

Bible and Ecology e-seminar, 19th September 2016

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[The main idea](#)

The bible is as human centred as it is male centred, so we need to find ways to give voice to the concerns of other creatures in the church’s thinking, as we have (in some places at least) for women.

Opening

“For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."

Is it for *oxen* that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake?

Of course it was written for our sake...”¹

So said Paul to the Corinthians near the birth of our movement.

Jason’s quick bio

Grew up knowing I wanted to help animals, as a vet or marine biologist, which led me eventually to honours in zoology.

Then an apparent about turn as I entered the world of faith, and found myself as a minister in the Uniting Church, ordained as a deacon. Deacons are charged with the task of helping the church work for justice for the marginalised and oppressed. Which for me, includes the 99.9999% of creatures which aren’t human, and whose needs are routinely marginalised in our decision making, politically and individually.

With MP my colleague in UE, pleased to be able to continue that process through this webinar today.

Two isms...

¹ 1 Cor 9:9ff

Andro (man) centrism

Blockes birthed the bible.

And Men for Millennia mediated its meaning.

And so they should, according to the author of Timothy, appealing to Genesis², and backed up by church “fathers” for centuries ever after³.

Even in those few churches which now fully accept women’s leadership, advocates acknowledge that,

“the later New Testament writings reflect a steady drift towards the subordination of women...”

So there are some passages, such as Galatians 3:28 and Acts 18, which seem to place men and women as equals, and others like 1 Timothy which undermine that.

The church for centuries went with the latter emphasis, so that to ordain women now is to admit that,

“the New Testament does not speak with one voice on the issue of the roles of women and men within the Church. ... even Paul seems to find himself pulled in different directions.”⁴

² 1 Timothy 2:11ff

³ Why does the Uniting Church in Australia Ordain Women to the Ministry of Word, p. 604. Was at <https://www.victas.uca.org.au/UCA%20Resources/Pages/UCA-Statements.aspx> Now missing. Available from https://www.dropbox.com/s/5750syu4fdtm84d/why_does_the_uniting_church_in_australia_ordain_women_to_the_ministry_of_the_word.pdf?dl=0

⁴ *Ibid*

And to claim that therefore

“even venerable Church traditions must be subjected to continual critique in the light of the gospel.”⁵

And we found it VITAL to do this continual critique, because unless we properly understand the relationship between women and men, we won't be able to act properly.

No matter how benignly men might have treated women, if they saw themselves as superior and more important, that would be a permanent blight on their relationship, and on the relationship of both men and women to God.

It seems to me that Christians who have engaged with this critique of *andro*-centrism in the scriptures and church tradition are well placed to respond to Lynn White's accusation, back in the late 60s, that Western Christianity, because of its biblical roots, is the most *anthropo*-centric religion the world has ever seen⁶.

What does it mean that the bible wasn't just written and interpreted by men, but by humans?

~~And can we, using our amazing human imaginations, nonetheless start to read the bible through ecological eyes? Through the power of the Spirit in whom all living creatures live and move and have their being, and who was here as our myriad forms of life on earth unfolded?~~

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 613

⁶ White, L. (1967) The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis, *Science*, Vol. 155, No. 3767 (Mar. 10, 1967), pp. 1203-1207 Published by: American Association for the Advancement of Science Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1720120>

~~Of course we can, at least a bit, if we really want to.~~

~~That's what our scholars will help us do today.~~

So our second ism- anthropo (human) centrism.

Anthropo (human) centrism

Christian Anthropocentrism includes the assumption that humans are the centre of the story of God and life.

Drawing on Genesis 1, a common form of Christian anthropocentrism assumes that human beings alone are created in the image of God, charged with dominion over Earth, and given the earth and its creatures as a possession.

Into our hands all things are delivered, in Genesis 8.

An increasingly common and apparently more ecologically friendly form of anthropocentrism tones down dominion in favour of Genesis 2, with its positioning of humans as the servants (or farmers) and protectors of God's garden. This gives us a far humbler, but still absolutely pivotal role in the story of life, especially as it is connected with the theology of the Fall, drawing on Genesis 3.

It *includes* other species as players in the story of God and life, but still has humans in the starring role.

Take the UC as a case study. Our founding document envisages a final reconciliation and renewal for the whole creation, not just humans⁷.

⁷ Basis of Union <https://assembly.uca.org.au/basis-of-union-1971-1992>

Yet in our first statement to the nation in 1977 we proclaimed...

“We affirm our eagerness to uphold basic Christian values and principles, such as the importance of every human being... and a concern for the welfare of the whole human race...

We are concerned with the basic human rights of future generations and will urge the wise use of energy, the protection of the environment and the replenishment of the earth's resources for *their* use and enjoyment.⁸”

Creation is *stuff* for humans to share.

A decade later, non-humans were given a small role, but humans were still the centre.

“We affirm our belief that the natural world is God's creation; good in God's eyes, good in itself, and good in sustaining human life.”

The UC hasn't moved beyond putting humans in the starring role of the story of God and creation.

A consensus even amongst pp. Who would like to shift that appears to be that it's too contentious to challenge Christian's belief that humans are the centre of God's concern.... As unpopular as Galileo telling us we were not the centre of the universe... and that we should instead focus on getting people to *do something* about the ecological crisis.

⁸ Statement to the Nation, 1977, <http://www.unitingjustice.org.au/uniting-church-statements/key-assembly-statements>

But can we *do* the right thing, or do *enough*, if ultimately we think it's all about us?

If men need to understand the relationship between men and women and God properly, do humans also need to understand our relationship to other animals properly, to have a proper relationship w each other and God?

And if so – if we need a revolution in our view of ourselves to act properly in the world- can we truly escape our self-centredness as a species and learn to read the scriptures with ecological eyes?

Can humanity do what some men have struggled to do since feminism, and hear the voice of another – see God's relationship with another – in scriptures written and mostly interpreted by them?

Some Scientific lenses

Sure we can! At least a bit. And we're about to see how today. Anthony Rees will talk shortly about some ecological lenses through which our various scholars approach the scriptures.

Let me briefly put them in a broader context. Here's some of the scientific fields, or lenses, within which ecology itself sits:

Cosmological

Learning that our planet wasn't the centre of the story of God and the universe rocked our world, and led to a few heresy trials.

We sit in a galaxy which until the 50s we thought was the whole universe. A universe which is expanding like a giant balloon, in which time and space bend so that it is only 14 billion years old, but nearly 100 billion years in diameter.⁹

How big? Take every grain of sand on every beach and desert in the whole world and you'd have about 1/10 as many grains as there are stars in the observable universe.

Is God the God of earth, or our galaxy, or the universe? The bible didn't know enough to even ask those questions.

⁹ <https://medium.com/starts-with-a-bang/how-is-the-universe-bigger-than-its-age-7a95cd59c605>

Evolutionary

The story of our origins is far richer than the authors of either creation story in Genesis could have imagined.

If 1m = all of *H. sapiens* existence (200,000 years)

18 = the genus *Homo* (*habilis*, *erectus* etc)

650 m the "age of mammals"

40 kilometres the beginning of life on Earth

100 km beginning of life in the Universe (feasibly)

700,000 km the future life of the Universe (possibly)

Human spirituality about 10 cm

Christianity 5 mm

There is plenty of reason to doubt that we are the main character in the book of God and life, even on Earth (the 40km line so far). In terms of how long we have existed, we would barely rate a sentence or two in the story. In terms of impact, perhaps a chapter. At the universal scale, we probably won't rate a footnote.

Geological/climatological:

We now know so much about the processes which have shaped the mountains, and continue to be felt in earthquakes, tsunamis, floods and even sea level rise. For many, God is not the central actor anymore, nor are such events signs of divine displeasure, but rather consequences of geological processes.

The oceans do not dwell in limits set by God, but have fluctuated by many metres through history, and are on the rise again.

In the last 200 years western human societies in particular have become another agent influencing geography and now climate. What does it mean that the bible sees floods as judgment for the sin of a nation, but in Tuvalu floods are being experienced by one nation because of the actions of *other* nations?

Ecological

How the world works.

Not humans who are essential to the good working of this garden planet, but microbes. They make the soil and influence rain. Then the plants.

Decomposers, not predators, are central to the web of life. For every human cell in our body there are 9 microbes, and they make up 10% of our body mass. We would be dead without them.

So humans haven't been here long enough to have been given the job of tending the planet, nor of exercising dominion over it. Except in this tiny 19-21C window.

The human ignorance which God flouts before Job is diminishing. Unlike the author of Job, we know that ostriches don't abandon their eggs. God mentions mighty beasts to put Job in his place, but we used to watch Steve Irwin regularly subdue Leviathan (the crocodile) on TV, and we have nearly made Behemoth (the hippo) extinct.

A proper understanding of our place in the world, and how we should therefore live, is not just an academic pursuit of knowledge, but a matter of survival: of other large species like the hippo, and even of us. The garden will go on fine in some form without us, and will probably bounce back after we're gone, given enough millions of years, but will we have a place in its future?

There I go being all anthropocentric.

The justice lens

We need to remember a lens which the church is more familiar with, The economic/social justice lens.

You will often read about what “we” are doing to the world. But there is no “we”.

Avoid the temptation to talk about how “we” are treating the earth and what “we” need to do. Not all humans have an equal impact on the Earth. Less than 1% of us now control 50% of the world’s wealth.

So on the one hand, agriculture or industrialisation may have signalled the beginning of the anthropocene- the era where humanity became a major factor in the ecology of the planet, but at the same humans are not all equally agents in this development.

Addressing ecological issues is inextricably linked with human justice issues.

To remind us of this, we might turn to the prodigal brother as an ecological parable. One son was wasteful and needed to come home, the other son never left.

Recap

As someone who started life completely ignoring the bible, and then at my conversion believed that there was nothing we needed to know which couldn't be found in the bible...

I've now concluded that, in terms of cosmology, evolution, climatology and most ecology, the bible largely gets an F. But then it was never trying to pass.

When it comes to environmentalism: the human place within the ecology of the planet: the intersection between humanity and the rest of creation, how does it do? can the Scriptures help us live better as part of the earth family which lives and moves and has its being in the God who desires reconciliation and renewal for all of us?

What happens when we read the scriptures with ecological eyes?

Today we have a collection of scholars from around Australia to help us dig into that question: through talks, plenaries and workshops, so that we can all leave here with a clearer answer to that question, and share it with others.

MIRIAM or Jason says...

I invite you to stand and stretch, say g'dday to those around you, and in five minutes Dr Anthony Rees, will give us a closer look at the methodology which our other scholars will be using today, so that they can leap straight into the meat of their talks.