

Consider an ant nest in far flung outer Siberia.

The significance of that nest to people walking the streets of Sydney is virtually nil. Multiply that level of insignificance a trillion times, as in almost infinitesimally insignificant. That, we know today, is a true indicator of planet Earth's place in the universe.

If the ant nest should disappear overnight, it would cause us no concern.
If Earth should disappear (as it will sometime) the rest of universe would not notice.

Here, I suggest, is a worthwhile starting point for theology, the study of "god" today.

We can no longer theologise imagining Earth as the focal point of the universe. Nor can we theologise meaningfully without taking "everywhere" seriously. Credible theology cannot be about a deity in the heavens anymore. If we insist on using the word "God" it must point to a reality beyond our comprehension, a reality present in all places, at all times, holding everything in existence.

Our scientific understanding of energy present and active everywhere in the universe may well be the best pointer we have to the mysterious source and sustainer of all that is. It provides the counterbalance needed against the prevailing notion of a deity watching over creation, listening in and responding to calls.

With this in mind, let us return to the ant nest in Siberia.

What is the task of every ant in that nest? I assume that it is to work together with other ants to keep the nest sound, and to provide a well-functioning home for the well-being and continued existence of the ant community.

How do the ants in that nest know what to do?

The theological implications of that simple question are enormous. In fact, I believe it is one of the most important theological questions we may ask ourselves today.

Consider this: there is no outside presence or power or ant god providing a set of instructions on how each ant is to behave. There is no school of learning life skills for ants. No, the ants know instinctively what to do. Not only that; they are capable of expanding their knowledge, adapting and changing their behaviour in the face of new challenges.

Likewise, the trillions of cells in my body know instinctively what to do and how and when to do it. They do not need an outside presence or power or god providing a set of instructions on how each cell is to behave.

These two examples lead us to consider a creative, energising, knowing presence embedded in all things. Call it the ground of all being, or source and sustainer of everything, or the breath of God, if you wish. Importantly however, this reality cannot be understood as a “deity”, a god, a localised super-being anymore.

“God” terminology in this context is outdated and confusing. A new word or phrase is needed but it is not forthcoming. The task of formulating new theological language will take considerable time. For now, I will stay with *creative, energising, knowing presence* to describe the mysterious reality beyond our words and ideas. Here I am inspired by Gregory of Nyssa who, in the fourth century, wrote that this reality “is present in everything, pervading, embracing and penetrating it.”

Now with this understanding in mind, consider the human community living on a planet as insignificant to the universe as any ant nest in Siberia is to us.

What is the task of every human being?

I want to postulate that the task of each and every human being is to live in harmony with other humans; to work together to establish and maintain a human community that thrives, evolves and endures.

As with the ants and everything else in existence, a creative, energising, knowing presence is embedded in us, grounds us in existence. This presence within the human community, within every human being, reveals how we should best act to build a well-functioning, healthy community.

In the great Axial Age several hundred years before Jesus, some of the greatest philosophical, moral and religious thinkers emerged in different parts of the world: Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Hippocrates, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zoroaster, the Buddha, Confucius and many others. Their respective insights, along with many others, point to a common set of values that could underpin and drive the cooperative task of the human enterprise.

Their great minds are examples of the creative, energising, knowing presence within everything coming to human expression. This expression is universal. It happens in every human community, influenced by and limited by place, time, history, knowledge, culture and beliefs.

The important theological principle here is that we do not need an external heavenly-based Deity to tell us how to behave, to be compassionate and caring, to love our

neighbour, to be tolerant and forgiving, to avoid violence and greed. No, the source of all, the creative, energising, knowing presence that underpins reality is embedded within us. Attuning to, then acting on our innate knowing of what is right and nurturing, is the basic requirement to create healthy, evolving and enduring societies.

The great philosophical, moral and religious thinkers were not alone in their wisdom. All the great mystics shared the same insight and told us a similar story about ourselves. Hundreds of years ago the mystic Rumi wrote: “*What was said to the rose to make it open was said to me here in my chest.*”

This is one reason the mystics in particular, have been viewed with suspicion by church authorities throughout the Christian centuries. Their beliefs about the inner knowing and innate goodness of each human being, clashed with traditional theology founded on notions of a flawed humanity, of separation from God and the need for a Saviour to reconnect humanity with Him.

Christian theology has told Christians they were born in sin, were unworthy of God’s presence with them, and that they needed the Church and its sacraments in order to access the Sacred. It told people that God could not be close to them and that only unswerving obedience to the Church could get them close to God and ultimately to God’s dwelling place in heaven. This understanding of humanity remains the official position of the Christian Church.

Ants in their nests are fortunate to be spared such negative perceptions of their species.

Christianity’s denigrating ideas about humanity have distorted people’s sense of themselves and of how they might live out their innate potential. In many instances across the world, it disrupted and destroyed traditional community life and culture.

People in the twenty first century have every right to question the Christian Church over its persistent refusal to consider new, and not so new, understandings of reality that point to a very different understanding of who and what we are as human persons.

Traditional Christian theology’s understanding of humanity is the exact opposite of what Jesus taught and gave his life for. He wanted people to change their negative understanding of themselves and to believe the good news of *God’s presence* within them. He urged them to use their belief in, and their experience of that presence to create *God’s kingdom* on earth.

The Christian Church, in its early haste to turn Jesus into a God-figure equal to or better than the Greek and Roman gods it was competing against, locked itself into disconnection theology. Ever since the council of Nicaea in the fourth century, the Church has ruthlessly silenced any thinking contrary to its redemptive theology, doctrines and creeds.

Even now, in the 21st century, a Roman Catholic bishop can silence any theologian, speaker or writer who publicly dares to question a key tenet of Catholic belief. For example, it is still absolutely non-negotiable to question the idea of a heavenly deity locking people out of heaven because of the “first sin”, or that Jesus has to be understood as the Saviour who rescued humanity from eternal separation from that deity.

As I wrote in my earlier article, “The Need for Theological Reform”, it is time to ask bishops publicly to declare if they really believe, as *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* demands they, and we, believe, the scientific nonsense espoused in paragraphs #389, #390 and #400 of the *Catechism*. This nonsense is the foundation on which the Church’s Christology is based.

Jesus yearned to empower people. The Christian Church on the other hand, has historically disempowered its adherents and continues to do so. It made people dependent on “middle management”; dependent on men with special powers who could dispense the sacred to the unworthy. The classic example in the Catholic Church is the understanding of Eucharist. Here, what was in the early days of the church celebrated as affirmation, empowerment and commitment to the message of Jesus, still plays out dependence, reception and unworthiness.

Ants know better how to organize and sustain community life. Deep within us, we in the human community know how to do that, too. If the Church returned to what Jesus taught, if it would empower, encourage and lead by example so that the followers of Jesus might accomplish *here*, on earth, what he dreamed was possible and of more importance than anything else: create human communities shunning violence, greed, division and fear. He taught us how to do it. Christian theology, teaching and practice crippled the “how” bit.