

## **Planetary Spirituality: Exploring a Christian Ecological Approach**

**Denis Edwards**

The twentieth century has left us some important legacies. One of the positive legacies is a wonderfully enriched understanding of the universe of which we are a part. Based originally on Albert Einstein's work on general relativity and the astronomical observations of Edwin Hubble, twentieth century science took us from the idea that we inhabit one galaxy, to the view that our galaxy, the Milky Way, is one of billions of galaxies in the observable universe, and that this universe is not static but expanding dynamically. We now know that our universe began from an unthinkable small, dense and hot state 13.7 billion years ago, and that it has been expanding and cooling ever since. It is made up of something like a hundred billion galaxies, and our Milky Way Galaxy is estimated to contain about two hundred billion stars.

One of these stars is the Sun, with our beautiful home, Earth, set just at the right distance from the Sun to nourish and sustain life. Part of our legacy is the picture we now have of Earth as a blue-green planet set against the inter-stellar darkness of space. Unlike other generations of human beings, unlike Moses, Jesus, or Newton, we can see Earth as a whole. We have a picture of what it is like to observe Earth-rise from the moon. We have a new appreciation of Earth's hospitality to life. We can see human beings as a global community. We have an imaginative picture of the interconnections of human beings with all other species on our planet and with the life-systems, the seas, the atmosphere, the land, the forests and the rivers. Astronaut Rusty Schweigert says that, from the moon Earth appears so small that you could block it out with your thumb, but then, he continues: "You must realize that on the beautiful, warm, blue and white circle, is everything that means anything to you," all of nature and history, birth and love, and

then you are changed forever.<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that this vision of Earth as one interconnected planetary community represents a precious new moment in cultural history.

At the same time we are doing terrible, irretrievable damage to the forests, the rivers, the seas, the soil and the atmosphere of Earth. Our use of fossil fuels is contributing to climate change that accelerates the extinction of many other species and will cause great suffering to human beings. We are destroying habitats all over our planet. If we continue on this path, if we continue to destroy forests and to exploit the land, the rivers and the seas ruthlessly, we will pass on to coming generations an impoverished planet. Many wonderful forms of life will be gone forever. These forms of life, I believe, have their own integrity, their own right to exist. When we destroy them recklessly, we do something that is terribly wrong in itself. But it is also wrong because it betrays our intergenerational obligations. We deprive our children and our grandchildren of what has always nurtured humanity, its spirituality, its art, its joy-in-life. We do them a very great wrong.

### **Planetary Spirituality**

In this context, something is emerging that I think can be called a planetary spirituality. People around the globe have begun to recognize that we are called to a new way of being on Earth. There is a growing movement of people who are connected in a common love of Earth and its creatures, a movement of farmers, artists, school children, scientists, industrialists, politicians and religious leaders, people living in villages as well as in great cities. Many have undergone, and are still undergoing, a process of conversion as they commit themselves to a life-style and a politics that involves respecting and protecting other species and enabling them to

flourish, conserving the forests, the rivers, the seas and land, and handing on to future generations the bounty of our planet

I am convinced that this movement, for all its obvious human limitations and sinfulness, can be understood as a new form of global spirituality, in Christian terms as a work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit who breathed life into the whole creation from the beginning, the Holy Spirit who is the very Breath of Life, now breathes through our human community calling us to a new respect for life, for each and every human being in all their unique dignity, and for the other creatures who share this planet, for great ancient trees in old-growth forests, for unknown insects in rain forests, for threatened species of birds and fish, for the great whales of the Southern Ocean.

Many of us find a sense of mystery, wonder and transcendence in our experience of the natural world; looking up at the Milky Way through clear skies and pondering the unthinkable size and wonder of our galaxy and its part in the universe; walking in a rain forest and being caught up in amazement at the extravagant exuberance of so many forms of life; quietly contemplating a great, old River Red Gum in dry creek bed; being overwhelmed by the beauty and abundance of marine life on the Great Barrier Reef; simply attending to one flower before us and truly appreciating its fragility and its beauty. In these and many other experiences we are taken beyond ourselves into mystery and awe. All of this, I think, is part of an ecological and planetary spirituality.

Human spirituality and human aesthetics are nurtured by such experiences. They have always been available, even when we have failed to attend to them. What is new is the sense that we form one global community of human beings beyond all barriers of race and class and nation, that we need each other, and that we are deeply interconnected with all the other creatures, with

the Milky Way Galaxy, with rain forests, with the marine life of the reefs, with this ancient tree, with the flowering plant before us. Planetary spirituality involves not only a real receptivity and respect for the natural world, but a deep sense of global solidarity, and a radical, life-long commitment to act for the good of the whole Earth community.

At the heart of this planetary spirituality is the sense that all is given. Life in all its diversity and beauty is a most beautiful and precious gift. It is not to be abused or squandered. It is a gift given by a generous and bountiful God. The creatures we encounter are the expressions of divine self-giving. This is not to suggest a romantic or idealized view of the natural world, but a clear-eyed view of its evolutionary dynamics, of the costs of evolution as well as its fruitful outcomes, of predation and extinctions as well as mutual interdependence and cooperation. A planetary spirituality will need to see the universe of creatures of which we are a part in all its finitude, well aware of the “groaning” of creation (Romans 8: 22), yet also rejoicing in its beauty, fecundity and diversity and standing before it as most amazing gift.

In attempting to describe this new experience of planetary spirituality, I am very conscious that here in this land we have the precious heritage of a very ancient, indigenous spirituality, with its sense of the land as a nurturing mother, with the natural world understood as sacred, and with human beings understood as called to be custodians of the land. I think that a Christian spirituality for the twenty-first century has a great deal to learn from this indigenous spirituality. It also has much to learn from the spirituality of other religious traditions. One of the signs of the times in Australia, and in many other places, is not only the growing pluralism of religions, but also the pluralism of spiritualities. There is a growing experience of meeting others beyond the borders of traditions in forms of meditation and prayer, and the emergence of interfaith experiences of spirituality. There are also those no longer in contact with particular

religious traditions, who still see themselves as engaged in a spiritual quest. In recent times researchers like David Tacey<sup>2</sup> in Australia and Ursula King<sup>3</sup> in The United Kingdom have pointed to the growing phenomenon of the emergence of spirituality that is not closely linked to the great religious traditions.

What I am suggesting is that there is a new, emerging experience of ecological spirituality, a planetary spirituality shared by people of various religious traditions and by people not committed to any religion. We have a new sense of ourselves as a human community within a global community of life, where every form of life has its own intrinsic value. This emerging spirituality involves a respect of for the dignity of each human being and for the gift and potential of the intellectual, artistic, ethical and spiritual life of the human community. It involves a sense of belonging with, and of interdependence with, the other creatures of our planet, and a commitment to their well-being. There is a new awareness of accountability to the future of life. We know that we are responsible for the flourishing of life in all its abundance in the future. And we know that we are responsible to future generations of human beings. We are called to do all we can to ensure that the beauty and bounty of Earth can be the heritage of our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

We are part of the abundant and diverse history of life that has emerged on this blue-green planet over the last 3.7 billion years. We now know that we are deeply connected to the emergence of the universe, that we are children of the universe. But along with this cosmic sense we know that we are grounded here, that Earth is our home, that we are deeply rooted in the life-systems of our planet, in the interconnected web of life. Alongside the sense of the cosmic, we know that the local and the particular matters, this place, this bioregion, this river, this species, this animal, this tree.

## **Christian Spirituality**

This transformation to an ecological consciousness is already underway, but it needs the cooperation, the commitment and the best efforts of the whole human community. I believe that the role of the religions of the world is crucial. For many people, their faith tradition is at the centre of who they are. Whether they are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian or belong to another tradition, it is religious faith that can provide the deepest, strongest and most enduring ground for their commitment to Earth and its creatures. This means, I believe, that those of us who belong to such traditions have to do our best to bring out the ecological meaning of our spiritual traditions. And we need to do this in such a way as to build a new consensus between us about care for the planet as central to spirituality.

Here I will point very briefly to some of the ways that Christian tradition can support an ecological spirituality for today. It is important to acknowledge that biblical faith can be, and has been, co-opted as a basis for ruthless exploitation of Earth and its resources, and that it has often been presented in a damaging, other-worldly way. I am convinced that this is a fundamentally flawed reading of the Scriptures as a whole and of Christian faith.<sup>4</sup> It is important to acknowledge, as well, that many Christian communities have not been in the forefront of the ecological movement. I see this as all the more reason to point to the interconnection between what is central to Christianity and an ecological spirituality for our time.

What is specific to Christian spirituality and to the Christian view of God is its concept of God as Trinity. Christianity finds the deepest truth about God, the God who embraces and enables the emergence and existence of every creature on our planet, in the conviction that God is Communion. God is a Trinity of endlessly dynamic mutual love. We find this God revealed to

us in Jesus, his preaching and practice of the kingdom, his death and resurrection and in the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit. God gives God's very self to us in the Word made flesh and in the Spirit poured out in grace. In what follows I will focus on three ways in which this Triune God is understood as acting for us, in creation, incarnation and in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

Creation is an absolutely free gift. In the life of the Trinity there is an endless generativity of the Word and a breathing forth of the Spirit, in an eternal, dynamic communion of love that involves radical equality and total mutuality. Creation occurs because this God freely chooses to give God's self to a community of creatures. Creation springs forth from within the divine life. God creates through the Word and in the Holy Spirit. The universe and all its creatures exist out of nothing, as God holds all things in being through the Word and in the Spirit, enabling them to exist, to interact and to evolve into what is new. Every creature is a word that reflects the eternal Word and Wisdom of God. A great rain forest, a threatened species, this flower before me, is an icon of divine Wisdom. Each has its own integrity before God.

In every creature, the Creator Spirit dwells, closer to it than it is to itself, breathing it into existence and life. It is in this triune God that we, and all other creatures with us, "live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28. Elizabeth Johnson writes:

In our day we discover that the great, incomprehensible mystery of God, utterly transcendent and beyond the world, is also the dynamic power at the heart of the natural world and its evolution. Groaning with the world, delighting in its advance, keeping faith with its failures, energizing it graciously from within, the Creator Spirit is with all creatures in their finitude and death, holding them in redemptive love and drawing them into an unforeseeable future in the divine life of communion. Rather than being simply stages on the way to *Homo sapiens*, the whole rich tapestry of the created order has its own intrinsic value, being the place where God creatively dwells.<sup>5</sup>

By the action of this same Creator Spirit, the Word through whom all things come into being is made flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). What is at the heart of Christianity is the conviction that the God of creation, the utterly transcendent God, gives God's self to creatures out of love in the incarnation. In Jesus of Nazareth, a living, breathing, fragile creature of our planet, like us the product of 3.7 billion years of evolutionary history, God takes matter and biology to God's very self. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God forgives human sin, restores the image of God in us, adopts us as God's beloved children, and deifies us, transforming us by grace so that we might participate in the trinitarian life of God.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God has embraced not just the human creatures of our planet, but the whole emergent world of biological life, rain forests and insects, wallabies and whales, and the land, the seas and the atmosphere that support life. God has become an Earth creature, one of us, part of the interconnected web of life, so that all of Earth's creatures might be transformed in God, each in its own distinctive way. This means that a Christian view of creation, and a Christian ecological spirituality, will be incarnational and christological. It will also be grounded in the Christian conviction of the bodily resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

As Paul said long ago, it is Christ crucified who, is the true Wisdom and the Power of God (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Because of the resurrection, divine Wisdom is forever the crucified one, Jesus of Nazareth, the flesh and blood member of the biological community of Earth. God is forever human. God is forever biological. God is forever matter. And this constitutes an unbreakable divine promise not just to human beings but to the whole creation, a hope "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8: 21). It is important to note that we have no good imaginative picture of God's future for ourselves or for other creatures. As Paul says, "we hope for what we

do not see” (Rom 8:25). And we Christians need to admit that we have often made this hope into something Platonic and otherworldly. But the true biblical hope at the heart of Christianity is a hope for this world, based on a divine promise that this world will be transformed in Christ, when all things reach their own fulfillment (Col 1:15-20). And in this process, our own participation, our loving acts, our ecological commitments and actions, will have lasting significance. Nothing will be lost. All will be transformed in Christ and brought to its proper fulfillment by the Spirit of God.

A Christian ecological spirituality will be shaped, I believe, by these central Christian truths, of creation, incarnation and the resurrection of the crucified. These Christian doctrines cannot be separated one from the other. They are deeply interconnected in what Christianity sees as the divine economy of self-bestowing love. All of them involve not just human beings but, with them, the whole creation. The Word in whom all things were created is the Word made flesh, that all flesh, and all creation, might be transformed by the Spirit and brought to its fulfillment in the dynamic life of the Trinity.

### **The Way of Wisdom**

In the biblical book of *Proverbs*, we are told that Wisdom is a cosmic principle, involved with God in the whole of creation, delighting in the creation of all things. Yet she comes to be with us: “Wisdom has built her house” in our midst, she has set her table and invited all to her feast (Prov 8:22-9:1). In the book of *Sirach*, we hear how cosmic Wisdom has pitched her tent among us (Sir 24:8). In the *Wisdom of Solomon*, we find that Wisdom is the “fashioner of all things” (7:22) who comes to those who love her: “She hastens to make herself known to those who desire her. One who rises early to seek her will have no difficulty, for she will be found

sitting at the gate...she goes about seeking those worthy of her, and she graciously appears to the in their paths, and meets them in every thought” (Wis 6: 12-16).

Jesus was a Wisdom teacher, in the tradition of the sages of Israel, who taught in parables taken from nature and from human affairs. He found God at work in the world around him. He is reported to have insisted on the importance of seeing things properly: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt 6: 22-23). Jesus himself must have has keenly observed the world around him, the birds of the air and the wildflowers of Galilee, the way the tiniest seeds produce great shrubs that birds can nest in, the way a woman mixes a little yeast in the dough and the result is the marvelous sight, smell and taste of newly baked bread. Jesus lived the way of Wisdom. He taught that “not one sparrow will fall to the ground without your Father” (Matt 10:29).

For Christians, following Jesus means following the way of Wisdom, seeing *all things* as loved by God, and as revelatory of God. Christians see Jesus as divine Wisdom, Wisdom made flesh.<sup>6</sup> Paul tells us that Christ crucified is the true Wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:24, 30). In the light of his resurrection, Jesus was celebrated by the first Christian as the cosmic Wisdom of God, the one in whom all things are created and all things are reconciled: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created...and through him God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself” (Col 1: 15-20).

Following the way of Wisdom today involves a paschal experience of the cross and resurrection, an experience of vulnerability and grace, of letting go of self and finding abundance. To follow Jesus-Wisdom is to see every sparrow as held and loved by God. It is also to see every sparrow and every great soaring tree as created in the Wisdom of God that is made

flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. To live in wisdom, in the full Christian sense, means seeing the whole of creation as coming forth from the dynamic abundance of the Trinity, as evolving within the dynamism of the life of the Three, and as destined to find fulfillment in this shared life.

But I think a spirituality of Wisdom is shared in different ways by many religious traditions. Perhaps from all our different religious backgrounds we can cooperate to build a wise way of living on our planet, a Wisdom way of life for a global community. Such a way of Wisdom would involve us all in an ongoing conversion to a new, ecological way of feeling, thinking, and acting in our world. It clearly would demand a new life-style and politics.

The way of Wisdom is the way of loving knowledge, knowledge through love. If it is to be an authentic ecological spirituality I think it will involve a rediscovery of asceticism and true mysticism. It will be a mysticism that finds the incomprehensible mystery of God in the boundless beauty of the natural world as well as in its strangeness and otherness. It will be a mysticism that involves an enduring, life-long, indeed eternal, commitment to the good of Earth. It will respect and love Earth and all its diverse forms of life and act to preserve Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations. Conversion to the Earth, to solidarity with the creatures that make up our planetary community, must involve action. It is not only a radical reorientation of thought, and it is not only the discovery of a new capacity for feeling for non-human creation. It is both of these issuing forth in personal, political and ecclesial action.

The way of Wisdom involves both enlightenment and action together. To act wisely is not only to act in accord with all the available empirical evidence, but also to act in a way that is at one with the gift of the Spirit breathing through creation and breathing love in us. Loving knowledge is the kind of knowing we have of a beloved friend. It is not a love that claims to comprehend or to control the other, but recognizes the other, even in the intimacy of deep

friendship, as an abiding mystery. I think this kind of loving knowledge is an important foundation for ecological practice. It is a knowing that recognizes the limits of what we can claim to know, that accepts the mystery of the other in humility.

A sound eye, seeing things rightly, is of the essence of the way of Wisdom. Sallie McFague contrasts the “arrogant eye” with the “loving eye.” The arrogant eye is characteristic of the typical Western attitude to the natural world. It objectifies, manipulates, uses and exploits. The loving eye does not come automatically to us. It requires training and discipline to see things with a loving eye. McFague points out that the loving eye requires detachment in order to see the difference, distinctiveness and the uniqueness of the other. Too often we imagine we know who or what the other is, instead of taking the trouble to find out. McFague writes:

This is the eye trained in detachment in order that its attachment will be objective, based on the reality of the other and not on its own wishes or fantasies. This is the eye bound to the other as is an apprentice to a skilled worker, listening to the other as does a foreigner in a new country. This is the eye that pays attention to the other so that the connections between knower and known, like the bond of friendship, will be on the real subject in its real world.<sup>7</sup>

What is required is that we learn to love others, human and non-human, with a love that involves both distance and intimacy. This involves cultivating a loving eye that respects difference. This is the way of Wisdom, a way of seeing each creature in relation to God, in Christian terms as a unique manifestation of divine Wisdom, as embraced by God in the incarnation and destined to share in the redemption of all things in Christ. Wisdom finds expression in us in conversion from the model of individualism and consumption to the simplicity of what McFague calls “life

abundant”: where what matters are the basic necessities of food, clothes and shelter, medical care, educational opportunities, loving relationships, meaningful work, an enriching imaginative and spiritual life, time with friends, and time spent with the natural world around us.<sup>8</sup>

What I think we need for the twenty-first century is what might be called a mysticism of ecological praxis. Liberation and political theologians have recognized that those committed to the cause of liberation need to be both political and mystical, and the same is true of those committed to the good of the community of life on Earth. The mystical that can enable us hope against hope, to act with integrity and love in the political and the personal spheres in times of adversity and failure, up to and including death. Edward Schillebeeckx says that the mystical seems in modern times “to be nurtured above all in and through the praxis of liberation.” Those committed to a new way of being on Earth discover the same need for repentance and conversion, the same asceticism, the same dark nights, as is the case in contemplative mysticism. He says: “Without prayer or mysticism politics soon becomes cruel and barbaric. Without political love, prayer or mysticism soon becomes sentimental or uncommitted interiority.”<sup>9</sup>

Commitment to the poor and commitment to the well-being of life on this planet must go together as two interrelated dimensions of the one Christian vocation. Ecological conversion is not opposed to, but intimately involved with conversion to the side of the poor. Ecological conversion, like conversion to the side of the poor, will need to involve both the political and the mystical, and the discovery of the mystical precisely in the political.

What then would a mysticism of ecological praxis, the way of Wisdom look like? I would suggest that it might embrace some of these kinds of experiences:

- ❖ The experience of being caught up in the utter beauty of the natural world, when this leads to a wonder and a joy that seem boundless.
- ❖ The experience of learning to see what is before us with a loving eye.
- ❖ The experience that all is gift.
- ❖ The experience of seeing ourselves as born of and dependent upon the 13.7 billion year history of the evolving and expanding universe, and the product of the 3.7 billion year history of the evolution of life on Earth.
- ❖ The experience of the natural world as *other*, of being overwhelmed by natural forces, by the size and age of the universe, and of being taken far beyond human comfort zones into a mystery that is beyond us.
- ❖ The experience of being called to ecological conversion, of coming to know other creatures of Earth as kin, of coming to know that each has its own value and its own integrity.
- ❖ The experience of being overwhelmed by the complexity of the ecological crisis, of perhaps being near despair, but still living and acting in hope.
- ❖ The experience of conversion from the model of individualism and consumption to the simplicity “life abundant” and knowing in this the truth of God
- ❖ The experience of commitment to the good of the whole Earth community, and to the conserving of the natural world for future generations, that has the character of a life-long commitment, which we can recognize as sheer grace.

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<sup>1</sup> In Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 181.

<sup>2</sup> David Tacey, *The Spirituality Revolution: The Emergence of Contemporary Spirituality* (Hove, U.K.: Brunner-Routledge, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Ursula King, *The Search for Spirituality: Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life* (New York: BlueBridge, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> On this, see the volumes of the Earth Bible Project: N.C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth: The Earth Bible 1* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2000); N.C. Habel and S. Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Genesis: The Earth Bible 2* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2000); N.C. Habel and S. Wurst (eds.) *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions: The Earth Bible 3* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2001); N.C. Habel (ed.) *The Earth Story in Psalms and Prophets: The Earth Bible 4* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2001); N.C. Habel and V. Balabanski (eds.) *The Earth Story in the New Testament: The Earth Bible 5* (Sheffield/Cleveland: Sheffield Academic Press/Pilgrim Press, 2002); N.C. Habel and P. Trudinger (eds.), *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008). For another perspective, see David Horrell, Cheryl Hunt, Christopher Southgate and Francesca Stavropoulou (eds.), *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical and Theological Perspectives* (London: T & T Clark, 2010). See also Ernst Conradie, *Christianity and Ecological Theology: Resources for Further Research* (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 198.

<sup>6</sup> On this see my *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006). See also Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008) and *Christ and Evolution: Wonder and Wisdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009)

<sup>7</sup> Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How we should love nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant: Rethinking Theology and Economy for a Planet in Peril* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 209-210.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in Our Western Cultures: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics* (London: SCM, 1987), 75.