

Exploring Myth & Meaning in Prehistoric Cave Paintings

Wentzel van Huyssteen to Give Prestigious Gifford Lectures

by Barbara A. Chaapel

On August 21, 1885, Adam Lord Gifford of Scotland, a senator in the College of Justice, signed his will. Contained in it was a provision for a series of lectures to be held annually at each of the four Scottish universities—Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St. Andrews—on the topic of natural theology.

These were Lord Gifford's words:

"I, having been for many years deeply and firmly convinced that the true knowledge of God, that is, of the Being, Nature, and Attributes of the Infinite, of the All, of the First and the Only Cause, that is, the One and Only Substance and Being, and the true and felt knowledge...of the relations of man and of the universe to Him, and of the true foundations of all ethics and morals, being, I say, convinced that this knowledge, when really felt and acted on, is the means of man's highest well-being, and the security of his upward progress, I have resolved, from the 'residue' of my estate, to institute...lectureships for the promotion of the study of said subjects...."

Thus began the Gifford Lectureship, recognized as the most prestigious religious studies lectureship in the world.

One hundred nineteen years later, in late April and early May 2004, Dr J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, Princeton Seminary's James I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science, will give the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh. He is both the first South African and the first scholar from Princeton Seminary to receive this distinguished honor.

The invitation came as quite a shock.

"I was home for two days last January, between visits to South Africa and a trip to Denver for a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science," he says. "I just glanced at the pile of mail that had accumulated on my desk, and at the top was the invitation. It was so unexpected; I was overwhelmed. I called my wife, Hester, immediately to share the news of such a wonderful confirmation of the work I've been doing in Princeton."

As the Gifford lecturer, van Huyssteen follows in the footsteps of philosophical and theological giants. Former Gifford lecturers include William James, Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Albert Schweitzer, Reinhold Niebuhr, Alfred North Whitehead, Niels Bohr, Paul Tillich, and David Tracy, a virtual Who's Who of world-class theologians and philosophers.

Lord Gifford's will stipulates that the Gifford lecturers (a series of six) address the topic of natural theology—theology deriving its knowledge of God from the study of nature independent of special revelation. According to van Huyssteen, defining theology as a "strict science, like chemistry or astronomy, not through revelation but through the facts of nature," was of particular significance in the nineteenth century, when science and reason were viewed as superior.

"But we don't look at the world that way today, especially in the Reformed tradition," he explains. "Today's Gifford lecturers usually begin by reinterpreting or reenvisioning Lord Gifford's charge to focus strictly on natural theology."

Van Huyssteen is not the first to do so. In fact, when Barth gave the Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen in 1937, he was the first "among Christian Gifford lecturers in inveighing against natural theology," according to Stanley J. Jaki, who wrote *Lord Gifford and His Lectures*, a history of the first 100 years of the lectureship.

For van Huyssteen, this reenvisioning means asking the question of what faith in God means for an understanding of the natural world. He takes an interdisciplinary approach to theology, which has always been an important part of his work and will be one goal of his Gifford lectures.

A second goal will be to expound on his belief that if you want "to understand what a human being is, you will find the highest value comes only when you see that we as human beings are in relationship to God."

What, then, does this scholar who has written about physics, Darwinism, postmodernism, and all manner of conversations between theology and science, and who has won three Templeton Awards for his work, choose for his topic? "Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology" is his working title.

"I want to explore one of the much-neglected areas of the science/theology discussions: paleoanthropology," he explains. "How do we think about human beings, and how did our prehistoric ancestors think about themselves? What are scientists saying about human origins? How does that relate to what theologians are saying? These are some of my questions."

A basic tenet of Christian theology posits that human beings are unique, *imago Dei*, created in the image of God, a concept of utmost interest to van Huyssteen. "What are scientists, and anthropologists in particular, saying about this uniqueness?" he asks. "Do they believe we are unique in terms of language, consciousness, creativity, art? If we—scientists and theologians—are both talking about human uniqueness, are we talking about the same thing?"

He finds a dramatic case study that might point to answers in the prehistoric caves in the Dordogne region of southwestern France and the Basque region of northern Spain, the most famous being the caves of Lascaux.

"We see one of the oldest known example of human creativity in the prehistoric cave paintings of Lascaux," van Huyssteen says. He describes the huge paintings of real and mythic animals on the cave walls as "the first tentative, surviving expressions of human symbolic activity."

The paintings were done between 40,000 and 15,000 B.C. by Cro Magnan people, and only discovered 100 years ago by four boys and their dog on a forest walk when they noticed the opening of one of the caves. Because the caves were hidden and almost literally sealed by shifts in the earth, the paintings were still there, unspoiled, almost as they appeared when they were painted, according to van Huyssteen.

"They represent an unexplained and spectacular explosion of cultural activity that you don't find anywhere else," he says. "They are like the Sistine Chapel of the prehistoric world. Walking in the caves, looking up at the vast paintings on the walls, is like walking in a cathedral."

The paintings, drawn in Picasso-like detail in pigments of red, brown, and yellow, represent lions, bison, bulls, cattle, mammoths, and horses. One of the most moving to van Huyssteen is a group of deer swimming a river, only their antlered heads visible above the water.

Paleontologists ask who made these paintings, when they made them, and how they made them. Theologians ask why.

"The paintings are the oldest symbols of human imagination," van Huyssteen says, "and they certainly had some religious and mythological meaning. They tell us about who our direct ancestors were, what they thought, and what they could do. They tell us about imagination, about creativity, about consciousness, about the Creator."

Might the Lascaux caves and their splendid paintings—and the conversations they have engendered among paleontology, neuroscience, and theology—broaden the concept of the *imago Dei*? Might they reestablish a closer relationship between the world of humans and the world of animals? Are animals, too, created in the image of God? Might the paintings help theologians rethink the doctrines of God, of redemption, of salvation, of Christology, of providence?

Wentzel van Huyssteen is probing these and other mind-expanding questions with the zeal of an explorer, and will share his work to date in the Gifford Lectures this spring. His excitement is contagious. "There was a time when there were three hominid types on earth, and thousands of other species, and today genetics and primatology tell us that we share 98 percent of our gene pool with the chimpanzee," he says. "We've lost the ability to imagine what it might mean *not* to be the only species on earth in relationship with God."

The Gifford Lectures, which will be published, as Lord Gifford's will provides, will also be a chance for van Huyssteen to try out his theological conclusions on scientists who are already his conversation partners. He looks forward to dialogue with the likes of paleoanthropologists Ian Tattersall, Steven Mithen, Richard Potts, and Simon Conway-Morris. "Whenever we ask about human origins, we have to turn to fossils and archaeology, and to the long line of evolution," he says.

A more intimate part of his Gifford Lectures audience will be van Huyssteen's family, some of his colleagues from PTS, and friends from around Europe, which delights him. From the intimacy of family and colleagues to the vastness of cave paintings to the immensity of God's creation, the note struck most clearly for this year's Gifford lecturer is surely the joy of knowledge and the exploration of its outer reaches. ■

Readers interested in learning more about either the Gifford Lectures or the prehistoric caves at Lascaux can go to http://www.faculty-office.arts.ed.ac.uk/gifford/gifford_lectures.htm and <http://www.culture.gouv.fr:80/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/>.



Photo: Joshua Sutherland

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