

Van Huyssteen, J W – Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology

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Reviewer: Dr G M J van Wyk (Vanderbijlpark)

Due to the fact that the essays brought together in this book are very diverse and contain a lot of detailed information about many different aspects of philosophical theology, it is impossible, within the limits of this review, to provide the reader with a summary that will do justice to even the main themes discussed by Van Huyssteen. I will rather try to point out what the central idea is that I believe the author reflects in the book through interrelated yet diverse essays. Before doing this, however, let me try to outline in short the contents of this book.

This volume is divided into three parts. In part 1, Theology and Epistemology, Van Huyssteen engages with the work of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Nancy Murphy and Jerome Stone while dealing with the questions of rational judgment and critical realism. Van Huyssteen's aim with this part of the book is to explore the dynamics involved when a theologian enters the conversation between the sciences with strong personal convictions. He is convinced that it is possible for members of a broader scientific community (and therefore also for theologians) to make responsible judgments and share them between various epistemic communities through conversation, deliberation and evaluation. In part 2, Theology and Methodology, the author deals with issues like the philosophy of science, Biblical authority, narrative theology and cognitive claims in theology. Here he focuses on the need for Christian theology to break out of an insularity that is concerned only with its own community and with the church and to relate publicly and openly to our contemporary intellectual world. Van Huyssteen turns to some of the important issues in the current dialogue between theology and science and discusses these issues as concrete examples of this dialogue in the third part of his book, entitled Theology and Science. Here he also enters into a dialogue with Gerd Theissen.

Van Huyssteen believes that philosophical theology finds itself at a crossroads in our fragmented postmodern age. Only a truly accessible and philosophically credible notion of theology will be able to play an important intellectual role in our fragmented culture today. The author believes that one of the key issues that must be solved in the dialogue between theology and culture and/or science, is to identify the similarities and differences between the epistemic and non-epistemic values that shape the rationality of theological reflection and those that shape other modes of reflection. The main challenge for contemporary philosophical theology is to answer this question: "How does theological reflection relate to other modes of intellectual inquiry, and especially to natural scientific knowledge, which very often is accepted unchallenged as the ultimate paradigm of human rationality in our times?"

Many Christians believe that their beliefs can be justified by appealing to some item of knowledge that is self-evident or indubitable and also God-given. They therefore see their own position as one that is inflexible and infallible because they believe to it have an ultimate foundation on which they can construct their arguments. This foundation is accepted as something that is given to the believers, who are seen as a privileged class of aristocrats. Van Huyssteen calls this position "foundationalism". He argues that in both theology and the philosophy of science foundationalism is often rejected in favour of non-foundationalism or anti-foundationalism. Non-foundationalists deny that we have any of those alleged strong foundations for our belief-systems because all our beliefs together form part of a groundless web of interrelated beliefs. This means that every community and context has its own rationality so that any social activity may in fact

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function as a test case for human rationality. In its most extreme form this position implies a total relativism of rationalities with internal rules that apply only for one specific form of reflection. From this point of view cross-disciplinary or cross-cultural conversation is more or less impossible or at least very difficult.

Because Van Huyssteen positively appropriates some constructive forms of postmodern criticism, he explores a third epistemological option beyond the extremes of foundationalism and non-foundationalism. He calls this third option post-foundationalism. He argues that over against the alleged objectives of foundationalism and the extreme relativism of most forms of non-foundationalism, a post-foundationalist theology wants to fully acknowledge contextuality, but also tries creatively to move beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a plausible form of interdisciplinary conversation. This position asks for a relentless questioning of our uncritically held assumptions. Theology must at all times be critical as well as self-critical.

The book is highly recommended to all readers who have an intellectual concern with theology in a fragmented culture. Those who do not have this concern should also read this text. They are the ones who can really benefit from reading the book, because it can also be read as an introduction to philosophical theology in postmodern culture.
