

Biocentric theology



Christianity celebrating humans as an
ephemeral part of life, not the centre of it

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, February 2005

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2 Abstract

When the Uniting Church formed in 1977, its *Basis of Union* envisaged a final reconciliation and renewal for all creation, not just humans. It did, nonetheless, reflect the anthropocentric assumptions of its day, as did other official documents released in the first decade of the Uniting Church's life. Anthropocentrism assumes that human beings alone are created in the image of God, charged with dominion over Earth¹, and responsible for the fallenness of creation, though not necessarily through the actions of a literal Adam and Eve. This basic framework did not shift in the first decade, even though Earth began to be talked about not as an inanimate resource for human consumption, but something good and valuable in and of itself.

In 1990 this anthropocentric paradigm began to be challenged, and during 2000-2002 two quite irreconcilable understandings of the relationship between God and Earth, and thus humans and other animals existed side by side in Uniting Church worship resources.

Having listened carefully to the story of life as told by ecological and evolutionary scientists, I conclude that the traditional anthropocentric paradigm is no longer tenable. Instead I propose that *all of life* is the image of God, in its evolutionary past, ecological present and unknown future. *All of life* is in direct relationship with God, and exercises dominion of Earth. Evidence traditionally used as evidence of the fallenness of creation is instead affirmed as an essential part of life, though life on Earth has experienced a number of significant "falls" in biodiversity.

Even the more biocentric thought in recent Uniting Church resources is inadequate, because its language implies that life is simple, static, benign, and to

¹ In this thesis I use the convention of referring to our planet as Earth, rather than earth or the earth. Some authors do this to imply that Earth is a subject, or even being. I do it simply because it seems more correct, it is the proper noun for this planet, just as I say I live in Australia, not the Australia. When quoting other authors I have retained whatever convention they used, for it is far too clumsy to change every reference.

some extent designed by God. In order to be adequately consonant with the life sciences, theology must be able to accept that finitude (pain, suffering and death) is a good part of creation, for without it there could be no life. This is an emphasis of ecofeminism, which I extend to affirm not only individual death, but the extinction of whole species, including humans.

I argue that the purpose of creation was not the evolution of humans, but to make possible God's desire for richness of experience, primarily mediated through relationships. Whilst this idea is well established in process theology, it must be purged of its individualistic and consciousness-centric biases to be adequately consonant with the scientific story of life.

The resulting biocentric paradigm has several implications for our understanding of Jesus. I argue that he offers salvation from the overwhelming fear of finitude, rather than finitude itself. Against the trend in ecotheology, I propose that this saving work is directed in the first instance to humans only. I tentatively propose that it is directed to only *some* humans. This, paradoxically, is more affirming of God's relationship with the rest of creation than most ecotheology, which proclaims Jesus as a global or universal saviour. Salvation for some humans, and all non human creatures, happens only in a secondary sense, because this is the only sense in which they need saving. I then speculate on whether and how it might be possible for a Christian biocentric community to live out its salvation.

Finally, I revisit the *Basis of Union* and argue that although the biocentric theology I have proposed goes well beyond the *Basis*, it is not at odds with the *Basis'* directions and intentions. Biocentric theology is, rather, an extension of the trajectories already contained within the *Basis*, with its trust in the eventual reconciliation and renewal of all creation.

3 Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Rev. Jason John

4 Acknowledgments

Andrew Dutney is a highly sought after supervisor for a reason. Our meetings were always helpful, so much that it was possible to do most of the thesis by distance, which limited us to small blocks of meetings once or twice a year. His enthusiasm and ability to recommend useful resources were both consistent and invaluable. The decision by the Church to appoint Karen Moyle as Andrew's personal assistant was a Godsend. Her high level of efficiency freed Andrew to put more hours into supervision, and her friendly and approachable manner made scheduling appointments with him a pleasure.

Stephen Downs generously agreed to be my supervisor for this thesis, before its shape changed so much that I shifted to Andrew, about which he was very gracious. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Christianity after Darwin conference which I co-organised during the thesis.

Robert Bos agreed to be my co-supervisor for my time in Queensland, even while transferring jobs. His enthusiasm for the project was much appreciated and compensated somewhat for the sometimes lonely aspect of distance education.

Chris Daniels is an associate professor at the University of Adelaide, where he runs the Evolutionary Physiology laboratory. He read the first draft of the chapter on the scientific stories of life, along with some tentative theological reflections, and offered some very useful feedback, not least his enthusiastic encouragement about the value of the thesis itself.

Several other students - Cameron Freeman, Lorna Hallahan, Cheri Joy and Deidre Palmer - shared their wisdom with me in some of the tricky sections where I wondered if I was getting myself way off track.

I received my scholarship offer the week after Toni Lawson and I found out we were going to have a baby. Without her willingness to go through the dramatic reduction in income that resulted, this thesis would never have got off the ground.

Toni, and Fran John read advanced drafts of this thesis and offered feedback on the parts which needed to be reworked for the sake of clarity. Rob John provided some office space, which helped me sustain focussed work in the final months.

Beth Prior, Val Canty and Wendy Davis made the library a productive joy to visit, as did the people behind the document delivery service, whom I never met. I thank Beth and Val in particular for always looking like they believed me when I said that this would probably be the last book I was going to borrow.

I want to acknowledge the work of the eco-engaged theologians whom I cite in this thesis. I believe that it is simply the nature of a thesis, rather than some repressed oedipal nature of my own which leads me to emphasise what I perceive to be the gaps and discrepancies in some of their writing. If the Christian faith was to take up and implement the ideas of any one of them I would be ecstatic, and the world would be a much better place. For example, though I criticise Charles Birch's writings on more than one occasion, the deep thoughtfulness and compassion he displayed during an interview some years back moved me to tears, and he has had a tremendously positive influence in the Uniting Church. The very existence of his books, before I read them, assured that there must be some hope that this new Christian thing I had signed up for would allow me to continue to live out my passion for life around me.

More trees than bear thinking about went into this thesis, along with all the organisms which rely on them. I hope to produce a more publicly digestible version of this thesis which might work against those who level forests to print their catalogues full of rubbish, and so in the long run actually save paper.

Finally, I acknowledge that this thesis finds me wanting. If my conclusions are at all correct, then I am very much in need of the kind of salvation I speculate about here. I am occasionally terrified that God might decide to save me in just these terms, like some modern day Job, though worse, because I asked for it.