling) manners what God is like,^{vii} enabling us not only to celebrate the mystery of the revealed God, but also to acknowledge the depth, width and height of that very mystery that sustains humanity as *imago Dei*.

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Endnotes

- 1 In an interesting editorial article Philip Hefner (2008:3) refers to religion-and-science as the third community, that is, an entity on its own which is at home in neither the scientific nor the religious community, and which exists in an uneasy relationship with both of them! He describes the relationship as one of irony for three reasons, then concludes that religion-and-science draws its identity and its strength from its third-community location. I consider his remarks important for a better understanding of my comment, "over both".
- 2 Here I follow Reynhout (2006:12), who made the insightful connection between Van Huyssteen's earlier *Duet or duel* and his later Gifford Lectures.
- 3 Nancy Howell (2008:496) raises the question of Western Christian thought in relation to contemporary thinkers, asking whether the latter are still bogged down in the ancient Christian question regarding human uniqueness. In her own words: "... (S)hould we expect Japanese scientists to be as committed to the search for human uniqueness as Western scientists?" (Howell 2008:495). See Van Huyssteen's (2008:522ff) response to Howell's question.
- 4 See Peterson (2008:468-9) for his critique of Van Huyssteen's 'linking' of human uniqueness to evolutionary epistemology, stating two main concerns. The first is the

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- abstraction and high level of generality of Van Huyssteen's methodology. The second is the employment of tradition as an epistemological category. Peterson's (cf. 2008:474) critique can be put in a nutshell: Van Huyssteen has not been transversal enough! See Van Huyssteen's (2008:512ff) response to Peterson.
- 5 In her article in response to Van Huyssteen, Barbara King (2008:451ff) questions his conviction that the capacity for spirituality can be understood as an emergent consequence of the symbolic transformation of cognition and emotions, stating that these roots enable rather than determine religiousness (King 2008:454), and that there is more than one line that leads to personhood, self-awareness and consciousness (King 2008:457). Her point is: "Van Huyssteen's refrain of a 'link' or 'mediator' between biology and culture sends us down a wrong path in understanding human religiosity because, when we speak of evolutionary change, there is no clean split between these two realms" (King 2008:464). See Van Huyssteen's (2008:506ff) response to King.
 - 6 Wildman (2008:475ff) expresses his appreciation for Van Huyssteen's "extraordinary" and "very rich" book, which commands respect and deserves close attention. However, he argues that in a few respects Van Huyssteen's interpretation of the bodily character of human life appears to be insufficiently thoroughgoing relative to our best contemporary knowledge of human nature from the natural sciences. See Van Huyssteen's (2008:516ff) response to Wildman.
 - 7 In this formulation, I support J-L Marion's intriguing understanding of revelation as a saturated phenomenon. For an insightful analysis of Marion's viewpoint in the context of religious experience, see Wessel Stoker's (2006) "Is faith rational?"