In this article I review the recently published *Speaking Differently: Essays in Theological Anthropology*¹ and offer some thoughts provoked by reading it.

I started to read this book with the very fine introduction by Phillip Tolliday. It seemed he had done the reviewer’s 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. Whether or not a reader is offering for ordination or simply reading theology out of interest, this book offers a set of thoughtful responses by some leading Australian theologians to questions that concern a student of theology. A Christian person in any walk of life can be sure at some stage to be confronted by these questions and other questions like them. 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 2012, 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 medievals accorded to the sages of antiquity, totally free from any need for questioning from alternative, more critical

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¹ *Speaking Differently: Essays in Theological Anthropology* by Phillip Tolliday.

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perspectives. Just two elements stood out for me in the Stephen Hawking programme: first, there is no meaning to life, apart from what we are 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. That worldview today is 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.

The cover of this book offers a non-verbal rejoinder: three hand-made pots, *consubstantial* pots (made of the same stuff), share a certain trinitarian commonality as well as difference. This cover design alludes both 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 to the integral connections in the Jahwist creation story between the human creature of flesh and blood (*adam/dammim*), and the earth itself (*adamah*) (Genesis 2: 7). It is 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 is 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 it opens up 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 is 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, 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 Damien Palmer is asking for when insists on authenticity from those who would comment on disability, 'the hard work 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 theologically 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' (Psalm 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 is encountered also in our 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 understanding of your place in society, in your understanding of yourself? This is 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 (Philippians 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 cognisance of the multi-facetted dimensions of personhood, and that these ways of knowing are just as valid, indeed are more so. 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 is 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 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 generalise 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 that this collection, even though it is 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.’9 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 psychic makeup, but ‘also on the network of relationships among these parts.’9 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,
to 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; 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.' 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 into question the boundaries between species; 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.'

This is a splendid collection of essays by faculty members of St Mark's National Theological Centre on the question of theological anthropology. I commend it to you.
Endnotes


3. This notwithstanding the wisdom of *abuses non tollit usum*, the principle by which misuse does not deny the possibility of correct usage in certain other more limited contexts.


