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What does it mean to be human? In conversation with Daniel P. Veldsman

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What does it mean to be human? This article engages with the work of Prof Daniel P. Veldsman, investigating his narrative on human identity, evolution and self-understanding. Veldsman's contribution to Christian anthropology engages with the natural sciences, acknowledging that to be human is to be part of the unfolding evolutionary processes. In addition, to be human is not only to know our limitations, to be present in the 'now', but also to dare to transcend ourselves by means of curiosity, mystery and a propensity for the divine. Lastly, this article explores the communal nature of being human; that to be human is to be part of something bigger than the individual.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article celebrates the work of Danial P. Veldsman and uses his work as a conversation partner in the science-and-religion discourse.

Keywords: humanity; anthropology; science and religion; community; transcendence; evolution.

Introduction

It is a tremendous honour and privilege to celebrate the person and work of Daniel P. Veldsman, who is both a colleague and a friend. Danie, as he is known by his friends, has made a considerable contribution to the fields of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics. Having collaborated with him on several projects in the South African Science and Religion Forum (SASRF), his academic contribution refuses to serve as armchair theology, but in his sometimes playful way with words, seeks to draw the mystery of religious beliefs (Christianity in particular) closer to the lived experiences of humanity in general. He does so in a masterful way by employing a unique transdisciplinary discourse, drawing from theology, natural sciences such as palaeoanthropology and cosmology and social sciences such as psychology, philosophy and history. One striking aspect of his work is how, woven delicately throughout his discourse, he manages to draw these disciplines together by insinuating an overarching question: 'What does it mean to be human?'. This is a significant question as human identity continues to be shaped by, among other things, changing worldviews, radically oscillating global events and belief systems that wrestle with emerging knowledge. In this article, I wish to grapple with this question and put it in the spotlight, not leaving it to be the thin thread woven through his work, but to magnify it so that we may celebrate the importance of its presence in Veldsman's work. I do so by addressing this question from three vantage points. Firstly, by appreciating Veldman's view of humanity as being sojourners, simultaneously emerging from both natural and spiritual foundations. Secondly, to frame human identity within the transcendence and immanence continuum. Thirdly, to find humanity in its communal function. The article will then conclude with some critical questions and a summation of his work.

To be human is to be part of an unfolding and evolutionary journey

Where do we begin? Perhaps we should start with a question of origins: 'Where do we come from?'. This question is grounded in reductionist rationalism. It assumes that if we understand where we come from, we will have greater clarity on who we are today. This question has caused a great divide between the knowledge systems of science and religion. Traditional (historic) religious (with an emphasis on Christianity) perspectives emphasise the origin of humankind as being initiated by a creator in very much the same form as we exist today. Conversely, scientific knowledge has advocated a journey of becoming in the form of evolutionary biology. Although the distinction between science and religion regarding this topic is not as clear-cut, the nuances of the different cosmological understandings still colour each perspective.

Speaking of cosmology, history is filled with examples of how our view of our place in the cosmos has influenced our self-understanding. Du Toit (2007:2–6) gives a helpful summary of this notion. Ptolemy's geocentric model of the sun and planets reinforced the idea that human beings are special, being placed right at the centre of the cosmos with the planets, sun and moon orbiting the Earth. It showed the church, at least, that God's intentional placing of the Earth carried a message concerning human identity, namely that we are truly and fully made in the image of God. When Copernicus suggested a heliocentric model, human 'specialness' was somewhat diminished. The Earth no longer carried centre stage in the cosmos. The Earth was still somehow special as it was placed at the centre of the moon's orbit. Galileo made another dent in human centrality by suggesting that within the heliocentric model, the Earth was not that special after all, as other planets in the solar system have moons as well, most having more than one!

Needless to say, the church's traditional cosmology and understanding of human purpose in the cosmos found a credible challenge. So, with the growing body of scientific knowledge, it seemed that our human perception of being purposefully created as the pinnacle of the cosmos (read Gn 1 and 2, and Ptolemy's model being compatible with early church doctrine of creation and anthropology) became incrementally weaker. Is there a correlation between the increase in scientific knowledge and the decline in human centrality? One would expect that a Christian theologian would resort to some form of theological-scientific gymnastics to maintain the status quo of human specialness, but Veldsman refuses to take this route.

From the onset, Veldsman seriously takes the knowledge of human origins put forward by science. Instead of using science to downplay human specialness, he argues for a distinction to be made between human uniqueness and human distinctiveness. This is a point that he echoes from the work of his close friend, the late Wentzel van Huyssteen (2006:324). The crux of this argument is to state that human origin narratives, as purported by science, do not have to come at the expense of the value of being human. Just because the Earth is not the centre of the cosmos (or universe), reducing the significance of human life, or life in general, would be both illogical and untenable. In fact, the reality of life being present on our planet shows the distinct value of what we experience as reality, which, to date, has not been observed anywhere else in the universe. Life, and human life in particular, is a distinct form of consciousness that stands out in the context of the expanse of the universe. This human life, with its awareness, consciousness, reason and its endeavour to explore so much more than itself, is part of a story of development and growth that stretches back not only generations but across the development of early hominids who formed who we are today. This point is made in Veldsman's article: '"Welc(h)omo Naledi"! What does our newest relative have to say to us?' (Veldsman 2016). This article first appeared as a paper delivered at the SASRF conference of 2016 under the conference theme 'What does it mean to be human in South Africa?'.

At this conference, Prof Lee Berger, an esteemed palaeoanthropologist, and whose team discovered Homo Naledi, acted as keynote speaker. Berger argued that in this discovery, we find the first signs of metaphysical awareness as it seems as if the collection of skeletons discovered in one cavity of the Rising Star cave system was indicative of burial practices (Hawks & Berger 2020). Although Homo Naledi has been greatly contested, there are some truths that we can glean from its 'appearance'.[1] The contestation in academia has mainly centred on the question of whether Homo Naledi is a separate species or a subspecies (Durand 2017:6) of hominid in this region of the Cradle of Humankind. Prof Francois Durand, at the same conference, questioned the metaphysical claims made of Homo Naledi by inferring that the discovery of the collection of skeletons is neither an indication of the first evidence of hominid burial practices, nor can one assume the emergence of ritualistic expression among early hominids (Durand 2017:7). In his article, Veldsman acknowledges these divergent perspectives in palaeoanthropology but does not want to get into the nitty-gritty of whether Homo Naledi is a legitimate new species. Instead, Veldsman seeks to focus on the impact the discovery of Homo Naledi has on our notion of human distinctiveness (Veldsman 2016:2). It is as if an ancient ancestor is speaking from the grave, pardon the pun, drawing our attention to the fact that what makes human beings distinct lies in what evolutionary history points to when compared to other living organisms, namely an emergent level of self-awareness. The point that religious awareness, awareness of the self and seemingly ritualistic behaviour are part of our progressive evolutionary journey is what sets human beings apart. This ability is in our genes, and it speaks to us from the voices that have gone before us.

Of course, going along with this narrative implies an acceptance of Darwinian evolutionary biology, a theory that Christianity has wrestled with for the past century. Many expressions of the Christian faith have demonised Darwin, as if to suggest that an adherence to his theory of natural selection is contrary to the Christian belief of human beings as created in the image of God. Veldsman rejects this notion and rather asks whether Christianity can 'befriend' Darwin in order to develop a new anthropological understanding. In his article 'In vriendskap met Darwin in die Christelike ontwerp van 'n antropologie?'[2] (Veldsman 2013a), Veldsman suggests that in order to come to the most informed and well-rounded understanding of what it means to be human, we need the best offering of both Christian theology and the natural sciences. His approach is reminiscent of the saying: 'A stranger is a friend you do not know'. Strangers always first appear to be threatening, which is perhaps a spill-over from our evolutionary biological fight-or-flight instinct. Nonetheless, to Veldsman, that which is at the heart of perceiving Darwin and evolutionary biology as the 'enemy of the Christian faith' is an

1.I use the word 'appearance' playfully as Naledi means 'star' in the Sesotho language. It seemed as if this new relative appeared out of nowhere like a star appears in the night sky.

2.'In friendship with Darwin in designing an anthropology from a Christian perspective?'.

inaccurate image created in our minds. Veldsman explains that Christians have traditionally equated Darwin with evolution, or their understanding thereof, but a closer look reveals that this understanding is based on a misunderstanding, the proverbial 'friend you do not know'. The caricature of Darwin is not true to Darwin's argument but is based on a conglomerate of Darwin's theory of natural selection, Mendel's study of genetics and the more recent foundational understandings of the Human Genome Project (Veldsman 2013a:3).

To Veldsman (2013a:5–7), whether we speak of creation, evolutionary biology, genetics or the Human Genome Project, we are dealing with the question of human origins. As stated before, this underscores the epistemological assumption that once we know where we come from, we will have a better understanding of who we are. We may bicker about the accuracy of any of these views, but the point is that we are here, and we have arrived at this point from the past. Of course, it matters where we come from, but what is tangible is our recognition of experienced reality in the present. Departure points may vary between these perspectives, but the crux remains: we are here. Darwin's point of departure is that we are here and then read the story backwards, connecting the dots between the present and the past, and once done, attempts to read the story from beginning to end. Christian theology, on the other hand, understands that we are here, but we have as a starting point the narrative of creation theory. It then reads the human story through the lens of creation-sin-salvation-eschaton narratives, focusing only on the spiritual development of the person without giving sufficient cognisance of the biological adaptations that have taken place over aeons. This is religion's blind spot. Science also has a blind spot in not answering the question of the essence of being human, which seems to be the focus in the religious, albeit Christian, theological approach.

With this, we sit with a body-spirit dichotomy in the science and religion discourse, asking whether God should be relegated to the spiritual or whether there is any space for God in the biological development of humanity without resorting to the 'God-of-the-gaps' dilemma. What does it mean to be human? Is being human purely the product of evolutionary biological processes? Is to be human a spiritual endeavour, engaging with metaphysical understandings of the self in the bigger scheme of things? Is it the one or the other? It may seem like the science and religion quandary forces a split, so that we fall into Gould's Non-Overlapping Magisteria (see Gould 2002). Veldsman brings these divergent perspectives together by highlighting Southgate's sentiment: 'Either God is everywhere present in nature, or he is nowhere' (Southgate 2008:11; Veldsman 2013a:4). To be human cannot be relegated to an either-or conundrum of body (sarx) or spirit (pneuma), to use a Pauline dichotomy. When the Christian theologians are confronted with almost irrefutable evidence of the physical progression of human biological formation, they have to contend with a radically revised God-understanding, where God is not only God of the spirit but also part of the physical and biological emergence of the human species (Veldsman 2013a:8).

To be human is therefore a matter of both the body and the spirit. To complete the trinity, a metaphor, which Veldsman often employs, he suggests the binding factor of emotion. Like the Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and the Son (borrowed from St Augustine), so emotion is the bond between the physical and the spiritual, the body and the spirit, evolutionary biology and created distinctiveness (Veldsman 2014a:430–440). In his article 'With reasons of the heart before God. On religious experience from an evolutionary-theological perspective' (Veldsman 2014a), Veldsman makes the argument that the symbol of the heart is what brings it all together. On the one hand, the heart is a pump responsible for circulating blood throughout the body. This is the physical and biological understanding. On the other hand, a spiritual question: 'Have you given your heart to God?'. When considering faith or the spiritual, the notion is generally accepted that these do not belong in the realm of rationality or science but should be stationed in the substrata of being human, namely the irrational emotive responses of human insecurity. This argument is reminiscent of Freud's notion that religion stems from the evasive longing for the father-figure who is called on to satisfy desires and who answers all our questions (Freud 1990:33). From an almost clinical perspective, emotion can also be relegated to this part of being human, away from the mechanised version of the human person. How does emotion bring the body and the spirit together?

We first have to question the proposition that the spirit, the divine and faith are irrational. We as human beings are not just our brains and neither is consciousness merely reducible to the firing of certain neural pathways (Veldsman 2014a:428). Veldsman draws on LeDoux (1998) to state that the brain and emotions cannot be separated. As our biologically evolved abilities enable detection of external stimuli, emotions arise that direct our responses to them.

An emotion is registered by the brain when a stimulus is recognised as useful for survival or for well-being or as damaging for survival and well-being. This appraisal results in bodily changes, such as quickening heartbeat, tensing muscles, etc. These bodily changes also imply that a map changes in the brain, and this change is the physical implementation of the 'feeling' (Veldsman 2014a:435).

The rational and (seemingly) irrational are intertwined, finding expression in the experience of emotion. Emotions can therefore be described as extensions of our biological engagement with stimuli, leading to physiological responses, which in turn lead us to an understanding and positioning of the self in relation to that which we experience. Veldsman's position therefore contests Pascal's observation that '… the heart has its reasons which reason does not know' and 'it is the heart which experiences God and not the reason' (Pascal 2022:78). Emotion and rationality are not mutually exclusive. Rationality is limited to being the passing on of information (Veldsman 2009:1). Faith, religion and spirituality (the seemingly irrational) without context and experiential reality are limited to being imaginary hypotheses. Being beings who are both rational and have a propensity to view the self beyond

oneself (metaphysics, spirituality, religion, culture, philosophy, etc. – the seemingly irrational), we find a culmination of these apparent mutually exclusive worlds by experiencing emotion.

What does it mean to be human? Firstly, we cannot be told what it means to be human (Jüngel 1986:27; Veldsman 2009:1), but from the premise of humanity unfolding as part of an evolutionary-biological journey, human beings are biological beings who have a propensity for the metaphysical and the divine (Veldsman 2009:4). Secondly, human beings have the capacity to ground real-life experiences in the framework of reflective spirituality and bring these divergent realities together through mediated emotion.

The concluding remark in this section is therefore that human beings are body and spirit, rational and spiritual, all of which are delicately intertwined so that no clear delineating point between these poles can be demarcated.

To be human is to be both immanent and transcendent

The second aspect of being human relates more to the subjective experience of being human. Borrowing from Du Toit (Du Toit 2007:16), Veldsman finds the words 'more than' to be important. Human beings cannot be reduced to either emotion or cognition, mind or body, or biological or spiritual. The phrase 'more than', pre-empting each of these statements, brings us a bit closer to the truth than if they were to stand alone. To be human is more than emotion, more than cognition, more than mind, and invokes the *more than*, which is mediated through context, culture, belief systems and so forth (Veldsman 2014b). To be human is to experience existential (subjective) reality as well as to encounter the mediated self, which is shaped by influences such as culture, belief systems, language, political systems, to name but a few. To be human is to live in the immanent state and to engage in concepts and structures that move the person beyond the self into something greater than itself (transcendence).

Once again, we find a divergence of understanding between science and religion on this topic. It has been argued that science focuses on immanent notions such as rationality and the measurables, while religion (faith, spirituality) focuses on transcendent themes such as metaphysics, God, sin, salvation, afterlife and so forth. The peculiar thing is that humanity seems to operate quite comfortably between these two distinct, yet integrated realities (Veldsman 2010:1–5). To use an illustration (Du Toit 2007):

> Many find it impossible to reconcile science and religion, natural and supernatural, immanence and transcendence. So, they choose to live in two apparently irreconcilable worlds. They visit the doctor with an incurable disease while fervently praying to God to heal them; they study the weather chart, praying for rain counter to its prognosis. (p. v)

While he points out the nature of an intertwined reality (between immanence and transcendence, physical and metaphysical), Veldsman is not as cynical about the human condition as Du Toit's suggestion of living in a 'split reality'. Instead, he asks some critical questions about the silos we have created in the constructs of science and religion. He asks, how religious is religion and how natural is naturalness? Which religion and nature are we actually talking about (Veldsman 2010:5)? To generalise religion by pushing it to the realm of transcendence and allowing the term 'religion' to be the mouthpiece for all forms of spiritual expression is, to put it quite plainly, disrespectful and ignorant of the diversity that exists in this form of human reality. Some religions are, by their very nature, intricately connected to the Earth, the natural and the tangible. Similarly, when science speaks of quarks, string theory, atoms, black holes, dark matter and quantum physics, is it not delving into that which transcends our animal-like awareness of self and our context? Science as a term, therefore, neither can be an accurate blanket definition to cover all forms of scientific knowledge and enquiry, nor can religion encompass all forms of spiritual expression. Veldsman adds that we have to make peace with the prospect that science and religion as THE science and THE religion is untenable; both are 'shorthand for many different approaches within their respective realms' (Veldsman 2005:2).

The interconnectedness between these broad definitions of science and religion should become the basis from which we engage the questions of immanence and transcendence. On the one hand, the human expression of religion generally finds its origins in the observation of nature, gleaning truths and assimilating structures of conduct that direct our understanding of self in the context of something greater. It is in this inclination of 'something greater', or metaphysics that we find the primordial *a posteriori* scientific observation, asking the question: 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' (Veldsman 2017:1–2). This leads us back to the story of origins, this time not exclusively the origins of human beings, but of the entire cosmos. Here, in both science and religion, the abstract comes into play, for there is neither a purely physical nor all-encompassing spiritual explanation of why there is in fact something and not nothing. For this reason, we have to guard against dualisms, that we either perceive God outside the reality of the natural world (Veldsman 2011a:134) or understand the natural world to be devoid of any metaphysical constructs. Just like emotion is a mediating point between the body and the spirit, biological and spiritual, to Veldsman, the point of contact between immanence and transcendence is in the phenomenon of being human – the human with its consciousness, experience of reality, reason (immanence) and its inquisitiveness and constant and persistent stretching beyond the boundaries of knowledge and lived realities (transcendence). How humans make sense of both these realities is then expressed through the knowledge systems of science and religion, which are the most appropriate yet limited tools at their disposal.

On a further point, to describe the interconnectedness between immanence and transcendence, Veldsman proposes that humans have the capacity to interpret their existential reality and physical context (immanence) through

transcendental notions. He explains this by asking: How do we as humans distinguish between whether something is beautiful or ugly, appealing or repulsive, moral or immoral, a sin or means of salvation (Veldsman 2006:201)? Plato, of course, would draw on the interconnectedness (and for him a necessary objective dichotomy) between body and spirit, form and object, observing and assessing the physical in light of its knowledge of the perfect spiritual equivalent. Plato's (or rather Socrates) analogy of the chariot comes to mind (Plato 2019). Once again, Veldsman does not resort to the dichotomy between the physical and spiritual, body and spirit, but states that our understanding of these divergent concepts (beautiful or ugly, appealing or repulsive) in our lived reality is gained by humanity's appreciation of, for instance aesthetics, art, eroticism and religious expression. It uses these instruments to comprehend the meaning of the immanent in light of the transcendental. It seeks to make an objective assessment by means of very subjective instruments, making it impossible for either the immanent or transcendental to be captured within the parameters of anything that resembles absolutes. This is the proverbial 'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. Not even humanity, with its immanent experience of reality, can objectively understand itself in the light of the transcendent. Their self-narrative is tainted by the influence of voices from the past, traditions that have their origins not in the courts of objective reality, but in among other factors, the subjective play between belief and power. To illustrate, Veldsman uses the following question: 'How does God "view" humanity?' (Veldsman 2006:217), assuming the proposition that God is the only one who is truly objective. Even here, humanity places words in the mouth of the transcendent. Why is it that from a Christian perspective, there is a dominant voice that uses the Augustinian narrative of humanity being grounded in sinfulness, fallenness and shame? Veldsman argues that this is a false narrative, overemphasising Genesis 3 and losing sight of the beauty and inherent goodness of creation (and humanity), as outlined in Genesis 1 and 2 (Veldsman 2006:218).

To be human, therefore, is to have one foot in immanence and one in transcendence, seeking to find meaning in existential reality by means of using metaphysical constructs. It does so through the lens of its history, knowledge, culture, belief systems and the like, hence finding that notions such as absolute truth are as attainable as capturing a rainbow in a bottle. Nonetheless, it is in this exact interconnectedness between immanence and transcendence, lived reality and metaphysics, body and spirit that humanity finds its identity and self-awareness. When this awareness, grounded in both immanence and transcendence, extends to god-understandings, it has to do so by questioning the traditional metaphysical and often deistic language to describe God and should rather show a preference for something such as a post-secular spirituality (Veldsman 2011b). What does this mean? It means that God and god-talk can neither be relegated only to the silos of religion, metaphysics or transcendence, nor can the understanding of the natural purely fall in the ambit of science.

What makes human beings distinct? To be human is to embrace both immanence and transcendence as intertwined aspects of one lived experienced reality (Veldsman 2008a:225). Veldman gained this insight from Van Huyssteen (1996:2) and agrees with him that to hold immanence and transcendence together, avoiding the exclusion of God from the natural and the natural from metaphysics, that humanity can appreciate the multifaceted nature of experienced reality. This 'holding together' is the basis for Van Huyssteen's post-foundationalism, and to Veldsman, it leads humanity to the ability of transversal reasoning (Veldsman 2008a:229), that is, to be beings, distinct in their ability to hold the concrete and abstract together while making sense of what it means to be.

To be human is to be more than communal

Lastly, to be human is not an individual exercise. The gaining of knowledge, whether it be imbedded in science or religion, depends on the scaffolding of information that spans beyond the individual. When Veldsman enters into conversation with Heyns, he strongly agrees with Heyns' comment that theological reflection (or religious narrative, to broaden the conversation) is a cultural project (Veldsman 2013b:3). This does not mean that religion is culture specific but refers to the nature of religious expression and understanding being part of communal identity, a frame of reference through which the natural world is engaged. No religion or metaphysical construct just simply appears spontaneously, and neither can it claim to be the custodian of all absolute truth. It is dynamic, moving through history, advocating ever-renewed insights and truths. The same thing can be said about scientific discourse. Both largely depend on the passing on of information from one individual to another, one generation to the next. How we speak, understand and interpret our lived realities carries the 'fingerprints of previous generations' (Veldsman 2008b:529). It is interesting that here too we find an interconnection between science and religion. It is as if both science and religion become the object undergoing the dynamic processes of evolution. Evolution in this sense is a loaded term, something that Veldsman does not miss. He makes this important observation: (as a cultural project) we are not merely in the business of replaying tradition, but instead, we are part of the stream of religious (and scientific) awareness and praxis (Veldsman 2008b:532–533) received from the past, holding knowledge, awareness and identity in the present and in turn passing it on down the line of succession. With each handing over, unique fingerprints are imprinted, making all epistemologies communal.

To be human is to form part of this progression of self-understanding in light of both the immanent and the transcendent. There are instances such as during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, where humanity simply could not make sense of the suffering that existed in the world (Veldsman 2020:4). To many it somehow seemed that God was silent during this time, no metaphysical voice thundering down from the heavens, explaining the immense extent of suffering experienced worldwide. Yet,

Veldsman argues, the seemingly silent God is the God who speaks wisdom into our experienced reality through the '[…] wisdom of love (i.e. in empathy, caring and compassion)' (Veldsman 2020:7). Should we then exchange the transcendent for the immanent? Is God to be trusted or should we solely depend on our human connectedness in order to either survive or find meaning in our existential reality? Veldsman warns that this option is not immune to abuse and carries its own shortcomings. Even philosophies that have all good intentions to emphasise human connectedness, such as Ubuntu can be derailed in the presence of individuals choosing self over the importance of human connectedness.

Enter theological metaphor. Community is not an end in itself but rather an extension of what the Christian narrative describes as being the Body of Christ – where one part of the Body suffers (Veldsman 2007:97–98). What makes us human? Our communal experience of the immanent, trying to find meaning, being custodians of past narratives and in a responsible manner contributing to the unfolding of humanity in generations to come. How do we speak of ourselves, and perhaps to extend the question, how do we speak about God in light of this? Veldsman draws on the example of the Psalms to navigate these waters (Veldsman 2011c). For instance, in Psalm 22, we find the example of the Psalmist being the honest narrator of his own lived reality. The Psalmist describes things as they are: events, feelings, emotions, notions of self. There is something concrete, immanent in the description of the present. The Psalmist in turn draws on the metaphysical to understand the present, to find meaning, to find justice, to find answers. God, whom he calls on, is not his own construct but the God of his ancestors, along with all their theological understandings and narratives (vv. 3–5). It is from the Psalmist's experienced reality that he engages with the Divine (vv. 6–9), not the other way around. To be human is to be present now (vv. 1118), to experience the present and to engage the metaphysical from this vantage point (vv. 19–21). As the Psalmist articulates, there is no response from the heavens, which does not mean that God is a figment of his imagination. Instead, in unpacking his reality, drawing from the voices and understandings of the past, he comes to a new self-understanding that includes the presence of God in his reality (vv. 22–26) and becomes the basis for knowledge of God and experienced reality for the community to follow (vv. 27–31).

Conclusion

What does it mean to be human? In my view, Veldsman offers a holistic and transdisciplinary approach to this question. To be human is to form part of an evolutionary-biological progression, inheriting our identity from generations and genera past. The physical attributes of modern humanity have a long history of biological development and will contribute to generations in the future. Being human is not just about the biological composition of who we are. There is also the abstract, the metaphysical self-understandings that have similarly travelled through time and space to manifest in who we are today.

The subjective experience of being human is then also rooted in the experience of the immanent and the understanding thereof using constructs that draw us beyond ourselves so that we continue the scaffolding of knowledge. To be human is not contained in the passive surrender to the experience of the present, but to strive beyond limitations and boundaries to the 'what can be'.

In all these aspects, the communal link is pivotal in our understanding of being human. Not only does community shape our experience of who we are but it also becomes the extension through which the transcendent, the metaphysical, the divine, God's fingerprint is imparted. To be human is the building of the individual through and in the community (past, present and future) and in turn, the individual's contribution towards the community (in response to the past, the experience of the present and contribution to the future).

One last aspect of being human is the ability to adapt to our context. The modern context is dominated by technological advancements. Being human is being mediated through digital personae, digital presence, profiles and status updates. The data show that digital connection comes at the cost of personal connection (Bentley 2023). If being in community (connected) is pivotal to our being human on all the levels mentioned by Veldsman, then what will happen when our sense of community is replaced by our own creations? Veldsman asks a similar question: Evaluating the impact of technology on humanity, has the creator become the image of the creation? (Veldsman 2019:6).

The jury is still out on whether the emergence of the rapidly advancing digital universe will have a positive or negative effect on the experience of being human. Being human is no longer just about a certain species roaming this planet, it has to contend with emulations of human consciousness, rationality and information sharing. The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) is but one of the avenues that will have a tremendous impact on our understanding and experience of being human.

However, we wish to lay claim to a projected knowledge of the future, even though we cannot do so with exact confidence. Veldsman draws us back to sobriety by reminding us of who we are, namely sojourners, travellers in biology, spirituality, immanence, transcendence, but most of all communities who shape both our understandings of self and understandings of God. Who we are today and what we pass on to the future is a tremendous responsibility, a distinct gift by distinct beings on a seemingly rare and unique spec in the universe.

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