Becoming your own outrageous self: Some reflections on theological education and theological anthropology.

Commencement lecture and Book launch, 26 February 2013.

It’s an honour to be here with you for your commencement lecture for the start of your 2013 academic year at St Mark’s National Theological Centre, and to launch this splendid collection of essays by members of your faculty. I’m particularly grateful for this opportunity to share some thoughts on theological education that’ve been simmering away for many years, as well as some more recent thoughts provoked by this book, Speaking Differently: Essays in Theological Anthropology,¹ to be launched tonight.

To each of you who’s starting a new year of theological study, especially if you’re embarking on theological studies for the first time, I want to ask you a question. It’s not a question I need to know your answer to, but a question I think you need to be able to answer for yourselves. Why are you here? Why are you doing theology? What are you looking for, and what are you hoping to find? What is your motivation? What is it here that you are passionate about? These questions all boil down to one big question: What are your burning theological questions?

I’ll tell you what my motivation was when I started to study theology, my questions – but note that this will not be your motivation or your questions. It will not necessarily describe your passion. You may even find my answers rather quaintly last century. So, my questions don’t exempt you from having to find your own questions. You have to find your questions for yourselves.

The reason I felt impelled to study theology, and I had to postpone it till I’d completed a three-year work contract, so I was even more impatient, was the combination of two big questions. First, this churchy stuff, this religious stuff that I’d been brought up with, had to be either complete and utter bunkum because it was just so counter-intuitive, so opposed to common sense, or else it had to be so important that it was worth pursuing at the expense of everything else. Its claims were so bizarre it had to be either just crazy, or else the pearl of great price and the treasure buried in a field. I was a real Kierkegaardian then – this couldn’t be something you just did out of habit twice or three times a year; it had to be all or nothing. So which was it? That’s the first thing I wanted to know. Second, what did it all mean? Could I agree with everything I said in the creed on Sundays? When I was a teenager I always glad my local church used the prayerbook (the Book of Common Prayer in those days) because during long boring sermons you could always flip to the back pages and peruse the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. I became very familiar with the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion. There was some weird and fascinating stuff in there, but did I agree with it? Having, by

¹ Phillip Tolliday and Heather Thompson (eds), Speaking Differently: Essays in Theological Anthropology (Canberra: Barton Books, 2013).
the time I was in year 11, read both the Communist Manifesto and the Acts of the Apostles, I had some considerable sympathy with those ‘certain Anabaptists who do falsely boast’ that the riches and goods of Christians should be held in common (article 38). But my real problem was with article 37. This was during the Vietnam war when we had National Service. Article 37 assured me that ‘it is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to bear weapons, and serve in the wars’. Well, I wasn’t so sure about that, and I spent a great deal of time reading and discussing this issue with friends and contemporaries. Was it lawful? Ethical? I had a good deal of sympathy with the Quakers, with their historic pacifism, on this matter. These concerns all seem very old-fashioned now. The students I teach and my own children talk quite happily about their friends in the defence department or the armed forces. But back then, it was a real problem, at least for me. Eventually I decided I could accept article 37, but it took me a long time to get to that point. And I had to study theology to work through for myself these and other questions, about what I could accept and what I couldn’t, and why. And I’m still inclined to think those Anabaptists might just have had a valid point.

So: Why are you here? Why are you doing theology? What are you looking for, and what are you hoping to find? What is your motivation? What is it that either drives you or lures you to be here? You have to answer these questions for yourselves. And when you know the things you are looking for, your questions, then I suggest that you recite them when you lie down and when you rise, bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (cf. Deut 6: 7-9). In other words, don’t forget them and don’t let anyone talk you out of them. Because your answers may change over time, but your questions will sustain you on the path on which you have set out. They are your motivations for being here.

The question of motivation is just a starting point – we need to be honest with ourselves about why we set out on this strange journey which many of our acquaintances can be guaranteed to see as nothing but building castles in the air, and making no sense at all. In a recent study of theological education in Australia, Les Ball advocates what he calls ‘transformative learning’. Theological education should transform the learner. Some years ago Andrew Dutney, the current Uniting Church President, wrote an article about the anxieties of congregations when one of their members decides to embark on the study of theology.2 ‘Don’t let them change you’, is the anguished advice – this being code for: don’t let their sophistry undermine your simple faith. But any course of study that’s worth its salt is going to transform the learner – the real question for Ball is whether ‘they’ are going to do the transforming, or whether you as learners are going to grasp this opportunity with both hands

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and transform yourselves. Les Ball explores what transformative learning might mean in a theological institution. It is a critique, in part, of the tendency of institutions to attempt the ‘forming’ of students. I have always felt uncomfortable with this notion of ‘formation’, and Ball has put his finger on the reason for my discomfort: it is not learner centred, and it should be. I would extend this comment to a reflection on formative assessment, or better, the formative use of assessment. This is an essential instrument in the toolbox of any tertiary educator, but once again, its value is conditional on the full involvement of students – of you - as collaborators and co-learners.

Ball deepens my initial question by citing the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, who puts three questions to theological learners: Where are you – in your understanding of God? Where are you – in your place in society? Where are you – in your understanding of yourself? And in each of these sets of relationships, are you growing? If we are talking about transformative learning here, this is about growth, about change – and as learners you can and should expect to change, in your relationship with God, your relationship to society, and your relationship with yourselves.

Ball notes that ‘In the Australian context, theological degrees are consistently very conservative in their statement of course aims…’ and that ‘the prevalent aim of a systematic and comprehensive study of received traditions stands at odds with Rowan William’s three-fold “where are you” questions.’ Starting from the question ‘where are you?’ stands at odds with any course that starts from the assertion: ‘this is where you need to be’, either now, or at the end of this subject, or at the end of the course. This is not to suggest that in a transformative course, anything goes: there is, as Ball points out, ‘a general corpus of content to which the student needs to be introduced.’ And to which, I would add, students, as learners, have a right to be given access. In this, ‘the learning facilitator (ie your lecturer or tutor) not only facilitates the learning of others, yourselves hopefully, but is also a participant, as a co-learner, in your growth in maturity of faith. This involves both humility and an attitude of vulnerable risk-taking on the part of your lecturers as well as yourselves.

Humility as a Christian virtue can of course be problematic, especially where it is enjoined – as it often has been – by the powerful upon the powerless. But when embraced by those already vested with institutional power, it becomes in itself transformative. The modelling of authenticity on the part of a teacher is simply part of the deal – personal authenticity is an essential component in

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5 Ball, 20.
6 Ball, 22.
7 Ball, 22.
8 Ball, 25.
what ultimately gives the teacher his or her authority to teach. All this may sound very like instructions to your lecturers, except that they are also learners, like you, and you need to help them by articulating – both to yourselves and to them - where you are; where you are starting from; where you need to go in your own transformation; and what you need, to get there. These questions are really about how we truly become ourselves, the people God intends us to be.

And this is where the volume to be launched tonight becomes important, the reflections of your lecturers, the faculty members of St Mark’s National Theological Centre, on the question of theological anthropology.

When I started to read this book, I started with the very fine introduction by Phillip Tolliday, and my first thought was: he’s done my job for me. Because the introduction gives a short crisp abstract of the key points in each chapter. But when I came to the essays themselves, it struck me that there is indeed more to be said. Because whether or not you’re offering for ordination or simply studying theology out of interest, this book offers a set of thoughtful responses by some leading Australian theologians to questions that you will be asked. Whether or not you’re in ordained ministry, once people know you’ve studied theology, you can be sure these questions, and other questions like them, will be put to you. You may not be expected to answer them on the spot, but you will be expected to have thought about them and to be able to enter into serious conversation about them. This is a very practical book, in other words. Let me illustrate.

Two days before Christmas in prime viewing time, SBS television gave us an hour of Stephen Hawking’s view of the meaning of life, delivered with all the authority that the mediaevals accorded to the sages of antiquity, totally free from any need for questioning from alternative, more critical perspectives. Just two elements stood out for me in the Stephen Hawking programme: first, there is no meaning to life, apart from what we’re programmed to attribute to it; and second, everything, all wisdom for Stephen Hawking, starts with the distinction by Descartes (1596-1650) between mind and matter. Now, you will be asked what you think of that sort of worldview, because it’s very pervasive. Descartes’ distinction leads directly to the advice of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) a century later that would deny the need to bring any theological perspective to anthropology:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of Mankind is Man.⁹

The cover of this book offers a non-verbal rejoinder, the three hand-made pots, *consubstantial* pots, made of the same stuff, and sharing a certain trinitarian commonality as well as difference. This cover design alludes both

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to Jeremiah’s insight into human nature in relation to God during his famous visit to the potter’s workshop (Jeremiah 18: 2-11), and also the integral connections in the Jahwist creation story between the human creature of flesh and blood (adam / damnim), and the earth itself (adamah) (Genesis 2:7). It’s worth remembering always that these etymological associations lie at the very heart of human identity in the biblical narrative, drawing us back constantly to our kinship with the earth. It’s a very fine cover indeed.

Scott Cowdell’s chapter addresses Stephen Hawking’s presuppositions more explicitly, proposing that ‘whatever it means to speak of God creating the world, it means that God loves the world and human beings and wants us to be at home in the world.’ One undogmatic and actually rather reticent sentence (‘whatever it means…’) opens up a perspective entirely missing in the worldview of Stephen Hawking - the possibility of understanding ‘who we are and what the meaning of our life is in this wonderful but also terrifying cosmos’. And the possibility that ‘God is not going to let us go’. How refreshing, and liberating, these thoughts are, after listening to that pre-Christmas hour of SBS television.

Then there’s Descartes’ dualism of mind and matter. The critical question here is: how many dubious dualisms have been undergirded by this ‘original dualism’? How many separations of normal from abnormal, complete from deficient, superior from inferior, powerful from powerless, of identical with and different from? Descartes’ dualism has a lot to answer for: it certainly lies at the base of a great deal of what people of the modern era decided was ‘other’, different. I am here, the thinking subject; the ‘different’ is over there. Christian theology, for all sorts of reasons, cannot rest easy with that sort of self-identification; it must question that particular understanding of otherness.

In this book, Damien Palmer writes about the otherness of disability. Janice Rees talks about gender differences. Steven Ogden talks about sexualities. Ray Minniecon writes about power differences in the meeting of cultures that lies at the base of Australian national identity. Jane Foulcher writes about religious diversity. Catherine Laufer asks about the final alterity of those who have died – the ones who, even though they have gone from us, seem still to inhabit our daydreams. All of these represent othernesses, forms of difference, that can be externalised, objectified, placed out there in contradistinction to our own innermost integral self, which is posited in Descartes’ fashion as our starting point, and which somehow thereby becomes the canon of ‘normality’.

But what if the other is not understood like that, if otherness itself were to be understood differently? This is what Damian Palmer is asking for when insists on authenticity from those who would comment on disability, ‘the hard work

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10 This notwithstanding the wisdom of abusus non tollit usum, the principle by which misuse does not deny the possibility of correct usage in certain other more limited contexts.
of wrestling with the profound theological issues’, and that they enter into the ‘pain and grief experienced by those who live with disability’. This is what Janice Rees is asking for when she questions if equality has to mean sameness, the abolition of difference. What if difference were to be noticed as a positive thing, differences not just between genders in this case, but between human beings of the same gender? And what if we were to draw on theological categories, like an interconnected, trinitarian notion of difference? This is what Steven Ogden is asking for, in questioning who determines what is to stand for ‘normal’. Who will be inscribed as different, and therefore problematic? And who will do the inscribing? This is also what Ray Minniecon is asking for in his impassioned call to think theologically, and his careful unpacking of what thinking, and doing, theologically might look like. This is what Jane Foulcher is asking for when she retrieves the unfashionable concept of humility and proposes ‘a robust theology of difference where the “other” is welcomed as a gift of God’: all this in relation to lived, interreligious dialogue. This is what Catherine Laufer is asking for when she proposes the need for a re-appraisal and a renewed reception of the doctrine of Christ’s descent even to hell: ‘If I ascend into heaven, you are there: if I make my bed in the grave you are there also’ (Ps 139: 7).

All these contributors are looking for different ways of understanding difference, ways that are genuinely theological, and which enhance our self-understanding of what it is to be human. Each of the differences encountered in these chapters you will also encounter in the practical business of ministry, not to mention daily life.

There are four chapters that are less explicit about difference, but each in its own way addresses methodological issues in theological anthropology. The chapters by Scott Cowdell and Heather Thomson could be taken as companion pieces in an emerging trinitarian framework that finds its resolution in Phillip Tolliday’s more explicit engagement with sociality. Scott Cowdell’s chapter, with its focus on the world, is incarnational: this world, and the stuff that comprises it, is to be taken with as much seriousness as God invests in it in ‘coming to his own’ (John 1: 11). Heather Thomson’s chapter takes a correspondingly pneumatological approach: the God who comes to us and calls us out of ourselves is also the God who warms and impels us from within, setting our hearts on fire, inspiring us to become our ‘own outrageous selves’. These two outgoings, in the Word that comes to its own and lodges in the world, and in the burning ardour of the Spirit that erupts from within, offer us glimpses of the nature of the holy one, of Godself, and an insight into our own truest nature as human beings, so that as Phillip Tolliday puts it, quoting Bonhoeffer, ‘the concepts of person, community and God are inseparably and essentially interrelated’. This neatly picks up Rowan Williams’s three questions: Where are you – in your understanding of God, in your place in society, in your understanding of yourself? And it’s also a practical, pastoral matter. Our view of God, and our relationship with God, are going to connect integrally with our view of other people and our
relationships with them - and with our own view of ourselves. These three chapters together spell out fragments of a larger picture of what it is to be properly human, living in a human sociality reflective of the larger trinitarian sociality.

Thorwald Lorenzen completes this picture with his observation that reflecting on human identity is never just a theoretical exercise: it will have practical outworkings in the way we live. Thorwald Lorenzen is talking about the ethical life here, about what it means to live as the image of God. But he doesn’t stop there. Rather he takes up the notion of human rights, universal human rights, as the key to a ‘bottom up’ approach. ‘Most ethical theories’, he writes (and a number of examples are offered) ‘are agent-oriented. They “look” from above. Rights language invites and challenges us to “look” from below, from the perspective of the potential victim’ (and we could add, actual victim). So the language of rights, on the face of it an Enlightenment concept in the history of ideas, and one that rests on the older humanist notion of human dignity, is revealed to be at heart an essentially christological concept (Phil 2: 6-8).

So to those who would burden us with a reductionist view of God, and a correspondingly reductionist view of what it means to be human, of what constitutes the meaning (or non-meaning) of human life, based on a one-size-fits-all theory of knowledge, this book as a whole affirms that there are other ways of knowing, different ways of knowing, ways that take cognizance of the multi-faceted dimensions of personhood, and that these ways of knowing are just as valid, and indeed more so.11 Anyone can put up a straw man, or a straw god, and knock him down again. The question is not, and never has been, whether God exists, but what sort of God one puts one’s trust in. And therefore, what sort of human being one chooses to be.

Are there other chapters that could be added to this book, any other forms of difference that could have been explored under the heading of theological anthropology? I think there are, and I shall mention just two.

First, what about the internal othernesses, the fragmentariness of and within each one of us? Two varieties of this inner fragmentariness come to mind: the cultural and the psychological. Culturally there’s an increasing number of people who feel themselves at home in two or more cultures. The best expression I know of this is in the opening pages of Amin Maalouf’s extended essay On Identity. After describing very poetically his own upbringing in Arabic-speaking Lebanon, ‘in the village of my ancestors’, as he puts it, and the deep sense of belonging that this gives him, he goes on to talk with equal feeling about his adopted country: ‘I have lived for 22 years on the soil of France; I drink her water and wine; every day my hands touch her ancient stones; I write in her language; never again will she be a foreign country to

11 For this point I am indebted to Rodney Fopp’s unpublished doctoral thesis, Presuppositions and Resurrection Belief: Science, History and Faith (Flinders University, 2013).
me. So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can’t be compartmentalised.’  

Maalouf then talks of the sense of frustration when, after explaining all this, he’s asked about his essential identity: ‘but what do you really feel, deep down inside?’ This question, which at first seems naively innocent, is one Maalouf finds disturbing and dangerous because, as he puts it, ‘It presupposes that “deep down inside” everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of “fundamental truth” about each individual, an “essence” determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter’. Maalouf’s point is that very few if any of us have such a culturally unadulterated ‘essence’; and that increasing numbers of people have dual or multiple cultures in which we feel at home, at least to some degree. If such people ‘are continually pressed to take sides or ordered to stay in their own tribe, then all of us have reason to be uneasy about the way the world is going’. Dual or multiple cultural allegiances have to be acknowledged, especially in a multicultural nation like our own. These are internal othernesses that, while on the face of it suggesting internal fragmentation, will help build bridges in the increasingly interconnected and multifaceted world in which we all live. On the question of culture more generally, and the influence of cultural presuppositions on research, Jared Diamond warns against the tendency of social scientists to generalise about human identity almost exclusively on the basis of their knowledge of people like themselves: ‘if we wish to generalize about human nature, we need to broaden greatly our study sample from the usual WEIRD subjects’ - in which the acronym stands for western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic societies – ‘to the whole range of traditional societies’. I’m glad to see this collection, even though it’s an Australian and therefore first-world product, is careful to avoid falling into that trap. Diamond’s call to listen, albeit critically, to the wisdom of more traditional cultures can be seen theologically, because we are all descended from hunter-gatherers, as a proper observance of the command to ‘honour your father and your mother… so that’ (significantly) ‘your days may be long (and that it may go well with you) in the land…’ (Exodus 20: 12; Deuteronomy 5: 16).

Counselling theory offers insight into another sort of internal fragmentation. Richard Schwartz writes ‘Most of us have been socialised to believe that a person has one mind…that though a person has disparate thoughts and feelings, they all emanate from a unitary personality.’ Once again we see the influence on popular worldviews of Descartes’ starting point from the thinking subject. This presupposition, for Schwartz, is psychologically damaging and ontologically misguided. In its place he takes up the implicit wisdom that describes certain individuals as men or women ‘of many parts’, and proposes a ‘multiplicity-based analogue for the mind’, a systems approach that focuses not simply on the ‘individual parts’ of a person’s identity.

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14 Schwartz, 15.
psychic makeup, but ‘also on the network of relationships among these parts’.\textsuperscript{15} Again, the otherness is within each person, each one of us, and a failure to acknowledge this is also a failure to do justice to who we are, our lived identities as we experience life in an ever-changing network of environments and relationships. We are all, as we are reminded more and more, people of many parts – and this is something each of us needs to negotiate in our interactions with others, and even more so, in ourselves.

There is a second form of difference that deserves consideration in any theological enquiry into what it means to be human. This is the problem of defining the limits of the human being, once again in two quite different directions. To what extent is human identity compromised by the increasing integration of technologies into the human body, from the spare parts industry of joint replacements, pace-makers and the like, to the possibilities for ‘intelligence enhancement’ in the direction of persons becoming ‘cybernetic organisms’ or ‘cyborgs’? This question has recently been explored by Brian Edgar, who argues that ‘the boundary between person and machine is diminishing’.\textsuperscript{16} This is a case of diminishing difference. The other area of diminishing difference, also raised by Edgar, is the fluidity of species, especially with increasing genetic modification of crops and animals. The human species, as already mentioned, shares a kinship with the earth and the other creatures of flesh and blood in the biblical creation stories. But genetic engineering will further call in question the boundaries between species, and human persons will not remain untouched by these modifications. Would a genetically modified Übermensch still be human, and if so, what does this mean for human identity? Edgar offers a helpful theological reflection on these questions. His conclusions are to pose a contrast between a creational (or as I would prefer, a protological) and an eschatological approach, arguing for an eschatological approach that holds out the possibility of not just restored and healed but also enhanced human flourishing. In the biblical worldview ‘there is never a thought that humanity should simply return to the form of life of the Garden of Eden: God is a creative God who takes the world on to new things’.\textsuperscript{17}

One of my current jobs is teaching Religious Education in a small Anglican secondary school for girls. Almost 50% of the students are of Asian background, a fair number of them from refugee parents. Many others, who on the face of it appear to be the standard ‘skippy’ Australian model, on questioning turn out to be children of often quite diverse cultural backgrounds. Religious diversity goes without saying – there’s not a major world religion not represented in the student body, and quite a few minor

\textsuperscript{15} Schwartz, 35.
\textsuperscript{17} Edgar, 104.
ones as well. There is not one of the other types of difference discussed in this book that would be unfamiliar, to at least some of these young women, in their own home lives.

All these things lead to questions, on a daily basis – and it’s a real privilege to sit with members of what’s come to be called the millennial generation as they wrestle with such questions (I was recently asked: ‘What year were you born in? We’re all Year of the Tiger.’ I was able to answer that I was also born in the Year of the Tiger, but I didn’t feel the need to tell which particular Year of the Tiger). And these are some of the other, more serious questions I find myself being asked: ‘Why is God male?’ (I think the students are used to me just raising an eyebrow at some of their questions by now). ‘Why does God hate homosexuals?’ (Another raised eyebrow). ‘Do you believe in creation or evolution? Is Jesus the same as God? If God can do anything, why doesn’t s/he?’ And, from an indigenous student some years ago, ‘What about the blackfellas?’ Meaning, in this case: Did God perhaps speak in many and various ways to our ancestors, through our prophets (Hebrew 1: 1) – or did we have to wait for you whitefellas to arrive?

I’m not going to tell you my answers to these questions, for two reasons: First, because every answer has to speak to all sorts of things about exactly how the question is phrased and the way the question is put. Sometimes I say: let me take that question on notice and I’ll tell you what I think when I’ve thought about it. But generally teenagers want their answers now. Tomorrow it might be a different question entirely. The second and more important reason I’m not going to tell you my answers is that, once again, my answers won’t necessarily be your answers, and the answers you give to these questions (and you will be asked these questions and questions like them) have to be authentically your answers. Teenagers in particular are acutely sensitive to - let’s just call it lack of authenticity on the part of adults. Your answer has to be from you, from your reading, your thinking, discussing, reflecting, your wrestling with the big theological questions. As Jacob found out at Peniel, a life lived in communion with the living God is always a matter of struggle (Gen 32: 22-31). You need to have done this work, if your answers are to be authentically your answers. That’s the great privilege of undertaking theological learning, that it gives you time and opportunity to do this work of preparation.

So let me invite you to take this new year not as a set of hurdles or hoops to be jumped over or jumped through, but as an opportunity to become yourselves more authentic persons. Whether you are preparing for ordination, or doing theology just out of interest, you will still be asked these sorts of questions, once it becomes known that you have undertaken this course of study. The one thing I’d like you to remember from what I’ve been

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saying, and I don’t mind if you remember nothing but this point, is the absolute importance of honesty, of authenticity, in your formulation of your questions, and your wrestling with those questions. If you are not honest with your own questioning, you will not become a theologian or a pastor. Because when people come to you with their questions, their real, life-and-death existential questions, they’ll be trusting you to take those questions with utmost seriousness and to accompany them as they struggle through these questions of theirs. They’ll be expecting you to offer them the fruits of your own struggles. Take Jacob at Peniel for your model here. There can be no higher calling or more profound set of responsibilities in life than this. It will give you, like Jacob, a new name, your true identity, so that you can really be your own outrageous self.