

## **Creating Science and Theology through a Cultural Lens**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*Creating science and theology from a cultural perspective is not a choice but a constraint. Our human capacity to symbolise, to create symbolic worlds within which we live always remains within the ambit of culture. The two dominant cultural discourses of science and theology both endeavour to explain reality, albeit in different ways. Both inform the way in which we construe our world, hence the motivation for the complementing perspectives of the religion:science debate. If, for whatever reason, science does not comment on the meaning of life, it loses its status as “omniscience”. If theology inclines to a kind of fictional supernaturalism, a faith experience of a culturally unmediated “more”, it likewise becomes questionable. Science does not know all, and neither does theology know “more” than what culture/nature provides.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

In direct opposition to the view presented by a paleoanthropologist at a recent religion:science conference to the effect that there is no deity, and that we should take responsibility for our own lives (Durand 2009:77), we find a statement from a theologian: “Reality, as human reality, is a construction. ... While God may be part of this construction, to the believer he is not for one moment less real than any physical reality” (Du Toit 2007:294). Du Toit, who hosted this conference, did not offer these words as a direct reply to Durand, but this is an earlier statement that has become a kind of stock answer by theologians in their conversations with scientists. Add to this statement on the “experience of god” the costliness of religion, to which the adherents thereof unhesitatingly subscribe - the erection of impressive buildings for worship (e.g. NG Kerk Moreletta Park in Pretoria and the Rhema Church in Randburg), the giving of tithes or other material means of sustaining a religion, the dedicated and virtually blind commitment to often excruciating rituals (e.g. circumcision often leading to deaths) and so forth – one is convinced of the “reality” of adherents’ belief. In some religious fundamentalist circles, even the sacrificing of a life is a small price to pay in return for what their religion offers members. The phenomenon of Muslim suicide bombers doing their “duty” across the world is well documented.

In order to deliberate not only on the parting of the ways of science and theology, illustrated by Durand and Du Toit, but also on their common ground, the title of this article has been formulated as it has been. To create science and

theology through cultural eyes is also the thesis that I defend in this contribution. The cultural domain is the shared domain where these two human activities take place, and where they can meaningfully interact. The term “culture” in this context refers to the human capacity to symbolise, and thus to create symbolic worlds within which to live. To “have a world” is not a choice but an imperative to live meaningfully. Apart from “culture”, world-making can also be described by similar terms such as discourse, rhetoric (e.g. rhetoric of the “body” in section B), *habitus*, ideology,<sup>1</sup> hegemony, master narrative, canon, mythmaking, world-view, symbolic world and cultural mapping (Lincoln 2000:409; Mack 2000:291). These terms are used interchangeably and their nuanced meanings will come to the fore in what follows. World making applies to both science and theology as they serve themselves with the dominant cultural paradigms of their time. We live in many worlds simultaneously, and religious worlds, on which I shall mainly focus, can be characterised as cultural systems “that organize language and behavior around postulated superhuman agencies” (Paden 2000:335). This also implies to politically invest particular societal preferences with transcendent status “...misrepresenting them as revealed truths...” (Lincoln 2000:416). If a society is territorial, individualistic or hierarchical, religion will follow suit and in turn re-inscribe such a society (Paden 2000:343). Why did I not use the term “natural” instead of “cultural” in the title? To access reality through “natural” eyes is not defensible as we always view the world through the interpretive filters that our communities provide. We should therefore replace a “natural view” of things with a “cultural view” (Vorster 2009:232)

The purpose of this article is not only to prove the thesis that both science and theology are cultural or world-making activities, but also to find common ground between these two disciplines. This can happen only if science does not usurp the cultural domain to postulate its claim to be the only acceptable voice through which an understanding of reality may be gained, presenting its findings as “omniscience”, and excluding all other meaning-seeking efforts such as art, music and theology. Despite being armed with its strength of causal explanation, it nevertheless cannot explain all phenomena, more particularly the origins of early Christianity, as will be shown in section B.

If theologians want to remain serious interlocutors in the discourse with secular science, their argument of “religious experience of God” has to be critically scrutinised, and this will be undertaken in section C. These are not the traditional philosophical arguments offered as proof for the existence of god, namely cosmological, teleological, ontological and moral, which believers and unbelievers have thrown at each other for so long (Clasquin-Johnson 2009:267-268). However, the argument of faith experience is offered as so real as to make it seemingly incontestable, since it portrays access to a mind-independent,

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<sup>1</sup> “Not every ideology is a religion, but every religion is ideology” (Lease 2000:445).

supernatural reality. Can this be possible as our access to reality is invariably mind-dependent, with our minds always shaped by cultural input? In the quote above Du Toit readily admits to reality, god included, as a human construction. The important question to be pursued is whether god is only that - or more. I limit my focus to the kind of theology practiced here on own soil where there is at least a serious engagement in the religion:science debate. I do not go into conversation with fundamentalist theology where virtually no credit is given to the findings of science (e.g. evolution). The views of two prominent theologians, namely C. W. du Toit (2007) and J. W. van Huyssteen (2006; 2007)<sup>2</sup> in regard to “religious experience”, have to a certain extent become the dominant voice locally in the engagement with science.<sup>3</sup>

In section D I argue in favour of theology as narrative to do what science is not primarily interested in doing, namely to “re-describe” reality in meaningful ways similar to art and music, and in this way complement science’s findings. However, if theology relies on supernatural backing (Krüger 2009:263), it loses a sympathetic ear in secular scientific circles.

## B SCIENCE: A DISCOURSE OF OMNISCIENCE?

The two dominant cultural discourses of science and religion represent two different ways of mediating reality, or better put, “making” reality, and consequently presenting their impressions of reality. It is not that the one is exclusively empirical (science) and the other metaphysical (religion). Although both exhibit an empirical and a metaphysical side, they function differently and focus on different subject matter (Du Toit 2007:10). Gregersen (2000:28) states that science moves beyond our conscious experience of the world (wherein religion is located), to the underlying structures and substantive elements in order to determine how the world has come to be as it is. Science teaches us about *how* the world came into being, while religion asks *why* there is a world, what is the meaning of us being in this world. Morality becomes the favourite pas-

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<sup>2</sup> Both Du Toit’s (2007) and Van Huyssteen’s (2006) sophistication of engaging in the religion:science debate is impressive, also evident in their earlier publications. Van Huyssteen’s stance as a postfoundationalist theologian, between the foundationalism of modernism and the relativism of postmodernism, to open up a transversal space where science and theology can creatively and interactively meet, has been argued convincingly for many years. Du Toit heads the Research Institute for Religion and Theology at Unisa and has staged several religion:science conferences over the years, leading to quality publications.

<sup>3</sup> Du Toit (2007:67) indicates more than a thousand “Who’s Who in theology and science” from 41 countries worldwide along with 72 institutes, organisations and periodicals actively partaking in the cosmology debate alone; my contribution does not pretend to add something new to the religion:science debate, but offers rather a deliberate focus on the notion of “faith experience” in the local theological discourse.

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time of religion, while science does not necessarily have a need to indulge in questions of right or wrong.

In scientific discourse, the emphasis on the empirical as integral to the discourse itself (Wolpert 2009:35; Durand 2009:77) has transformed scientific discourse into a kind of a "new god" of our time. What scientists claim as "fact" can be convincingly substantiated by evidence, usually from a wide spectrum of related scientific disciplines. Their discourse becomes so persuasive that it is popularly received as unquestionable, and is therefore perceived as "omniscience". After the scientist has offered a proven explanation, having answered the *how* question, nothing more needs to be added - including the *why* question of "meaning". Accompanying and adding to its power is its claim to objectivity, especially as the impression is created of having pure and unmediated access to reality. The "real" world and its "facts" lie in waiting to be laid bare. But is the scientific approach as objective as is intuitively assumed? "Facts" change as perspectives change - as the history of science clearly indicates - and in this way, natural science is just as historically and contextually embedded as any of the social sciences. New "facts" do not lie objectively "out there somewhere", awaiting discovery, but are the consequences of new assumptions and beliefs, new paradigms with which reality is mediated (Fish 1989: 487 referring to Thomas Kuhn)<sup>4</sup>. If the scientific discourse changes, new worlds come to light. Furthermore, science is able to construct *a* world and not *the* world because of its chosen focus on the structures and substances of nature. What culture, the other discourse, offers in terms of a force of its own lies beyond the interest of science. In actual fact, there is only culture, and no nature: what we experience and describe as "nature" is provided to us by our culture (Vorster 2009:240). We "see" nature solely through the discursive practices of our culture (see also footnote 20). It is clear that even a so-called objectivistic perspective on reality through the eyes of science, is always culturally filtered and coloured.

Vorster (2009) illustrates the limited potential of scientific explanation, more especially that of Darwinian evolution, to explain the early origins of Christianity. This is particularly notable in the work of Richard Dawkins<sup>5</sup> (2006). The Burkeian notion of "terministic screen" which Vorster utilises<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> An elementary example is the change in cosmology from a geocentric worldview (early Greeks) to a heliocentric worldview (Copernicus) to a modern cosmology of an expanding universe. Increasing knowledge dramatically changes worldviews. Another example is the way in which modern quantum physics questions the Newtonian laws of the behaviour of matter.

<sup>5</sup> Vorster (2009:219) explains: "A terministic screen is the product of strategic selection of the possibilities offered by the repertoire of an interpretative community ... Functioning as a symbolizing mediating agency, directing our attention to particular experiences of reality, the nature and quality of the selected symbols and processes of

confirms the subjectivity of all scientific endeavours, including that of the Biology of Dawkins as well as his own, namely Rhetoric. Apart from having a reductionistic view of religion, natural selection utilised by Dawkins cannot explain why early Christianity flourished in opting against the laws of survival. Rhetoric offers a far more sophisticated grasp of the complexities of culture and religion, notably so in their constructionist functions. The rhetoric of the “body”, the socially constructed ideal or regulatory “body” that functions like a spirit determining and shaping all others, is a useful tool to understand how this discourse in turn constructs society. The Roman gladiator<sup>6</sup> functioned as the regulatory “body” for early Christians. They embraced and emulated and capitalised on the gruesome suffering, pain and martyrdom of this “ideal” male figure. In doing this, the early Christians were on the course of self-destruction in terms of natural selection. Instead of averting the life-threatening behaviour of the gladiator, which is the expected thing to do when speaking of survival, Christians went out of their way to be brave “gladiators”. And yet, Christianity grew into a formidable movement within centuries (Vorster 2009:237). The same is true of the early Christian idealisation of a regulated, self-controlled a-sexual, but nevertheless male body.<sup>7</sup> Emulating this “body” meant living a life of abstinence completely contrary to what Vorster (2009:239) calls “[T]he force of natural selection to prompt sexual desire, genital stimulation and reproduction...” – and yet Christianity nevertheless expanded. Even in its strong point of causal explanation, science is in this surpassed by a cultural/rhetorical explanation of the origins of the early Christian movement. Natural science cannot claim the status of “omniscience”.

Science’s omniscient status is further questioned by the fact that some things lie beyond its scope, while very much at home within the ambit of culture. This is confirmed by Van Huyssteen (2006:98; see also Du Toit 2007:29) who emphasises that culture has a life of its own, reaching beyond its natural origins:

Cultural evolution indeed depends on specific biological processes, and our cultures therefore are part of a grandiose universal natural history, but cultural evolution, once it started, obeyed its own principles and gave human evolution an entirely new direction, even acting back on organic evolution....

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symbolization constituting a terministic screen, decisively determine the nature and quality of the reality we experience ...”

<sup>6</sup> The Roman gladiator became the embodiment, the materialisation of the Greco-Roman societal generating principles of competition and engendered hierarchy.

<sup>7</sup> A self-controlled body was the materialisation of the Greco-Roman societal generating principles of balance (through self-control) and engendered hierarchy. This was radicalised by the early Christians into an ideology of a-sexuality as opposed to “proper sex”, ensuring the well being of the Roman family as core of civil society.

A cultural explanation of the human condition is often more convincing than a reductionist explanation in terms of its biological roots. However, to try and step outside of culture, to transfer the source of explanation to some assumed, but uncontrollable supernatural domain, is equally unconvincing. If theological claims such as evil, moral failure, sin, tragedy and redemption are tabled to address the human condition, a condition lying beyond the fossil record and science (Van Huyssteen 2007:221), one immediately detects that these claims also lie outside of culture. Is theology part of culture or does it transcend culture? Does it linger within the natural (= cultural) or does it see itself as supernatural?

### C THEOLOGY AS A DISCOURSE OF SUPERNATURALISM?

The explanation of “meaning”, referred to in the previous paragraph, is a very important part of culture in which science is not primarily interested (although it sometimes crosses over to metaphysical/ultimate matters). Scientists usually leave explanations of the meaning of life to the “Arts”. The domain of “meaning” becomes a fruitful space within which theology can operate. Symbolic worlds eminently convey meaning. The symbolic might be non-veridical empirically but very real to those who live in these ideological worlds. Earlier symbolic anthropologists (e.g. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, E. Leach), with their views of “expressivism”, made the grave mistake of not appreciating the contents of the symbolic worlds of pre-industrial societies as literally “real”. They would argue that a prayer to ancestors for rain does not mean that these figures really exist to provide rain, but are only a symbolic expression of the deep sense of dependence on nature on the part of those who so pray. Not so, says anthropologist Robin Horton: a prayer to the ancestors is “instrumental”, a deliberate rational decision to move these gods, whom the supplicants deem to exist literally, to fulfil their wishes (Pals 2000:161-163). The symbolic world is indeed very real<sup>8</sup> but the important question to be asked here is where does this world come from, what is its source — natural/cultural (i.e. humans’ own imaginative symbolic representations) or super-natural (i.e. revelations from the gods)? Whereas science is characterised by its mathematical mode (measuring, testing, control) of going about its business, theology after it has fulfilled its scientific duty finally switches over to a confessional mode, which lies beyond rational control.

The emphasis on the subjective, quite welcome after the reductionist rationality of modernism, also marks theology. After both Van Huyssteen and Du Toit have presented their really impressive command of the newest developments in science and theology, they offer as a final word their subjective stance of faith in the Christian god. As sophisticated scholars they are very

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<sup>8</sup> See again the quote of Du Toit (2007:294) at the beginning of this article: “...to the believer he [God] is not for one moment less real than any physical reality”.

well aware of the vast array of god constructs featuring in the deliberations of leading scholars in the religion:science debate. Their own stance comes across as the “canonical core” of mainstream theology on South African soil. “Canonical core” is Van Huyssteen’s term for Darwinian theory as the “dogma” still dominant in Biology (2006:164). These scholars have this to say:

- “For the theologian this interdisciplinary move implies that God used natural history for religion and for religious belief to emerge as a natural phenomenon” (Van Huyssteen 2006:322; 2007:218);<sup>9</sup>
- “...a return to embodied notions of humanness where our embodied sexuality and moral awareness are tied directly to our self-transcendence *as believers who are in a relationship with God*” (Van Huyssteen 2006:219; 2007:220; emphasis added);
- “He [Lord Gifford] might just as well have said that what is truly unique about us as humans is to be found in exactly this remarkable ability we have to know God through our relationships to this God...” (Van Huyssteen 2006:273);
- in reaction to Kaufmann’s notion of god as “serendipitous creativity”, he remarks: “...this does not imply the illusory character or non-existence of God, but might actually reveal the only intellectually satisfying way to talk about God if we wish to believe in a God with whom we can have a humanly comprehensible personal relationship” (Van Huyssteen 2006:283);
- “The theologian may be immeasurably enriched by ... the scientific implications of human embodiment...The scientist may be enriched by ... these powerful and religious propensities ... (that)...come alive only in the living faith of specific religious systems...” (Van Huyssteen 2007:219).

Du Toit writes:

- “The existence of God cannot be proven empirically and has to be accepted in faith” (2007:42);
- Following Bonhoeffer, he points out that “...we should seek God in what is known and not in the unknown ... through millions of people who believe in him, *experience* him ... (this) represents a tremendous and visible manifestation of divine action...The action of God through

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<sup>9</sup> Arguing in the same vein is cognitive psychologist Justin Barrett (2007:70): “The theist may build such an epistemological foundation by appealing to the divine as a trustworthy source of Truth, that has imparted the ability to conceive Truth (at least under some conditions) through cosmic fine-tuning or supernatural selection or supernaturally generated mutations that then were naturally selected to produce human minds. I leave the details and coherence of such a theology up to the individual theist.”

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those who believe is visible, empirical, theoretical and falsifiable" (Du Toit 2007:316; emphasis added);

- "Theology's main message of God's love and forgiveness that bring redemption through Christ<sup>10</sup> need not be compromised by accepting science in the naturalistic sense of the word" (Du Toit 2007:316).

What is very conspicuous in these few quotes is the argument presented for experience of god through faith. Being in a relationship with god is not offered as rational proof of the existence of god. We do not have here the traditional philosophical arguments (see Introduction) usually put forward to build a case for the ontological reality of god. However, the faith experience of god becomes an irrefutable argument against all others, since one does not easily argue against people's deepest, sincerest, emotional convictions of the "truth" – convictions which, in fact, overwhelm them. This argument places us within the social constructionist explanation of religion<sup>11</sup> as experience (also as social formation, mythmaking, cognition, projection, etc; see Braun and McCutcheon [2000]). But before delving into the "what", contents or "object" of the religious experience, which forms the second focus of discourse theory,<sup>12</sup> the initial focus thereof, namely the *kind* of discourse itself, has to be commented on. This is a typical discourse exemplifying mythmaking (or world-making), "myth" here used in a positive sense as ideology production or ideal-making with the strategy to totalise, naturalise, rationalise and universalise its contents within the society it constructs, and which in turn is upheld by that society. Most believers go along with "what-goes-without-saying" (the reality of god) (McCutcheon 2000:206, following Roland Barthes), and the discourse establishes for itself a "place beyond criticism" (McCutcheon 2000:207). This is true of all ideologies as they all vie for power, admittedly including the writer's own, where an alternative discourse, that of religion as social construction, is subscribed to. However, if the discourse of religious experience/faith becomes an argument imposed by authority, untouchable and insulated against any fur-

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<sup>10</sup> Spangenberg (2009:138-141) laments theologians' lack of a historical consciousness trapped in "the world of myth" (Don Cupitt), by still accepting the Augustinian paradigm of fall-redemption-judgement - a mythic cosmic fall requiring a mythic saviour Jesus Christ, "...to claim a status for Christian doctrines that contradicts the evidence that these doctrines were formulated by humans and enforced by emperors". Informed by evolutionary epistemology, Van Huyssteen is quite aware of the untenability of a past paradise from which humanity has "fallen", but nevertheless accepts the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ (2006:37, 306).

<sup>11</sup> This is the approach which I subscribe to, namely that of religion (and god[s]) as a social construct. It is what humans do in order to "have a world", it comprises "world-making" as briefly stated in the Introduction to this article.

<sup>12</sup> Discourse implies more than language or verbal texts and includes architecture, icons, types of behavior, clothing, painting, musical performance, et cetera – everything that in many diverse ways signals the cultural script (Braun 2000:11; Murphy 2000:399).

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ther critical inquiry, there can hardly be any conversation between different stances. The theological discourse is not in a class of its own, and therefore has to be scrutinised like any other ideology.

What is being experienced? Van den Heever (2002:32) puts it aptly: “Religious experience therefore does not refer to some inner experience of the divine reality, but rather to the affectively charged interaction with the discursive process of constructing religion.” He regards religion as social formation, as a political (power-seeking) discourse operating in a specific social context to foreground its preferences (values) so as to produce a discursive (language-) world within which the adherents find meaning and identity (Van den Heever 2002:34). As discursive product, society in turn enacts and recreates its formative discourse. To interact affectively involves “matters of the heart”, deep and ultimate realisations/illuminations of meaning, but, ironically, only of the discursive practices provided by society, even though “more” is so often claimed by theologians.

There is no unmediated knowing of reality, either in science, theology or any other discipline: we only “know” through the terminologies/vocabularies and taxonomies provided by our society. These discourses are always there, with a structural power of their own, ready to produce subjects (or “subject positions” *a la* Laclau and Mouffe; see Murphy 2000:401) An author does not exist but becomes an instant “I” activating existing discourses, or particular combinations thereof which might even result in a creative or unique new master-narrative (Murphy 2000:402-403). It is only here, within discourse, that objects or raw materiality come to “life” (Foucault). A spherical object made of leather, becomes a football with all its significations only within a soccer-playing society. Murphy (2000:400-1) verbalises lucidly:

This is not to say that discourse brings the material object into existence...It is only to say that the *raw materiality of mind-independent objects has little to do with their life in society* (emphasis added). They become objects for human beings by virtue of the place within a system of relations, relations which have an undeniable signifying element.

With material objects we can obviously form different concepts of the same object, but with god we find ourselves within the realm of non-materiality or the non-empirical. Even if god exists mind-independently, that “something” which we call god begets its meaning only within the meaning-creating societal discourses within which we live. A real god outside of our human grasp becomes meaningless. God has no referent, except our societal ideas. What is then believed and experienced is god-society; if “more” is claimed, how could this be controlled? God-society is an ideational construct symbolising and directing our thoughts to where we belong in the bigger scheme of things, and

is never neutral but always politically interested.<sup>13</sup> Devotion to societal constructs, especially when these god-ideas constantly change, becomes a non-persuasive appeal. These ideas come to “life” and die as societies create new gods all the time.

Karen Armstrong aptly illustrates the social construction of gods. She often uses the word “create”, where each generation “creates” a new god that works for them. After her monumental journey through 4000 years of god history within Christianity, Judaism and Islam, where god-creations fluctuate between incomprehensible abstraction to pantheism, she sees some hope in mysticism (1993:454), where god is “...a subjective experience, mysteriously experienced in the ground of being”. Spangenberg’s focus on the god-concepts of ancient Israel, early Judaism and early Christianity confirm the constructional role of societies as new historical contexts require new gods to fulfil new needs (2009). Within the polytheistic Canaanite environment of pre-exilic Israel, Israel’s pantheon looked similar to that of the Canaanites. There was not much reason to differ from the Canaanites that dramatically as Israel spontaneously and creatively interacted with their neighbours’ existing discourses. Israel’s resulting pantheon consisted of four hierarchical tiers: Yahweh and his Asherah, gods/children of the gods, other lower ranking gods and angels. Shortly before the exile the idea of a single god (“great king”) were propagated strongly by the Deuteronomists. Israel being in an agreement (covenant) with this single god had no choice but to pay him sole worship (monolatry). The depressing exilic and post-exilic era became *inter alia* an identity seeking exercise for early Judaism that prompted a discourse of monotheism in the form of an exclusivistic Yahwism. This new, two tier pantheon included Yahweh and angels. Jesus and his followers were adherents of early Judaism or Second Temple Judaism, worshiping Yahweh as the only true god. Leaving aside the different Judaisms, Jesus himself evolved through social construction from an old style traditional prophet (not a god) in very early Christian communities, to a fully fledged Ruler of the cosmos (after having been crucified and resurrected, according to Pauline discourse), fictionalised further by the gospels and always tapping into a vast array of available discourses (e.g. Judaism[s], Plato, Stoic philosophy, Roman conceptions of the divine, mystery religions, Gnosticism, Mediterranean popular beliefs; see Van den Heever 2002:40) formative of early Christianity. Eventually, in the fourth century, Jesus became the second godly person of the Trinity (then part of a four tier pantheon, including angels). The Trinity was the resultant construct driven by the Roman Emperor Constantine (275 – 337 C.E.), along with the Nicene bishops, to lay to rest the differences among Christians that jeopardised the stability of the empire. Theodosius

<sup>13</sup> Malul (2002:175, footnote 92; 288, footnote 99; 446) describes god as the ultimate social-structural principle, the incarnation of society (Durkheim) embodying its values, ideologies, lore, customs and tradition. It is not only modelled on the human social world but in return models its source.

(346 – 395 C.E.) continued in the same vein by making Christianity the state religion and enforcing the idea of the Holy Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

If people keep god(s) “alive” by talking about, to and with them, as has been the argument presented thus far, if they beget their lives and meanings in society’s discursive practices (Braun 2000:11 following Lincoln and Fitzgerald), then it becomes clear: no god-talk means no gods. A “godly-ontic” existence apart from our human cultural grasp, which might or might not be, can only remain a hidden mystery, the tautology intended to emphasise the questionability of an unmediated access to such a “something”.

Still within the ambit of the (supernatural?) “experience of god” is the argument of *theoception* put forward by Clasquin-Johnson (2009), which implies a vague (deistic) sense of god, similar to that of our sense of time without us having specific time “receptors”.<sup>15</sup> This innate sense of time is universal, as is the innate “sense of god”. Theological discourse gratefully capitalises here upon. The quote above by Du Toit emphasises the notion that, with millions of people across the globe experiencing god, the question has to arise as to how they could be wrong.<sup>16</sup> Clasquin-Johnson (2009:277) asks:

[W]hy should there be a sense designed/evolved to detect ... absolutely nothing? Why should the vast majority of human beings be convinced that they are making contact with something that does not exist in reality?

He focuses *inter alia* on cognitive psychology to argue his case. Humans do not have a “god-spot” or a specific brain function or region that serves as a “receptor” for god.<sup>17</sup> The whole of the complex brain-mind works together to generate god concepts and religious experience. Neuroscientists are capable of artificially inducing religious awareness. Psychologist Justin Barrett’s (2007) example of the perceived robin is brought into play:

<sup>14</sup> These are only a few broad historical strokes to emphasise the point that societies bring to life different god-constructs through their discursive practices; for more historical detail see Van den Heever (2002) and Spangenberg (2009).

<sup>15</sup> Although steering away from the “existence” of god Clasquin-Johnson, however, “...cannot ignore the ontological implications of epistemology ... The only religious tradition that we can back up from our sense of god is the vaguest kind of deism ...” (2009:267, 268, 278).

<sup>16</sup> We find a similar kind of argument as that of theoception with Van Huyssteen (2006:94) where he refers to the natural religious intuitions (their phylogenetic memory) of our early ancestors, the Cro-Magnons, exemplified in their fascinating cave art, that should not be mistrusted.

<sup>17</sup> Du Toit (2009:6) puts it aptly: “We are not wired for religion, only for rationality ...”

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Suppose I believe I see a robin outside my window...No one wants to argue that if scientists can use electro-magnetic fields to make me believe I see a robin that suddenly I am not justified in normal conditions in believing I see robins.<sup>18</sup>

So if my brain processes something there must be something! But what about things that have no referents, for instance the trance state? What is experienced in trance only exists within the personal mind, tapping from the cultural resources in which the subject is always embedded. And what about illusion? The brain can and does misjudge<sup>19</sup>. Guthrie (1993:39-61) uses the telling example of misjudging a boulder for a bear. The illusion creates exactly the same affective reactions in the perceiver as if it were a real bear – increased pulse rate, heavy breathing, sweaty palms, hair raising and so on. The brain processes “real things” and fictions in exactly the same way. Neuroscience cannot really prove the existence or non-existence of god(s) and other counter-intuitive possibilities, but what *can* be meaningfully grasped and deliberated upon is the cultural construction of god-ideas (see also Craffert 2002). The persistence of these god-ideas is explicable through the innumerable discourses ever since humans appeared. Reiterated over and over again, it makes sense that god-ideas become innate,<sup>20</sup> that our brain-minds become conditioned to keep on generating them. They come naturally along with our other symbolic propensities to “have a world” (world-making). But if there is no god-talk there is no god, and

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<sup>18</sup> Of the five arguments from the bio-psychological sciences that Barrett (2007) puts forward refuting the claim that they prove the non-existence of god, this argument concerns the human *neural substrate* (see also his arguments of religion as *evolutionary byproduct, religious utility* and *inherited belief*). The argument of *error-prone minds* states that if we cannot believe our minds in regard to religious concepts we can hardly trust our minds for anything. Mind does not exist objectively, it cannot be proved, but we still utilise its “existence” to have a meaningful life. Why not god, who can also not be proven objectively? Barrett’s analogy between mind and god is a good and convincing one. However, both are *theoretical constructs* allowing for meaningful explanation.

<sup>19</sup> Barrett (2007:67, 70) is quite aware that the mind can err but not to the extent that it is totally untrustworthy.

<sup>20</sup> When Barrett and others (2004:76-93) experimentally illustrate young children’s *natural* notions of god as superknowing and superperceiving, superpowerful, immortal, the creator and also perfectly good, these ideas cannot but come across in western Christian *cultural* garb, where the subjects were mostly drawn from American Protestant circles. They maintain, however, that the same kinds of notions also appear cross-culturally. Vorster’s (2009:233) utilisation of Kuberski’s notion of “worldliness” echoes the near impossibility of separating nature from culture: “There is in fact no real gap between the world and the brain, but consciousness comes into existence by virtue of worldliness as a context for the brain.” Note also Pyysiäinnen (2001:215) in the same vein: “The human mind has co-evolved with the world it reflects, and cognitive domains should be understood as the outcome of this interaction.”

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if we prefer to switch off or bypass our mental tools,<sup>21</sup> counter-intuitive beings disappear, admittedly from culture and not ontologically if they do exist. It would seem that the “existence of god(s)” is very much in our own hands. Craffert correctly emphasises the role of culture against the argument that the gods will not go away as long as we have the kind of brain-minds that we currently have: “The same brain structure and potential experiences can also be filled in by culture without making use of a god hypothesis” (2002:82).

Whereas the scientific discourse tends to ignore cultural input in the explanation of a meaningful reality, the rhetoric of theological faith experience presumes to have an unmediated access to reality, even a supernatural reality. The quotes on having a relationship with god (Van Huyssteen and Du Toit) communicate this precisely. This presumed bypassing of the cultural/natural constraint or limit on our knowing seems to be highly unlikely. It is impossible to access reality independently of the mind; our access to reality is always mind-dependent, with minds always shaped by cultural input. And what culture provides us with are constructs, ideas that come and go. The history of god(s) pointed out earlier confirms that they are culturally derived. I doubt if a discourse of fictional supernaturalism/transcendentalism - to borrow a term from Lincoln (2000:418) — to which the canonical core of mainstream South African theology finally adds up, will be accepted as a serious complementing (rectifying?) voice to the naturalistic scientific endeavour, or within the social sciences. But this need not be the end of theology. If god and religion become a creative, artful way of re-describing reality, then meaning is indeed what has been accomplished. If theology, a specific (religious) cultural activity representative of the continuous human search for meaning, becomes a creative narrative that unlocks life’s meaning in novel ways, it has to be taken seriously.

## D THEOLOGY AS NARRATIVE

To see theology’s task as narrative is most certainly not something new. To convert something into creative narrative can indeed open up new horizons, with new dimensions of meaning coming to light that we were not able to see before. That is why we enjoy reading good literature,<sup>22</sup> to be uplifted by the imaginative skills of a talented author and to discover new worlds of meaning, even if the author re-activates stories that have been told over and over again. Through evolution, we have developed narrative minds so that narrative ap-

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<sup>21</sup> Belief comes intuitively, instantly and unreflectively. One has to override, or short-circuit for instance the two mental tools HADD (Hyperactive agency detection device) and ToM (Theory of mind, filling in the detail that HADD has detected), amongst many, when they intuitively detect “supernatural” agency; one also has to satisfy and incapacitate these tools with alternative explanations, e.g. instead of a designing creator god opt for evolution (Barrett 2004:107-118).

<sup>22</sup> Other art forms like painting, sculpting, music, dancing, et cetera, likewise provide imaginative new perspectives on our world.

peals to us effortlessly, while calculus needs hard and often tiresome effort. And religious narratives might even catch the attention of natural scientists, allowing them to appreciate what they cannot do or are not primarily interested in doing, namely a specific kind of world-making that can convey a deep sense of meaning. The archaeologist, Jurie van den Heever, whilst criticising the creationist reading of Genesis 1-11, simultaneously appreciates biblical narrative, “the use of metaphor in the Bible and ... *the beauty of allegorical tales*” (2009:148; emphasis added).

Gregersen (2000:29-31) sees theology’s task as that of re-description (narrative)<sup>23</sup> and not explanation. Causal explanation should be left to the sciences, which are remarkably good at providing these, for instance the evolution of life. The sciences do not need religion or theology to go about their business, but theology depends on scientific explanation.<sup>24</sup> A theological re-description can add the cultural perspective that life is not only about reproduction and survival but also about a qualitative well being. Gregersen (2000:31-38) then elaborates on Big Bang cosmology and specifically biogenesis or the origin of life, the route leading from non-living to living systems, through the self-organisational principle. The latter can be theorised by way of a built-in, teleological creativity allowing for the self-replicating ability of RNA, or something similar in proteins preceding RNA, or a non-linear mathematical order<sup>25</sup> governing self-organizing systems. Re-describing or narrating these scientific insights theologically, Gregersen (2000:39-48) utilises the notions of “creation” and “blessing” of the Genesis narratives. God creates creativity and allows for this self-organisational principle to manifest itself in the self-productivity of the earth and its “self-making” creatures. The togetherness of God and creatures becomes even clearer in “blessing” as generative power, to evolve to an even super-abundance of life. However, “God” is the same god as discussed above, the “God” of belief and experience, “by believers who already understand themselves to participate in a two-way communication with God” (Gregersen 2000:40). It seems as if “God” is more than the cultural discourse.

Van Huyssteen (2006; 2007) likewise re-describes the last hominid on earth (see striking title of his 2006 book, *Alone in the World...*) theologically. Science has convincingly laid bare *homo sapiens* as kin to the animal world, but evolving and transcending them as a symbolising creature with remarkable

<sup>23</sup> Gregersen (and Van Huyssteen) may not agree that their theological re-descriptions of scientific findings are mere narratives.

<sup>24</sup> One cannot help but sympathise with the view that religion and theology is parasitic (Boyer 2001:191, 202; Vorster 2009:234), but then the same applies to the art forms mentioned in footnote 22.

<sup>25</sup> When Du Toit (2007:43) defends *revelation* by saying: “Not only does mathematics uncannily ‘fit’ the reality of the physical world, but so do metaphysics and theology ‘fit’ the spiritual and philosophical worlds”, the latter is quite explicable in terms of our normal *human contemplation* of reality and our consequent “world-making”.

imaginative capabilities in terms of language, art, science and religion. Human uniqueness is theologically re-described as *imago Dei*, humans in the “image of God” (Van Huyssteen 2006:111-162) or the “walking representations of God” (following Towner, Van Huyssteen 2006:167). After paying due attention to the historical understandings of the *imago Dei* as substantive, functional, relational, as well as to contemporary existential and eschatological understandings, he pleads in the light of evolutionary epistemology, against an overly abstract interpretation thereof, for an embodied understanding of human uniqueness, emphasising “our vital connection with nature precisely by focusing on our species specificity”, and so not isolate theology from the interdisciplinary dialogue (Van Huyssteen 2007:219). But theology must also protect its own integrity after leaving the transversal space of dialogue with the sciences: “to return to embodied notions of humanness where our own sexuality and moral awareness are tied directly to our self-transcendence *as believers who are in a relationship with God*” (Van Huyssteen 2007:220; emphasis added). A relationship with god implies more than the god of social discourse. In the approach adopted in this article - that of religion and god as social constructs, — the discourse that I find most convincing, *imago Dei*, seems rather to be a reflection on the “perfections” of the human capacities of reason, will and feeling (Feuerbach), where “God ... is the notion of the species transformed by the imagination into a perfect exemplar of the species, a conscious being with perfect knowledge, will and, above all, feeling” (Guthrie 2000:232, quoting Harvey).

In another redescription of the cosmology of science by way of a cosmospheric meditation, religion scientist Kobus Krüger (2009) verbalises our intuitions of (meta-) Nature, what is “in” and “behind” nature. He presents us with a coherent triad of Unground, Infinity and Cosmos, which he names Arché/Spirit.<sup>26</sup> Each of these consists of either smaller triads, or constitutions of powers/principles/factors, thus:

- *Unground* – End, Absoluteness, Origin.
- *Infinity*:
  - i. Potentially (Freedom) – Dream (Imagination), Desire, Will
  - ii. Realisation (Necessity, Law) – Power, Deed (Action), Consequence
  - iii. Reality (Existence) – Unity, Plurality (Duality), Interdependence (Non-duality)
- *Cosmos* – Mind, Soul, Matter.

All of these elements are mutually implied (Krüger 2009:249):

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<sup>26</sup> Spirit and Arché are just sounds, signs and names for the Unnamable, such as other unnamables like Tao, Original Nature, Buddha-Nature and God (Krüger 2009:259)

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It is like a baobab tree, its three basic organs (root, trunk and leaf) distinct yet mutually implied and interactive – a unit, growing upwards, downwards and sideways through the consecutive seasons. In one sense, root comes first, then stem, then leaf; in another sense there is no sequence. Were it not for the leaves, the roots would not grow...

In the primordial triad *Unground*, End falls away into Absoluteness (an axial concept) and Origin exits from there. This triad is a non-empirical postulate to understand nature as a procession and return in an eternal spiralling movement. The second primordial triad which revolves around the first is *Infinity*. It is not closed but undetermined, begging to be carried to the next triad, and also timeless; it may be compared to ancient philosophy as the spiral movement between origin and end, emanation and return (Plotinus), love and strife (Empedocles), et cetera. The secondary triads within *Infinity* is firstly, Potentiality (Dream/Imagination, Desire and Will), which encapsulates pure Freedom. The second smaller triad of Realisation (Power, Action and Consequence) implies necessity. The third smaller triad, Reality/Actuality (Unity, Plurality and Interdependence), spells existence. Stated otherwise, each of these secondary triads may be equated to “knowing/understanding”, “sensing/feeling” and “acting/being”. The coherent whole of *Infinity* exits from, and collapses into, *Unground* through the portals of Origin and End. From the postulated non-empirical triad of *Infinity*, movement occurs to the triad *Cosmos*, the empirical awe-inspiring world of nature, the blueprint of *Unground*-*Infinity*. Whereas movement in the first two triads is a-chronic, in *Cosmos* it is diachronic, a “come-into-being” of life through evolution. Evolution is not blind (nihilistic), nor a super-natural intervention, but a concomitant emerging of soul, mind and matter “...from the depths of a mysterious Potentiality, exiting from *Unground* ...”, developing through responsive feeling and creative intelligence to “... manifesting ... in the Finch’s untutored weaving of its nest...” (Krüger 2009:256, 257), and finally returning to Absoluteness. To summarise: *Unground* is the experientially unknown abyss of source and termination. *Infinity* or possibility, arises out of *Unground* and sinks back into it, but in between concretizes in *Cosmos* in time, space and causality. Together the three move from Absoluteness to *Cosmos* and back. *Cosmos* is the outside of Arché/Spirit, the latter’s self-evolution (Krüger 2009:259).

Linking this triad with the Trinity in Christian mysticism, *Unground* becomes God-above-God (God above Father, Son and Spirit); the ideas of Origin and Potentiality (dream, wish and will) can be linked to the Holy Spirit; Realisation (power, creative action, growth, preservation) with the Father.<sup>27</sup> Reality and End (unity, estrangement, reconciliation, death, new beginning) with (cosmic) Christ. In similar vein links are drawn with other mythic pictures

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<sup>27</sup> Krüger (2009:260), however, distances himself from the Christian view of duality between Creator and creation.

and their cosmogonic stories, those of Buddhist and Hindu traditions (Krüger 2009:260-1). This meditation is also meant for human beings to leave behind their self-centred *ego* and mature into a Spirit-centred *ipse*, “acting with wisdom and compassion towards oneself ... other human(s) ... animals ... plants ... sub-vegetative life ...the cosmic All” (Krüger 2009:262).

Some final and important words from Krüger: his meditation is not a description but a construction, and consists of postulated *a priori*s to make sense of nature – “they have *no supra-natural backing* whatsoever. In this way we may seek *a connection* with the language of *science*” (2009:263; emphasis added). A narrative that does not pretend to tap from a mind-independent, supernatural source, something that transcends our cultural capabilities of knowing, is a convincing one as it admits our finite human consciousness. And Krüger is correct, there is no hindrance to conversing with scientists at home within the naturalistic sphere.

## **E CONCLUSION**

Creating science and theology through cultural eyes is not a choice but a constraint. We cannot really escape the limits that our culture has placed on our minds; our human comprehension and experience always remain within the ambit of culture. The symbolic worlds that we inhabit are our own creations. If it is argued that they are revelations from somewhere “more” than culture/nature, namely the supernatural, this remains a claim only, and never controllable. The notion that we are culturally determined must necessarily be a depressing one if the determining force is understood to be static. History, however, tells a remarkable story of constant creative change and innovation confirming that culture possesses a “life of its own”, since its appearance in human history roughly 60000 – 30000 years ago. The recent histories of both science and theology bear testimony to the vastness of the symbolic capacity of humans.

The two dominant cultural discourses of science and theology both endeavour to explain reality, albeit in different ways. Both inform our world-making, hence the motivation for the religion:science debate to have complementing perspectives. If science does not comment on the meaning of life for whatever reason, it loses its status as “omniscience”. If theology inclines to a kind of fictional supernaturalism, a faith experience of a culturally unmediated “more”, it likewise becomes questionable. Science does not know it all and neither does theology know “more” than what culture/nature provides.

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