



# Editorial – Special Collection South African Science and Religion Forum (SASRF) 2019: What does it mean to be human in a technological age?



## Authors:

Andries G. van Aarde<sup>1</sup>   
Wessel Bentley<sup>2</sup>   
J.S. Krüger<sup>3</sup>

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Research Institute for Theology and Religion, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

<sup>3</sup>Department of Religious Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Andries G. van Aarde,  
andries.vanaarde@aosis.co.za

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## In memoriam: Cornelius Willem du Toit (1953–2019)

This special collection is dedicated in memory of Prof. Cornel du Toit. Cornel, a dear friend and colleague, accepted a post as the head of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion at the University of South Africa in 1993. His inaugural address was entitled 'Research and truth? Adjustments in Systematic Theology in light of changing contexts'.

Even in the title of his lecture, it was evident that Cornel saw truth as dynamic, never absolutely contained in a single philosophy, theology or science. To Cornel, truth (or truths) were to be accepted as malleable, a fundamental structure, yes, but interpreted and re-interpreted in light of context, experience, knowledge and the search for meaning. To this end, his life's work became an attempt to understand how people, particularly people of faith, can hold onto their truths whilst at the same time engaging honestly with the exciting and often challenging perspectives offered by the natural sciences. What Cornel was doing was, as I understand, a perfect rendition of Anselm of Canterbury's 'Faith seeking understanding'.

And so, Cornel unapologetically explored truths offered by culture, politics, religion, evolutionary biology, metaphysics, philosophy, quantum physics, genetics, consciousness, artificial intelligence... each one a small puzzle piece, contributing towards an understanding of the greater question, 'what does it mean to be human?'

To date, SASRF (which Cornel headed up for the past two decades) has explored several lines in this question, to name a few: what does it mean to be human in light of:

- nature, evil and suffering?
- religion(s) and transcendence?
- design and complexity in creation?
- integrity and ethics?
- diverse knowledge systems?
- cultural and contextual-political influences?

And the list continues.

This special collection continues this line in questioning, asking 'what does it mean to be human in a technological age?' Many of the papers contained in this special collection were first presented as papers at an SASRF seminar held in Pretoria in 2018. At this seminar, Cornel read his last SASRF paper entitled 'The metaphysical self and the self in metaphysics and religion: Ambiguities of mind and reality'. Once again, Cornel argued that although people may adhere to certain truth-claims, they are bound to admit that no notion of the self or of their truth convictions can be limited to our existential presence or experiences. There is more to being human, more to truth than what meets the eye. Even with the rise of technological influences in humanity's notions of self, of the cosmos or even in relationships, there is something about being human and our engaging with 'truth' that is not contained in certainty, but is appreciated in notions such as mystery, awe, vulnerability and an awareness of the self in the knowing that we are but a small part of a much greater whole.

With this special collection, we remember and celebrate Cornel as a person and also his influence, inspiring countless others in philosophy, theology and the natural sciences to look beyond the

**Note:** SASRF 2019, sub-edited by Cornel du Toit (University of South Africa) and Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa).

limitations of their own disciples and be inspired by truth that subtly evades our constructed notions of certainty.

– Wessel Bentley

## Cornel du Toit Memorial Service: 12.08.2019 – J.S. Krüger

Let us be silent.

To all next of kin and on behalf of all here present, I wish to convey our most sincere condolences upon your loss – and the loss for all of us. While others will talk about Cornel as a family member, friend, colleague and person, I am privileged to spend some moments with him reflecting on the greater connection of things, as stated by Cornel (a strong and noble friend he was), and, yes, on all of our beginnings and endings in that greater scheme.

Death, alongside of birth, is the surest given in the lives of the vulnerable creatures we call ‘humans’ and, indeed, for all living creatures. Yes, all things face an end. An ancient way of thinking, including the way death is seen, and one that has survived for thousands of years, now finds itself in a gradual process of disintegration; to many a grandiose god concept that defined cultures, is gradually timing out; even the question – *the* question – namely the one concerning the origin and end of all things (including of religions and millenarian empires) is dying. Death is also in the offing for the technologised, commercialised global culture, just as it caught up with the ancient Egyptian empire existing for thousands of years. Appearing on the horizon of human expectation, there now emerges the threat of complete catastrophes such as approaching ecological and nuclear annihilation. Indeed, ‘transient’, ‘terminal’ and ‘mortal’ are terms that can define all things.

As for individual death, the present inclination tends towards evasion or denial of death and of questioning the meaning of death. But the passing of Cornel invites us, compels us, to immerse ourselves in the mysterious death dimension of all things. Those who pay attention soon discover that each fleeting, flashing moment of life, of existence, when examined closely, simultaneously encompasses the moments of the origin and of the end. The origin and the end are identical twins, derived from a single ovum. What would be the larger context of this?

Let us suspect that each ‘I’ (each miniscule, fleeting, mortal collection of elements) is an expression, a condensation of the entire cosmos. From that, ‘I’, together with each other being, derive an exceedingly relative and yet meaningful value, as sparks from the same great fire, moments in the same great dance.

The cosmos includes all (living beings as well as inanimate things: from sub-atomic micro-elements to the macro components and occurrences in outer space); all intimately bound up with one another as a single organic unity with a

shared fate. The cosmos is the developing sum of water and rock, tree and blossom, moon and sun, stars and space, individual birth and death, evolution and extinction of species and origin and destruction of all things. The cosmos, I suspect, is not a dead entity with a coincidental freakish life and consciousness, but a living being, self-revealing to us in silent meditation, approached in our science and mathematics, our art and religion, in word and form, colour and sound.

Within the cosmos, we discover, in moments of silence, an ever-deepening secret, an unreachable horizon, unfathomableness, expressed by some as ‘Being’, ‘God’, ‘Father’, ‘Mother’, ‘Tao’, etc.. The secret within cosmos is not another, separate reality, but the absolute death dimension of this ordinary reality, present in each drop of water, in each person. I stand awestruck before the grandiose, astonishing beauty of the cosmos encompassing pain, suffering and all, and the peace-filled depth shimmering through the cosmos.

Earth is a part of the cosmic body, and we are all small cells within it. In the cosmos there is origin–decay, birth–death; no foreign invader or threat, but a normality. And the after-death of each cell, as stated by Cornel, is recycling in the greater, living totality.

Each person is a product of the evolving tree of mankind in the cosmic forest, where each leaf emerges and falls, decomposes and, eventually, however it might occur, re-emerges, is reprocessed and recycled as compost in the great evolutionary process, just as awe-inspiring as being born.

Each ‘I’ has, on account of whichever causes and with whichever strengths and weaknesses, appeared as part of this particular leaf on this particular twig, with so many possibilities, inherited realities and lingering consequences. The factors in the process of recycling are too complex to be identified in any detail or captured in any simplistic formula. But know that a long time has expired before and a long time will expire after this short-lived ‘I’ – the ‘I’ that was, is and always will remain part of the cosmic forest of matter-life-emotion-knowing.

Each ‘I’ must understand to the greatest possible extent its own unique and complex constitution and situation, with all the contributive causative factors outside of its control as well as those brought about by itself. Responsibility should be accepted for all of this, together with a firm resolve to become a better part of an improved leaf in a more beautiful forest.

And in the final instance, we dare to think, there is the eventual disappearance into the final quiet horizon on which everything appears. I believe that all people, in the deepest depths of their beings, desire to find that vista. The passing of the self and of others can be so much more than an occasion of despair, fear and sense of destruction. At the deepest level of being, I suspect we all yearn for homecoming to the great totality, return to the source of things, just as a salmon strives

upwards towards the clear pool of origin in the vast clearance above.

Thus, what might I expect when I die, what should I fear and what might I hope for?

One model, with variations, proposes that human being is made up of two parts: an immortal soul and a mortal body. After death, the body decays but is revived at a later stage when the body and the soul reunite and, post final judgement, live on eternally in everlasting pain or happiness, punishment or salvation. Possibly, the soul might also be purified in purgatory during the intermediate stage.

Another model, also with variations, proposes that one is reborn after death, repeatedly, in a never-ending process of self-recreation for better or worse, depending on how well or badly one has lived.

But I suspect an approaching time in which 'I' shall 'have been', shall become 'was'. This short-lived puny constellation, 'me', shall shortly return completely to a state it is anyway sharing in now, namely that of *matter*: soil and rock, fire and light, air and wind, sea and rain; to *life*: plant and insect, worm and fish, bird and animal; to *love*: the cosmic togetherness of all things; to *knowing*: all-surpassing insight, and all four expanding as the wonder of being, suspended in eternal space.

At one level, 'I' will be soon forgotten. But one drop and the great Pacific, one fraction of a second and a million years, one atom and the universe, all imply each other, are *one*. 'I' and 'all' are one. The individual is eternally retained there, remembered.

The individual also continues to exist as a residual effect in cosmic totality, returning to the cosmic cycle and playing a part in the re-circulating entirety. And the great entirety itself is on route from inception to completion. The greatest

spirits, enlightened minds beyond delusion, the emotionally and morally purified beyond desire and hatred, the ego-extinguished growth points of humanity know this and pass on tranquilly, happily.

We thank you sincerely, Cornel, for your life and contribution to the lives of all of us here and many of those not present. We take leave of you, but in our appreciative remembrance and your legacy you will remain. We will remember you.

Let us be silent.

J.S. Krüger

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

W.B. is responsible for the section entitled 'In memoriam: Cornelius Willem du Toit (1953–2019)'; J.S.K. is responsible for the section entitled 'Cornel du Toit Memorial Service: 12.08.2019'; A.G.v.A. is the corresponding editor of this editorial.

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