



# When Heaven and Earth Embrace:

## How Do We Engage Spiritually in an Emerging Universe?

**Abstract:** In this thesis I am proposing that we can engage spiritually in an emerging Universe if we have a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth that is informed by contemporary science, if we underpin that with an ecotheology that recognises Heaven and Earth as interconnected while respecting their differences, and if we have an ecospiritual praxis that is open, attentive to and aware of divine presence in all that is. I am convinced that a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth has the potential to drive action for justice for Earth at a time when there is ecological devastation in our evolving cosmos. This vision is at the heart of Christian ecospirituality in an emerging universe. Using the craft of practical theology, the thesis is a study of how one community group, Earth Link, engages spiritually in an emerging universe in a way that moves it to transformative practice towards its vision of a world where there is “respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community.” The dialogue partners in the process are Thomas Berry and Elizabeth Johnson in the fields of ecospirituality and ecotheology respectively, with some reference to *Laudato Si*, the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis. The thesis concludes by proposing enhanced principles for Earth Link in the light of this dialogue. The author is the instigator and currently the facilitator of Earth Link, so approaches the work as both participant and observer.

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*This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.*

*No parts of this thesis have been submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.*

*No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.*

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Sisters of Mercy of the Brisbane Congregation and of the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea who enabled my dreams and those of the Earth Link community to come into effect. Without their affirmation and resourcing there would not be any story to be told.

Throughout the history of this project the Earth Link community has been at the heart of any developments, and its Core group, whose membership has changed a little over time, has provided a community of concern for Earth and cosmos, and demonstrated fidelity to exploring the faith and practical implications of such concern.

Writing a thesis is of necessity a solitary pursuit, but there have been a few unexpected companions on that journey: the pale headed lorikeet who made a one-off appearance in my garden as I discerned whether to enrol; the shrike thrush whose song marks its arrival around October each year; and the white caper butterflies who timed their once-in-about-ten year migration to coincide with my preparing the final stage of the thesis. It was truly heartening to take my coffee breaks in their company.

All of these keep reminding me of my identity within the community of creation.

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# **PART 1: GETTING STARTED**



## Chapter 1 Introduction

In this thesis I am proposing that we can engage spiritually in an emerging Universe if we have a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth<sup>1</sup> that is informed by contemporary science, if we underpin that with an ecotheology that recognises Heaven and Earth as interconnected while respecting their differences, and if we have an ecospiritual praxis that is open, attentive to and aware of divine presence in all that is. This is not the dominant paradigm. A revisioning of many assumptions is needed.

How we envisage the meeting of Heaven and Earth determines much of how we view reality. For too long the human religious trajectory has been one of escape from our Earthly reality to the other-worldly heavenly realms. While Heaven and Earth do meet in that vision, they are pitted against each other, and the emphasis is on the inferiority of the Earthly to the heavenly and on the inferiority of nature to the human. There is every indication that this dualistic and hierarchical worldview<sup>2</sup> which underpins much of Western culture has led us to an undesirable state of affairs. We are in the midst of a global crisis where climate change and environmental degradation need to be matters of concern for all.<sup>3</sup> The data is to hand

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<sup>1</sup> References to Heaven and planet Earth including the Earth community will be capitalised in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines worldview as “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world,” accessed 8 March, 2017.

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/world-view>

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 2015, accessed 8 March, 2017. In Chapter 1 he identifies pollution, climate change, water, loss of biodiversity, decline in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society and global inequality as issues that impact negatively on Earth, our common home. .

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

that human influence is contributing seriously to these problems.<sup>4</sup> Our vision of the relationship between Heaven and Earth needs to change.

Scientific findings of the twentieth century onwards are telling us of the evolutionary nature of the universe, and of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all reality. For some, the worldview of scientific naturalism provides a vision which can take us into the future. For me, its dependence only on what we can see in a materialist sense is not enough. Neither is a worldview where Earth is denigrated in the pursuit of a heavenly future, nor a worldview where Heaven and Earth completely overlap without allowing for differences. This thesis holds up a vision that links the material and the spiritual in a way that values both Heaven and Earth, and recognises their embrace as the lynchpin for engaging spiritually in our emerging universe, so that our spiritual and ethical practices move us towards redressing environmental degradation and human poverty.

Heaven and Earth do not just meet at every moment—they embrace, always interdependent, together on a journey that is constantly unfolding. My image for this embrace is the Celtic triquetra<sup>5</sup> which heads this and many of the subsequent chapters. There is a connection, an intimacy, an embrace, which allows for the distinctiveness of the parts. Such a world view allows each part to “stand in its own difference, but encompassed by a wider whole that affects their interrelatedness.”<sup>6</sup> No part is complete except as part of the whole, and the whole “transcends yet includes”<sup>7</sup> the parts. We engage spiritually in an emerging universe as a part within an interconnected whole. We are part of the mutual engagement of the parts with one another and with the whole.

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<sup>4</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), Climate Change Report 2014, Synthesis Report, 2, accessed 8 March, 2017. The first finding is that “human influence on the climate system is clear, and recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history. Recent climate changes have had widespread impacts on human and natural systems.” [https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR\\_AR5\\_FINAL\\_full\\_wcover.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_FINAL_full_wcover.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> There are many versions of the celtic knot, but the one that I am using has a circle going through the three parts of the triquetra or triangle and that underlines the interconnectedness and unity of the three parts.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 269

<sup>7</sup> Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries, Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 191. Phipps acknowledges Hegel's recognition of this pattern of “transcending and including” as a universal principle of evolutionary emergence.



The use of the Celtic triquetra also underlines that the parts are interconnected in their distinctiveness, and not in any sense of hierarchical value. There is also no hint that the parts are equal. While the title of this thesis has only two elements, Heaven and Earth, humans as the third element of the triquetra will at times be considered within the sense of Earth as the whole Earth or planetary community, and at other times considered separately as a species of greater complexity, consciousness and dignity. As a symbol of the Trinity, the use of the Celtic triquetra also sets the tone for the theological reflections.

The dialogue partners in this theological reflection, Thomas Berry and Elizabeth Johnson, have been chosen for their recognition of the embrace of Heaven and Earth, for their commitment to the interrelatedness of the divine and the natural. There will also be references, where relevant, to the papal encyclical, *Laudato Si*.

In the context of this thesis, *Heaven*<sup>8</sup> is the locus or place of the Divine.<sup>9</sup> Heaven,<sup>10</sup> in this thesis is not taken as an other-worldly realm, but rather as a relational reality which is mediated by the physical, planetary and cosmic realms, yet opens up towards fullness of life in the Divine. It is the encounter with the Divine that is significant. The place and nature of the encounter will feature prominently in this thesis. My approach to the Divine derives from contemporary understandings of God whose transcendence and immanence are intimately connected. At different times in the course of this thesis, I refer to God as God, the Divine and the Sacred. This is part of a sensitivity to those whom I have encountered often enough who are experiencing what Ilia Delio calls a new atheism,<sup>11</sup> a needed phase of letting go of one God and making way for another. People can be averse to naming God as God, because of negative connotations which they are seeking to revise. *Earth*<sup>12</sup> in this

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<sup>8</sup> In contrast Heaven is defined in the Oxford Dictionary as “a place regarded in various religions as the abode of God (or the gods) and the angels, and of the good after death, often traditionally depicted as being above the sky.” This is not the sense in which the term is used here. Accessed 8 March, 2017. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/heaven>

<sup>9</sup> When I am using the Divine as a naming of God, I will use upper case.

<sup>10</sup> Heaven is also referred to as the doorway to the cosmos, to the galaxies, planets and stars, the context in which we live out the drama of life. Heaven will not be used in this sense.

<sup>11</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, God, Evolution and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013). Ch 4 is about birthing a new God.

<sup>12</sup> “Earth” in the Oxford Dictionary is understood as the planet on which we live, and “earth” as the soil, or substance of the land surface. I will by using it in the sense of the planet and inclusive of the Earth community. Accessed 8 March, 2017. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/earth>

thesis is not used as soil, but rather as the planet including the whole Earth community, including human society,<sup>13</sup> all parts of which are caught up in processes of evolutionary emergence.<sup>14</sup> Planet Earth is also part of the unfolding story of the universe, and so has a cosmic dimension. This perspective influences the formation of an anthropocosmic<sup>15</sup> worldview which will be explored for its theological meaning using the work of Elizabeth Johnson. It is the whole which is in relationship with the Divine, and this is the basis of a theocentric worldview.

This thesis is about how we humans engage spiritually within an emerging universe. While the research is applicable generally, the *focus* is on the way in which one community group engages spiritually in response to the current environmental crisis. This research is grounded in the principles and practice of the Earth Link community which has, since 2000, been educating, reflecting, resourcing and acting towards its vision of a “world where there is respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community.” Members of the Earth Link community recognise that “spirituality comes from the transformative experience of deep bonding with Earth,”<sup>16</sup> and their experience has led them to believe that this is an experience of the Sacred. Earth Link is an initiative of the Sisters of Mercy within the Catholic Church as part of their commitment to “extravagant hospitality, justice and compassion in the Earth community, shattered by displacement.”<sup>17</sup>

The thesis is about whether the Earth Link community engages spiritually in our emerging universe in a way that enhances the embrace of Heaven and Earth. Spirituality is not necessarily aligned with a religious tradition. In the words of Bron Taylor:

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<sup>13</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 9. Rasmussen coined the term “Earth community” to speak of the “*internal*, not external, linkage of society and environment, and of nature, history and culture.”

<sup>14</sup> Denis Edwards, *Partaking of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 75. The term “evolutionary emergence” provides a concise way of referring to the dynamics of the evolutionary process.

<sup>15</sup> John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 56. The authors explain that “anthropocosmic views of the human as emerging from out of the processes of nature provide new orientations for mutually enhancing human-earth relations of participation rather than domination.”

<sup>16</sup> *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, a series of essays on the principles of Earth Link, developed in 2007 by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney

<sup>17</sup> Statement of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, Chapter 2011.

Spirituality can be understood as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one's lifestyle and vocational choices.<sup>18</sup>

In this thesis, however, I will engage directly with the Christian tradition and its contemporary approaches to ecospirituality and ecotheology, while acknowledging the contribution of secular approaches. Thomas Berry, as one of the key influences on the formation of Earth Link, will feature prominently in my consideration of ecospirituality.

Ecospirituality needs to be grounded in well-considered ecotheology, and I will be giving special attention to the work of Elizabeth Johnson in order to do this. It needs also to be relevant to the reality we live in, namely that of an evolving, emerging universe. The ecospirituality and theology need to be cognisant of developments in contemporary science and philosophy and the implications that flow from them. Such a theology will be important for enhanced ecospiritual principles and practice for the Earth Link community.

This thesis is written in an era when the only constant is change. As well as that, human abuse of the environment and the reality of climate change continue to loom large on the public agenda. A continuing response to these realities is needed by all. Those from religious and other traditions who share Earth Link's vision of a world where there is "respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community" have an added responsibility to work for its enhancement.

### **Methodology: Practical Theology**

Writing a thesis is about entering into a creative composition. This thesis will not follow the rules of a sonnet or a symphony, but will follow the contours of practical theology. Practical theology is a suitable methodology for this thesis because it is also about exploring connections: between Heaven and Earth, between science and religion, between spirit and matter, between theory and practice, between theology and life. Don Browning, one of the pioneers of the discipline, sees it as a task of any theology to link practice and theory.<sup>19</sup> More specifically, his intent in developing the notion of strategic practical theology as a movement within a framework that integrates descriptive theology, historical theology, and systematic

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<sup>18</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3

<sup>19</sup> Don Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991), 9

theology, is to underline the importance of integrating practice with theory, and moving to enhanced practice. He contrasts this with the movement from theory to practice which was more prevalent prior to the 1980s, and which is associated with systematic theology. While systematic theology is predominantly interested in seeking meaning, practical theology begins with practice and seeks to improve it.

The interconnection between practice and theory, between life and theology, is also stressed by Miller-McLemore in the Introduction to the *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*. She speaks of practical theology as a way of life, a method, a curriculum, and a discipline, and stresses the importance of the first and the last of those if we need to be reminded that the ultimate aim of practical theology “lies beyond disciplinary concerns in the pursuit of an embodied Christian faith.”<sup>20</sup> As she says later in that same Introduction, “practical theology either has relevance for everyday faith and life, or it has no meaning at all.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Veling, practical theology recognises, along with Buber, that “religious experience is not meant to ‘lift you out of the world’, but to lead you into the world.”<sup>22</sup> It wants to “keep our relationship with the world open, so that we are never quite “done” with things; rather, always undoing and redoing them, so that we can keep the doing happening, passionate, keen, expectant-never satisfied, never quite finished.”<sup>23</sup> To quote:

Practical theology is an effort to always honour the appeal to human experience, drawing our attention to questions of history, culture, and society, urging us to respond to the real needs of our world, to the conditions of human existence, “on earth.” This is perhaps what is meant by the word “practical.” Yet it is practical *theology*—an effort to regain the transcendent appeal of God’s word to humanity, an appeal that calls out to us and asks us to be people of God, people of faith, people of hope, people of justice and mercy—a people living and acting on earth, “as it is in heaven.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, First Edition, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Wiley Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 5

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>22</sup> Terry Veling, *Practical Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 9

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

In other words, practical theology honours religious experience in all its unfinishedness, even though it is about “a certain reintegration of theology into the weave and fabric of human living, in which theology becomes a “practice” or a way of life.”<sup>25</sup> It is about learning in the doing, rather than about abstract theorising about a situation.

In emerging areas such as ecospirituality and ecotheology, there needs to be room for a critical examination of traditional sources. I find Browning’s work particularly helpful when he highlights that practical theology “brings questions generated by the disruption of experience to its tradition-saturated ideals and practices.”<sup>26</sup> This process, for me, begins with a sense that classical approaches and understandings are indeed in serious need of a critical dialogue with contemporary scientific understandings about the emergence of the universe. The reverse is also true if contemporary world views are to be enhanced by religious traditions. There are problems and possibilities here that need to be explored. This is embraced in Browning’s definition of fundamental practical theology as “critical reflection on the church’s dialogue with Christian sources and other communities of experience and interpretation, with the aim of guiding its action towards social and individual transformation.”<sup>27</sup>

The intent of practical theological reflection, according to Darragh, is “transformative practice.”<sup>28</sup> For me, that ethical response is animated and sustained by spiritual practice, hence my interest in the embrace of Heaven and Earth. The goal of this project is environmentally responsible behaviour driven by both love and concern for our home, planet Earth and her inhabitants,<sup>29</sup> and by “respect, reverence and care”<sup>30</sup> for them.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,3

<sup>26</sup> Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 11

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,16

<sup>28</sup> Neil Darragh, “The Practice of Practical Theology: Key Decisions and Abiding Hazards in Doing Practical Theology,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 9, no.1, (2007), 1, [http://aejt.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/395736/AEJT\\_9.9\\_Darragh\\_Practice.pdf](http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/395736/AEJT_9.9_Darragh_Practice.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> The use of the feminine when referring to Earth is discouraged by feminist scholars who see it as reinforcing the oppression of both women and Earth. I am choosing rather to align with ancient and contemporary traditions which honour Earth as Mother and worthy of the greatest respect, reverence and care.

<sup>30</sup> See Mission of Earth Link as stated on its website: [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)

## As a discipline

Practical Theology is a theological discipline whose proponents vigorously debate their understanding of what it is. The International Academy of Practical Theology engages with issues such as the five common misunderstandings about practical theology as outlined by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, namely that “(1) practical theology is a marginalized discipline with a confused identity; (2) the problem with practical theology and theological education is the clerical paradigm; (3) practical and pastoral theology are interchangeable terms; (4) practical theology is impossible to define or, inversely, can be defined simply (e.g., study of the relationship between beliefs and practices); and (5) practical theology is largely, if not wholly, descriptive, interpretative, empirical, and not normative, theological, and in some cases (dare I say) Christian.”<sup>31</sup>

She goes on to revise the misconceptions and to posit a new set of understandings in their place, and in summary these are:

(1) Understanding knowledge as it arises in practice has become central to contemporary education. Practical theology’s longstanding efforts to develop methods to study theology in practice and to teach toward transformation contribute to this discussion and strengthen practical theology’s position.

(2) Use of the clerical paradigm to capture the plight of contemporary practical theology and theological education overlooks the equally troubling problem of intellectualism that distorts how religious knowledge is learned, conveyed, and practiced. Creative work on theological knowledge must grapple with how it is enacted in the world.

(3) Pastoral and practical theology refers to distinct academic endeavours. Because of the many-layered meanings of both terms, greater care in definition is needed. Whereas practical theology is integrative, concerned about broader issues of ministry, discipleship, and formation, pastoral theology is person and pathos-centred.

(4) Difficulty in explaining practical theology need not undercut its value. It is a discipline, but it is not only a discipline. It is a multivalent term with distinctive and varying uses. Differentiating its uses will clarify confusion and foster refinement in specific areas.

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<sup>31</sup> Miller-McLemore, Bonnie J., “Five Misunderstandings about Practical Theology,” *International Journal of Practical Theology*. 16(1) (2012): 5, doi:10.1515/ijpt-2012-0002

(5) As theology, practical theology is normative. It makes demands on those who practise it to live by the sacred and transcendent convictions it professes. Greater clarity about our theological and not just our practical contribution is one of our challenges, but success in this realm will advance the discipline and its value for religious communities and the common good.<sup>32</sup>

Notwithstanding the healthy state of the debate about the nature of practical theology and its various manifestations in different academic and cultural contexts, I recognise that it is an approach that connects Heaven and Earth, and has potential for the exploration that I am undertaking.

### **Method/Process/Craft**

Darragh in looking at both the presuppositions and the hazards of practical theology summarises its method/process/craft thus:

Briefly, the process begins from the analysis of a particular context by researchers who are themselves part of that context. This analysis requires a description, normally non-theological, of an area of interest within the contemporary context for the purpose of deciding on a significant ethical issue within that area of interest. The researchers need, in the course of this analysis, to pay attention to their own position within that context, and to take note of analyses that have been made in different but related contexts. Once a decision has been made on the contemporary issue to be investigated, the researchers formulate this issue into a question (a 'pivotal question') that can be addressed to Scripture and Christian Tradition. The researcher then reads the Christian sources in the light of that question, taking into account accepted principles of scriptural interpretation, in the hope of arriving at a response. If a scriptural and traditional response can be arrived at, the researcher seeks a contemporary application that will transform contemporary action in the original context.<sup>33</sup>

This essentially cyclical process is not unique to practical theology. In the 1960s I became acquainted with the See-Judge-Act process introduced by Joseph Cardijn which was and continues to be part of the methodology forming generations of Young Christian Students and Workers; when I was doing further study in religious education in the 1980s, Thomas Groome was advocating a praxis methodology which went through the same stages; around the same time Evelyn and James Whitehead were introducing us to a method in ministry which is based on the same cycle. My training in Social Planning used a similar methodology,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 5–26

<sup>33</sup> Darragh, "The Practice of Practical Theology," 3

and when I did an Action-Research thesis on organisational change, the outline was basically the same.

My learnings from those experiences remind me that a method is a map, and not the route itself. It helps to have a map, but life is not usually so linear. It ducks and weaves and adjusts in the light of new learnings and insights. The Action-Research approach, which is spiral in its concept, reminds us that the end is often the beginning of a new cycle. I foreshadow that a meaningful interconnection with ecotheological discourse and ecospiritual practice is a major learning in this piece of work, which will in turn enhance the principles and practice of Earth Link.

The Sisters of Mercy regularly engage in processes at various levels of the organisation which follow the theological reflection cycle as outlined in the following diagram. They put together a visual model initially at a gathering of theologians in Burlingame, California, in 2007. Most recently the visual has been enhanced as the basis of a global Mercy International Reflection Process focussed on listening to the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor.<sup>34</sup> I will use this diagram as a template for this thesis although I will reverse the order in which I articulate the experience and analyse the context.

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<sup>34</sup> See Figure 1 above.





Figure 1 Theological Reflection Cycle, Mercy International Association, Dublin, 2016.

This thesis is about bringing the craft of practical theology to bear on ecospirituality in an emerging Universe, on the interconnectedness of God, humans and nature, on the embrace of Heaven and Earth. Wolfteich speaks specifically about a practical theology approach to the study of spirituality. She envisages a partnership between professionals from both fields using a process such as that outlined above. Of value is her suggestion that practical theology allows for these contributions to such a dialogue: thick description of spiritual practice that would uncover their implicit worldviews and theologies, access to the riches of the tradition out of which the spirituality emerges, correlating contemporary practice and the tradition such that past and present are brought into dialogue, and enriching formative processes in the light of the above.<sup>35</sup> Those contributions of practical theology enhance this research.

I believe that this thesis can also make a contribution to the field of practical theology which has been largely engaged with pastoral concerns that are human-centred, whereas this

<sup>35</sup> Wolfteich, Claire. 2009, "Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology*. 13(1): 138-139, doi:10.1515/IJPT.2009.7

thesis is a sustained argument for an anthropocosmic and ultimately theocentric approach. Such an approach broadens our concerns to include the whole Earth community, and indeed, the community of creation. In this way, practical theology will engage with yet another vital contemporary issue.

## Overview

This thesis will unfold according to key moments in the practical theology process. Part 1 which is called “Getting Started” includes this introductory chapter and *Chapter 2* on context. In that chapter I track changes in worldviews during the course of history, and consider the influence of cosmology and evolutionary emergence on the shaping of contemporary thought, before locating us in the Anthropocene Epoch. In this current epoch, there is evidence that humans are breaching the safe operating boundaries of several planetary systems.

Part 2 is called “Beginning with Experience.” In *Chapter 3* I look at Earth Link, the group which is the focus of this research. I describe the journey since its inception, its vision, mission and key activities, and its approach to ecospirituality and to ecotheology. Earth Link is a community group which is responding to the current environmental crisis out of its faith tradition. For Earth Link, the embrace of Heaven and Earth is very important. Earth Link facilitates conversation about the importance of ecological conversion. It is primarily about theologically informed ecospirituality, even as it encourages environmental advocacy and sustainable living.

Part 3 is “Dialogue with Ecospirituality.” In *Chapter 4*, I consider understandings of ecospirituality, and then revisit the work of Thomas Berry. He stands within the Catholic Christian tradition while drawing attention to the urgency of the environmental crisis, its underlying causes and the need to respond. In *Chapter 5* I look at ways in which a range of proponents have developed some of the themes in Berry’s work. My dialogue with Berry is not as extensive as my dialogue with Johnson as his work was foundational to Earth Link, while Johnson’s work takes Earth Link to a newer place. .

Part 4 is a “Dialogue with the Ecotheology of Elizabeth Johnson.” In *Chapter 6*, I begin by searching out the seeds of her ecotheology as they appear in her work from 1992 onwards. In *Chapters 7-10*, I examine her study of the work of Charles Darwin, before unpacking her

theology of the Creator Spirit, present and active everywhere, sustaining all creation in existence, accompanying them through death, and empowering evolution's creative advance. This is followed by a study of the significance of the God of love joining "groaning creation personally in the flesh,"<sup>36</sup> and the redemption or healing of the whole cosmos in union with the resurrected Christ. I present Johnson's critique of the human contribution to the current state of the environment, and of the hierarchical and dualistic world views which afforded us a position of dominion. My synthesis culminates in her retrieval of the biblical insight of the community of creation and its development into a new paradigm which builds on the evolutionary understanding of the interconnected Earth community,<sup>37</sup> and places all in relation with the Trinitarian God. I also capture something of Johnson's reminder of the need for conversion to loving Earth and the ethical responsibilities that flow from being part of the community of creation. Where related to Johnson's argument, I will refer to *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home*, the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis which specifically addresses the current ecological crisis from multi-disciplinary perspectives.

Part 5 is about "Enhanced Practice" for Earth Link. In *Chapter 11* I indicate how Earth Link is both affirmed and challenged by entering into dialogue with Berry, Johnson and Pope Francis. In *Chapters 12-14* I take those learnings into a reframing of the Principles of Earth Link such that the community can enhance its practice. This has the potential to take Earth Link into a new era and give its work greater credibility and relevance.

I believe that this project is necessary to enrich the integration of faith and life for those who want a better world for themselves and their children. It is a vital underpinning for their individual and collective ways of living sustainability, as an approach to work, ministry, and action for ecojustice. Despite ecotheology and ecospirituality being on the agenda since the early 1980s, there is a remarkably insignificant adoption of care for Earth and universe as integral to a Christian way of life. This thesis can make a practical contribution by linking understanding and action, and show what ecological conversion can look like. Its hoped-for outcome for the Earth Link community and beyond is ecological conversion understood as "falling in love with earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we

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<sup>36</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 482

<sup>37</sup> This is not a term Johnson uses. As her emphasis is on listening to the plants and animals, she refers instead to the community of life. She does, however, place the community of life within a cosmological framework.

participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love.”<sup>38</sup>

What I intend to add to the field of research is a contribution, not from a career academic, but from one whose life has been committed to the practice and promotion of ecospirituality at the community level for more than a decade. I am the founder, former director, and now facilitator of Earth Link, so I obviously stand within the project under consideration. It is important to me that this research be integrated, relevant, and consistent in its world view, theology, and practice, while being accessible and communicable. It also needs to contribute to the wellbeing of the whole Earth community at a time when critical choices need to be made about its future.

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<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 259



## Chapter 2: Context<sup>1</sup>

The immediate context for this thesis is the second decade of the twenty-first century, a context which has considerable bearing on how people see the embrace of Heaven and Earth. There is a strong sense that something different needs to happen, and there are some indications that it is. Joanna Macy writes of the Great Turning.<sup>2</sup> A contemporary Australian writer and commentator, Paul Gilding, writes about the Great Disruption.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry wrote about the Great Work.<sup>4</sup> There is a range of emotions about this unknown future. At a 2014 conference on the interface of science and religion, Ian Barns<sup>5</sup> in his keynote addresses presented a range of future scenarios ranging from the optimistic to the pessimistic, including those held by people who are convinced that society is heading for a catastrophic collapse!

This is obviously a period of dis-equilibrium with a felt sense that the systems of thought that gave us meaning are fraying at the edges, if not at the centre. As with any turning point, the present moment has the potential to exacerbate the rift between Heaven and Earth, and also between the environment and its inhabitants. It also has the potential for a more profound embrace of Heaven and Earth, and for greater connection in the Earth community. In order to get a sense of the urgency of coming to terms with an ecospirituality for our times, it is helpful to look at worldviews that have gone before, and those that are beginning

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<sup>1</sup> The image of the globe used here is from [https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/BlueMarble/BlueMarble\\_history.php](https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/Features/BlueMarble/BlueMarble_history.php)

<sup>2</sup> Joanna Macy, *Coming Back to Life* (Gabriola Island, B C: New Society Publishers, 1998)

<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilding, *The Great Disruption* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: BellTower, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Ian Barns, Keynote presenter at the ISCAST Conference entitled "Putting Science in its Place," held in Melbourne, Australia, 4-6 July, 2014

to characterise our own times. That is what I will do in this chapter, and in addition I will look at some of the influences shaping contemporary world views, with particular mention of cosmology and evolutionary emergence. I will then locate us within the Anthropocene Epoch that we are moving into. With such a perspective, we can amplify the trends that are life-promoting, and redress those that are not.

## Changing World Views throughout History

People come to this conversation from different perspectives, and variously speak about cosmologies<sup>6</sup>, world views<sup>7</sup>, and paradigms.<sup>8</sup> What is basic to all is an exploration of ways in which people make sense of the world, including their views about Heaven and Earth and how they are interrelated. I will briefly track changes in the way people have understood the relations of cosmos, Earth, humans and the Divine from Greco-Roman times through the Middle Ages and the Age of Enlightenment to the present times. Ilia Delio suggests that elements of the worldviews from all these eras have a bearing on the way we currently make meaning of our reality.<sup>9</sup>

The way one perceives the embrace of Heaven and Earth often depends on what one knows about Earth and its relation to the rest of the cosmos. The *early Greeks* understood the planets to be circling the Earth, a geocentric or Earth-centred world view that was devised by Ptolemy. Panikkar describes this as the ecumenic moment when “nature, man and the divine are still amorphously mixed and only vaguely differentiated.”<sup>10</sup> It is the period of

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<sup>6</sup> Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from the Centre of the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 16: “Cosmology means two very different things. For anthropologists, who study human cultures, “cosmology” means a culture’s Big Picture, its shared view of how human life, the natural world, and God or the gods fit together....For astronomers and physicists, the word “cosmology” means something quite different: it is the branch of astrophysics that studies the origin and nature of the universe as a whole.” With Abrams and Primack, I will “seek to connect these two different understandings of cosmology by offering a science-based explanation of our human place in the universe.”

<sup>7</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines worldview as “a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world,” see <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/world-view>

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 1996). Kuhn proposes that certain ways of thinking, which he calls a paradigm, prevail for a time and then give way to a new paradigm which better fits new evidence.

<sup>9</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), Ch 1

<sup>10</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience, Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 54.

animism where humans relate directly to forces in the landscape.<sup>11</sup> This religious impulse endures in some indigenous traditions and in pantheistic experiences of the Sacred in nature.

This ecumenic moment progressively gave way to the monotheism of the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Islam and Christianity, which emerged out of the middle-eastern cosmologies of Babylon and Assyria. Ian Barbour refers to that world view as *biblical*.<sup>12</sup> In those early cosmologies the Heavens above are separated from the abyss below by Earth and sky. There are various orders of being with sense, soul, and intellect, building up from lesser to greater. They are related to, but of course inferior to the One who is absolute and the source. The philosopher who had considerable influence in formulating this cosmology was Plotinus who was born around 204-5 AD and who lived in Greece. In his time, the search was obviously to make meaning of the everyday world and the relationship between Heaven and Earth. This is known as the first axial period, a time of emerging religious consciousness which continues to influence religious responses in our time.

Delio points to the Middle Ages as the time when *classical or traditional cosmology* was developed. This was the time of the scholastic philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas who sought to make meaning of the views held around them. The classical period was not without its traumas. Copernicus proposed that Earth, rather than being the centre of the universe, was, in fact, a planet circling the Sun. Enter the heliocentric worldview, a truly disturbing point of view at the time. In the sixteenth century people such as Descartes, Galileo, and Newton were influential, and this period sees the birth of modern science. Galileo's astronomical telescope enabled confirmation of the movement of planets around the sun which challenged long-held views supported by the Church. Descartes' approach to mathematics and philosophy took those disciplines away from the domain of the Church. Newton's studies of law and order revealed predictable, machine-like properties in observable matter. Subsequently theology during this period began to stress law, order, and the need for redemption from crass materialism. Thomas Berry points to the Black Death pandemic, and the widespread fatalities that occurred as a result of the bubonic plague in

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<sup>11</sup> Nurit Bird-David, "Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment and Relational Epistemology," *Current Anthropology* 40 (Supplement), (Feb 1999), S67-91

<sup>12</sup> Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 79



the fourteenth century, as the beginning of the desire to bring nature under control, and also the beginning of our alienation from nature. This attitude was reinforced by scientific and philosophical developments which separated matter and spirit, physics and metaphysics. For Panikkar, this is the humanistic or economic moment when humans differentiated themselves from both nature and the divine. The emphasis was, and still largely is, on human individuation.<sup>13</sup> Many aspects of this classical or traditional period are still dominant in current thinking.

## Contemporary World Views

Many who recognise the limits of the classical paradigm go beyond describing the problems to promoting a world view which addresses them. Barbour refers to the present times as the *contemporary period*; Pope Francis proposes an integral vision where there is “a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it”;<sup>14</sup> and Grim and Tucker develop an anthropocosmic view which “orient(s) humans in the universe and ground(s) them in nature.”<sup>15</sup>

Ilia Delio calls the emerging world view *evolutionary*. Drawing on the Teilhardian scholar, Ewert Cousins, Delio describes our times as a second axial period which is “communal, global, ecological and cosmic.”<sup>16</sup> A mechanistic, static world view gives way to one that is organic, relational, and conscious of the place of humans in an unfolding cosmos. Contemporary sciences have made major contributions to the understanding that everything is interconnected, and it is to those sciences that I now turn.

The twentieth century has seen some extraordinary discoveries, and notable among these are developments in cosmology, Darwin’s theory of evolution and quantum science. Debates rage as theology either denies, defends, or responds creatively to these discoveries. When the science is taken seriously, it calls forth new spiritual and religious responses which

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<sup>13</sup> Panikkar, *Cosmotheandric Experience*, 32

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home* (hereafter LS), 39, accessed 8 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>15</sup> The term “anthropocosmic” refers to “a view of the human as having arisen from cosmological and ecological processes which orient humans in the universe and ground them in nature.” See John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 43-44

<sup>16</sup> Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 28



are pertinent for this thesis. I will begin with the broadest context, cosmology, and then consider evolutionary emergence, before locating us in what is increasingly being recognised as a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene.

### *Our place in the cosmos*

Cosmology<sup>17</sup> has opened up vistas for understanding our place in the universe which provide a much bigger canvas for the human story. A cosmological perspective enables us to locate planet Earth within the context of the Milky Way galaxy and the sand storm of galaxies beyond that. Current projects in cosmology are even more expansive. They are directed at understanding the “outer” space that is beyond the galaxies that are currently known. This expanded perspective may have the effect of humans’ feeling insignificant and powerless in the face of such enormity. It was a big enough transition when the Copernican revolution de-centred planet Earth from the position it occupied in the Ptolemaic universe. Now we can locate it within billions and billions of galaxies!

There is a positive side to this. Abrams and Primack argue that we humans need to “ground ourselves in something real that is greater than we are. Thinking cosmically can change our behaviour globally, but to think cosmically we must begin to see through cosmic metaphors. By ‘cosmic metaphors’ we do not mean just figures of speech but *mental reframings of reality itself*.”<sup>18</sup> They appeal to us to think about the cosmos and our place in it differently. They proclaim that humans are at the centre of the universe, but their understanding of the universe is different from the traditional. It has no physical centre. They go on to explain:

There is no geographic centre to an expanding universe, but we are central in several ways that derive directly from physics and cosmology—for example, we are in the centre of all possible sizes in the universe, we are made of the rarest material (stardust), and we are living at the midpoint of time for both the universe and the earth.<sup>19</sup>

They go further to argue strongly for a “*social consensus*”<sup>20</sup> on how to think about the big, cosmological picture. Such a consensus would be built on a scientific consensus which has

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 5 in this chapter for an explanation of the way I am using the term.

<sup>18</sup> Primack and Abrams, *View from the Centre*, 242-243, italics are theirs

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 19

been shared with other sectors of society to the point where together all sectors can reflect on its significance for themselves and society.

This is a powerful exhortation to develop a cosmology and claim the power that we have. It is a materialist, scientific cosmology which also has implications for theology and spirituality. It is a further development from the heliocentric world which revolutionised the classical or traditional worldview. It is understood in terms of Einstein's theory of general relativity, the modern theory of time, space and gravity. Its message about the place of humans in the universe is a salutary one, one that needs to be taken seriously if we are to heed the call of Abrams and Primack to move beyond "tired (religious) metaphors from an admittedly unreal world."<sup>21</sup>

### *Understanding Evolutionary Emergence-*

The story of the unfolding of the Universe underlines the connectedness of all species with what emerged before them in that story. It provides a perspective that is very helpful for this thesis. Our Universe, our planet, life and humanity have a "big history."<sup>22</sup> The twentieth century afforded scientists the technological skill to detect rays coming from the origin of the universe as we know it which is currently dated at about 13.75 billion years ago(bya). Within the broad sweep of evolutionary history, there have been many moments when something more emerged from what was there before. In language that is a blend of science and poetry, Tucker and Swimme in *Journey of the Universe*<sup>23</sup> talk about the origins and unfolding of the universe as story, a new mythic yet scientifically based story which needs to replace literal tellings of origins as occurring in seven days, or simultaneously with the beginning of human history. The scientific story, based on now measurable data, indicates that with the origins of space and time came the dynamics of inflation and gravity. In that fiery furnace matter emerged. Elementary particles combined to form the building blocks, protons and neutrons, which fused together to become the first nuclei which eventually became atoms. The story continues as the cosmic cloud fractured. Galaxies formed as gravity drew the smaller clouds together. Within these galaxies, stars are "fiery cauldrons

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 269

<sup>22</sup> The term "big history" describes the history of the Universe from its origins to the present.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). This is the source of the description that follows.

of transformation,"<sup>24</sup> and one such supernova explosion gave birth to our solar system and to planet Earth within it. Earth, our planetary home, has gradually through its 4.6 billion year history cooled and formed into an egglike structure with a molten core, a crust and an atmosphere. The emergence of the first prokaryotic cells about four billion years ago later led to the formation, about two billion years ago, of eukaryotic cells with their potential for the origins of life. Early forms of life became progressively more complex, and have evolved into the range of species, including our own, with which we are familiar. About four million years ago, apes began the sequence of developments that gave rise to our species, homo sapiens. We humans like all other species have emerged from what went before us, and we are most probably not the final chapter in the story. In the words of Swimme, "This is the greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: you take hydrogen gas and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans."<sup>25</sup>

### *Key Evolutionary Understandings*

For our purposes, two things stand out in the story of the evolutionary emergence of organisms. There is a dynamic within the process itself which enables the movement from simple to more complex organisms, and secondly, species have a common origin. Darwin is a major exponent of the interdependence of species based on their common origin. Elizabeth Johnson was keen to hear the message of evolutionary emergence through a study of Darwin's treatise *On the Origin of Species*. She and colleagues at Fordham University read and discussed it on the 150th anniversary of its original publication in 1859. Johnson sums up Darwin's book when she says:

*On the Origin of Species* is one long argument that species are in motion, coming into being from previous species by a process that can be explained naturally, without appeal to a supernatural cause.<sup>26</sup>

Darwin begins his argument by establishing the reality of variation in species, a position which challenges the understanding that they are immutable. From that starting point, it flows that the survival of a species is not guaranteed. The theory of natural selection is built

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>25</sup> Brian Thomas Swimme, "Comprehensive Compassion, Interview with Brian Swimme" in *What is Enlightenment*, 1, accessed 2 July, 2003, <http://thegreatstory.org/SwimmeWIE.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts, Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 27

on the premise that favourable variations within a species are preserved, and injurious variations are rejected, and the less adapted species die out over a period of time.<sup>27</sup> The longer term result of these incremental adaptations is the spread of a desirable trait through the species. Ultimately, over geological periods, new species originate in dynamic relations with their surrounding communities. The result, as Johnson notes, is that organisms are “ever more beautifully adapted to their life’s situation.”<sup>28</sup> Darwin recognises natural selection as a “truly wonderful fact.”<sup>29</sup> Johnson, in her turn, sums up what she calls his “profound ecological insight”:

All organic beings, living and dead, are related to one another, historically and biologically. All take their place in a single narrative of creative struggle, divergence, thriving, death, extinction, and further breakthrough. Common descent with modification by natural selection is the explanatory principle which interprets how species originate from one another, naturally.<sup>30</sup>

Darwin’s theory was based on observation, and supported by study of fossil records throughout time, and evidenced throughout space from the variations of plants and animals around the globe. In a culture where both similarity and difference were interpreted as the result of multiple separate acts of creation, Darwin drew up scenarios for the migration of species from their places of origin which established both common origins and variation brought about by adaptation to local conditions.

Darwin, in concluding, stated that his scientific observations lead him to the conclusion that “all organic beings have descended from one primordial form, into which life was first breathed.”<sup>31</sup> He acknowledged the difficulty of accepting that the dynamics of natural selection could be the workings of the natural world, rather than seeing them as independent acts of creation. While his work called for a serious appraisal of cultural and religious assumptions, his own appreciation of the natural world was undimmed:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one: and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>29</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of the First Edition of On the Origin of Species*, annotated by James Costa (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 128

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 65

<sup>31</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 484

on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>32</sup>

Johnson draws her own working understanding of evolution from this work of Darwin. She extracts key features of evolution as a whole:

*Kinship* is a most striking one: all living beings on the planet are interrelated by common descent. *The emergence of novelty* is another impressive element: new forms of life never before seen appear in the course of time with new properties and abilities amid new networks of relationships. *Cumulative bodily relationship* is yet another: these new life-structures are not assembled from scratch but take shape through modifications made to already-existing simpler forms, to the point where the accumulation of many small changes leads to new organs with advanced form and function (recall the eye), and eventually even new species. *Death* is another feature of the story, a sobering companion of this biological creativity. In a *finite* universe the logic is inescapable: new patterns can only come into existence if old ones dissolve to make place for them. Seen in retrospect, a *trend toward complex organization* also characterises the process. While evolution wanders, diverges into dead-ends, indeed does not aim at any goal beyond successfully fitting an organism to its surroundings at any particular moment, its results over time show an inbuilt propensity to produce beings of ever more complicated structures by elaborating on simpler structures that already exist. Once life ignites from inorganic matter, living creatures evolve to the point of being conscious and then self-conscious, each capacity a function of increasingly organised nervous systems and brains.<sup>33</sup>

These key messages about the interconnectedness of all species were radical in their time, and strongly influenced the transition into a new worldview which can rightly be called evolutionary.

The other important understanding about evolutionary emergence is that nature is unfolding according to a dynamic within it. Such an understanding renders obsolete any reliance on the direct and immediate intervention of a Creator God for nature's forward movement. Something new can come into existence from what preceded it. Emergence theory basically seeks to explain the relationship between what emerges and what went before. It offers valuable insights into emerging realities, such as mind emerging from matter. Niels Gregersen<sup>34</sup> offers the broadest view of what emergence theory is:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 488

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 102, italics mine

<sup>34</sup> Niels Gregersen, "Emergence and Complexity" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 767

Emergence theory was formed as a meta-scientific interpretation of evolution in all its forms-cosmic, biological, mental and cultural-by British scientists in the 1920s. Although emergentists differ in their metaphysical orientation, they usually share three tenets:

- Emergents are qualitative novelties that should be distinguished from mere resultants, which come about by a quantitative addition of parts.
- Nature is a nested hierarchy of ontological levels, so that the higher emergent levels include the lower levels in which they are based.
- Higher levels are not predictable from our knowledge of their constituent parts, and their operations are in principle irreducible to their lower levels.

Murphy<sup>35</sup> in her introduction to the volume entitled *Evolution and Emergence* spells out the meaning of emergence by juxtaposing it with a reductionist approach.

If the basic idea of emergence is more or less the converse of reduction, and the core idea of reduction is that Xs are nothing more than Ys, then the core idea of emergence is that Xs are something over and above Ys.

In other words, we can see the emergence of the new either as a reassembling of what is, or we can accept that the new has causal properties which distinguish it from what gave rise to it.

Emergence theory offers a corrective to those who would reduce all of reality to its physical components. As Barbour says, it is possible to accept the theory of evolution without accepting the philosophy of materialism. He understands materialism in this way:

Materialism is the assertion that matter is the fundamental reality in the universe. Materialism is a form of *metaphysics* (a set of claims concerning the most general characteristics and constituents of reality). It is often accompanied by a second assertion: the scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge. This is a form of epistemology (a set of claims concerning inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge).<sup>36</sup>

He makes the point that the materialist position precludes any consideration of other forms of knowing such as religious knowledge. Operating from that premise rules out any

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<sup>35</sup> Nancey Murphy, "Introduction" in *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, ed Nancey Murphy and William Stoeger (UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1

<sup>36</sup> Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002),4

possibility of a science-religion dialogue, such as occurs in this thesis. At the popular level, the debate rages between materialists whose evolutionary theory leads them to atheism, and those who reconcile their evolutionary theory with theism, even while it may lead them to a critical appraisal of some of its forms. The latter is the position adopted in this thesis.

## The Anthropocene Epoch

The contemporary context is being identified by many as a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, named because of the planetary power exercised by humans. This is a time for choosing the future we desire. For some that could be *technozoic*, dominated by technological developments and fixes for many of our concerns, such as global warming. In a recent encyclical,<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis enters into the conversation about whether this is the desired future. He details the symptoms of the current ecological crisis as manifest in pollution and climate change, issues around water, loss of biodiversity, changes in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society, and global inequality.<sup>38</sup> I agree with him that “we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair.”<sup>39</sup> He looks below the symptoms of the current ecological crisis to an analysis of its causes, and points towards what he calls the dominant technocratic paradigm. He acknowledges the benefits that have come from technological knowledge, but recognises that its basic premise is flawed. He says, “This paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.”<sup>40</sup> He continues:

The specialization which belongs to technology makes it difficult to see the larger picture. The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, but it leads to a gradual loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon, which then becomes irrelevant. This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today’s world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 2015, accessed 8 March, 2017, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>38</sup> *LS*, 20-60

<sup>39</sup> *LS*, 61

<sup>40</sup> *LS*, 106

<sup>41</sup> *LS*, 110

The preferred future of Pope Francis is one of integral progress, one in which social, economic and environmental concerns are addressed together.

One aspect of contemporary society that comes under scrutiny in *Laudato Si* is “misguided anthropocentrism”<sup>42</sup> which ignores the fact that “everything is interrelated,”<sup>43</sup> a view that is developed at length in this thesis. Thomas Berry, in his day, urged us to proceed with a similar understanding. He advocated transition from the current Cenozoic era into what he called the Ecozoic Era, “the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community.”<sup>44</sup> Currently humans are present to this planet in such a way as to be a planetary power. This is being named the Anthropocene epoch, and is depicted in this way by a group of international scientists:

Over the past century, the total material wealth of humanity has been enhanced. However, in the twenty first century, we face scarcity in critical resources, the degradation of ecosystem services, and the erosion of the planet’s capability to absorb our wastes. Equity issues remain stubbornly difficult to solve. This situation is novel in its speed, its global scale and its threat to the resilience of the Earth System. The advent of the Anthropocene, the time interval in which human activities now rival global geophysical processes, suggests that we need to fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit. Many approaches could be adopted, ranging from geoengineering solutions that purposefully manipulate parts of the Earth System to becoming active stewards of our own life support system. The Anthropocene is a reminder that the Holocene, during which complex human societies have developed, has been a stable, accommodating environment and is the only state of the Earth System that we know for sure can support contemporary society. The need to achieve effective planetary stewardship is urgent. As we go further into the Anthropocene, we risk driving the Earth System onto a trajectory toward more hostile states from which we cannot easily return.<sup>45</sup>

Below is a diagram from the Swedish Academy of Sciences indicating the safe operating space for nine planetary systems.<sup>46</sup> These have already been exceeded for the rate of

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<sup>42</sup> *LS*, 115-122

<sup>43</sup> *LS*, 120

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work, Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1998), 8

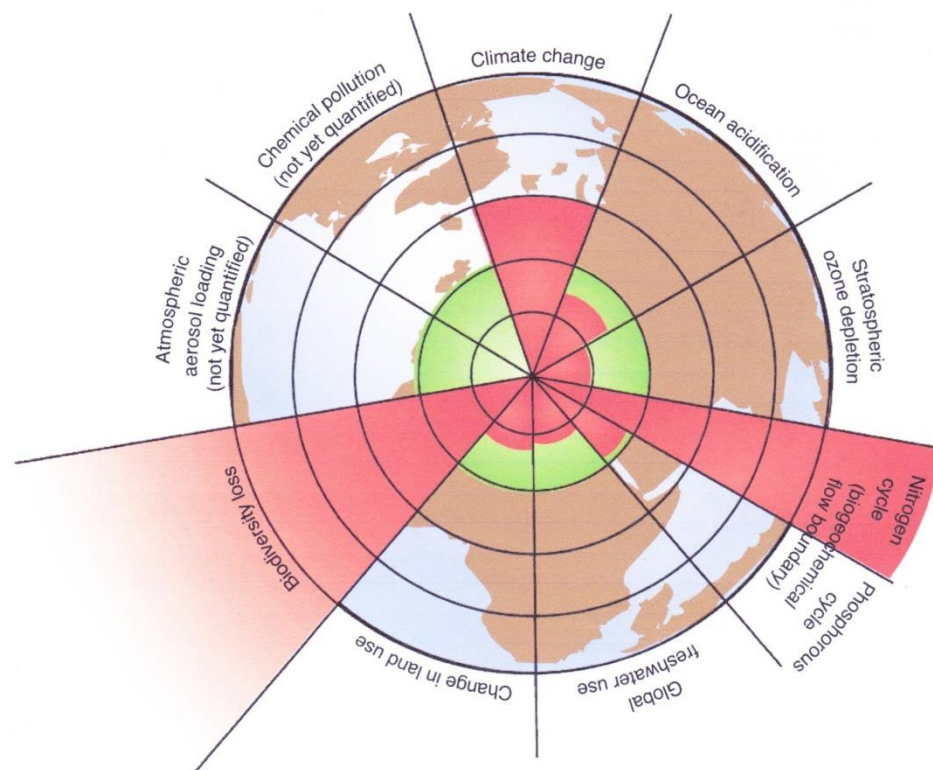
<sup>45</sup> Will Steffen et al, “The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship” in *AMBIO* 40 (2011):739–761

<sup>46</sup> Figure 2, Rockstrom, J., W. Steffen, K. Noone, A Persson, F.S. Chapin III, E.F. Lambin, T.M. Lenton, M. Scheffer, et al, “A safe operating space for humanity.” in *Nature* 461 (2009a): 472–475.



biodiversity loss, climate change, and human interference with the nitrogen cycle, while the boundaries for the phosphorus cycle, ocean acidification, global freshwater usage, and changes in land usage are moving towards the limit of the safe operating level.

The relationships between humans and the planet are in a critical transition during which time we need to acknowledge and redress our negative impacts on the planet. If anything, the urgency for the vision and mission of Earth Link becomes more evident from these developments, even as it takes heart from the public profile that environmental degradation and human poverty are now being given.



**Fig. 9** The inner green shading represents the proposed safe operating space for nine planetary systems. The red wedges represent an estimate of the current position for each variable. The boundaries in three systems (rate of biodiversity loss, climate change and human interference with the nitrogen cycle) have already been exceeded (Rockström et al. 2009a)

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This is the context which gives rise to this thesis. The increasing alienation of humans from their planetary home during the classical or traditional period led to nature being treated as an object to be dominated and controlled by humans, and treated as a commodity for the

benefit of humans. Concerns such as those listed above and identification of the need to promote a new worldview informed by contemporary science led to the establishment of Earth Link as a faith-inspired response to the environmental crisis. That organisation is the focus of this theological reflection, of this exercise in practical theology, and will be the subject of thick description in Chapter 3.

## **Part 2: STARTING WITH EXPERIENCE**



## Chapter 3 Starting with Earth Link<sup>1</sup>

Earth Link has a vision of a world  
where there is respect, reverence and care  
for the whole Earth community.

The first step in the practical theology or theological reflection process is a thick description of the principles and spiritual practice of Earth Link which is designed to uncover its implicit and explicit worldviews and theologies.<sup>2</sup> This practice is then taken into dialogue with the ecospirituality of Thomas Berry and some in his tradition, and with the ecotheology of Elizabeth Johnson, with some reference to *Laudato Si, On the Care for our Common Home*, the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis. Earth Link is both affirmed and challenged by those dialogues. Earth Link is critiqued against the vision in this thesis of the embrace of Heaven and Earth as expressed in the interrelationships of God, Earth and its inhabitants in ways that are intimate yet respectful of the distinctiveness of the parts. In light of the wider exposure to the dialogue partners, I will revisit what Earth Link stands for, and propose an enhancement of its formal position statements. In this chapter I begin with a description of the genesis and development of the project, before considering, in some depth, what Earth Link stands for and how it gives expression to its vision and mission.

### Genesis and Development of Earth Link

As I was the instigator of Earth Link, its genesis is very much intertwined with my story. My background is in education, especially in religious education, and in leadership of the Sisters of Mercy, a congregation of women within the Catholic Church. My attempts to come to terms with the diminishment confronting religious orders had taken me into an awareness of the paradigm shifts that were/are happening around us. I was conversant with shifts in

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<sup>1</sup> The image at the beginning of this chapter is the logo for Earth Link.

<sup>2</sup> Clare Wolfteich, "Animating Questions: Spirituality and Practical Theology," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 13 (1): 138-139, doi.10.1515/IJPT.2009.7

the understanding of the building blocks of matter, the atoms. Whereas atoms were previously understood to be composed of particles rotating in fixed orbits around a nucleus, they were now known to be much more dynamic in their movement, with the particles moving in and out from potential to reality. Findings from physics were driving a shift from a static, mechanistic world view to a more dynamic, ecological world view in which the interconnectedness of all of reality was recognised, and where the only constant was change. I had explored the implications for organisational life of these changing understandings and the world views built on them. Nothing prepared me for the shock of discovering that the human-centred or anthropocentric world view which is dominant in Western society could, in fact, be a major contributing factor to the deteriorating state of the environment. What was more shocking was my growing awareness that the Judaeo-Christian tradition which re-enforced the notion of human superiority over the rest of created reality was seen by some as making a major contribution to the ecological crisis.<sup>3</sup>

As part of my response to this, I have been living, since the turn of the century, out of a deepening consciousness of my place in the Universe which, on current data, is understood to be about 13.75 billion years old. When I first recognised my place in this deep history, I felt as if I had been hit by an asteroid. That encounter was hardly an event of global proportions, but I did feel as if my centre of gravity had shifted. My human-centred or anthropocentric world view began to give way to a more inclusive, life-centred world view, with the subsequent need to review most of the assumptions that had given me meaning for many years. Some of these experiences needed to be available to others. With the endorsement and financial support of the Sisters of Mercy, I set up Earth Link to offer educational and reflective programmes. After about two years, a sixteen hectare property, Four Winds in the district of Ocean View<sup>4</sup> became available. It had accommodation for eight people. At this stage, Earth Link acquired a home.

During the next year, 2002, a group of people with backgrounds in environmental and religious education designed a curriculum for a four unit programme covering cosmology, sense of place (bioregionalism), action for justice for Earth, and immersion experiences in

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<sup>3</sup> See Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155, Issue 3767, (1967): 1203-1207, doi: 10.1126/science.155.3767.1203

<sup>4</sup> Ocean View is about an hour out of Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

other bioregions. The programme was offered on site initially, workshops derived from the content were offered more widely, and those courses were eventually made available in distance mode. These initiatives were promoted on the website<sup>5</sup> and flyers were distributed by hand, on community noticeboards, and in local and regional newspapers for specific events. In 2002, I was also able to attend the United Nations Climate Summit held in Johannesburg, and absorb its global perspective, and Australia's embarrassing role in the negotiations.

Alongside programme development, attention was given to managing the property in an environmentally responsible manner. Its location twelve kilometres from the nearest small township meant that we were self-sufficient in terms of water, responsible for our own waste disposal, had a grey water system and an onsite septic system. Our attempts to live sustainably led to the establishment of a permaculture garden, and eventually to the installation of solar power and solar hot water systems, and an outdoor composting toilet for use by groups who visited or came for programmes. The biggest challenge was the care of the fifteen hectares which were not cleared. This was and still is an important reserve within the local bioregion. Learning how to maintain land for wildlife was a challenge, especially learning how to manage weeds such as lantana which seemed to have the perfect growing environment in our dry sclerophyll forest. Fortunately there was Federal funding available for such efforts, and we were successful in our applications for grants for that purpose over several years.

In 2004, the three-yearly review of the programme<sup>6</sup> indicated a stronger interest in ecospirituality. In 2005, a community of committed persons gathered to read, study and discuss ecospirituality, before commissioning a writing group who became the Spirituality Team. During that period, thanks to grant funding, we developed resources for use in personal reflection and in workshops. We developed our website, and began the production of a monthly online newsletter which includes reflections and book reviews. Ritual spaces and walks were developed on the property, and they featured in our workshops and were

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<sup>5</sup> The web address is [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)

<sup>6</sup> See attachment 1 for copy of Report of 2004

available to guests.<sup>7</sup> The ecospirituality principles that developed in this period were published in a booklet entitled *Introduction to Eco spirituality*<sup>8</sup>, and it has proved to be very popular. It has formed the basis of facilitated workshops and self-directed retreats in several places. Resources to accompany the booklet were/are available on request. This programme was even integrated into a university module conducted by Australian Catholic University. An article based on our principles was published in the journal *Social Alternatives*.<sup>9</sup> We also contributed a five-part series to the *Earth Song Journal*<sup>10</sup> between 2007 and 2010. During the period 2005-2010 Earth Link was at its peak. We continued to be subsidised by the Sisters of Mercy while attempting to elicit grant funding, especially for improvements of the property.

The ecospirituality principles developed by Earth Link were always intended to be generic and appropriate for anyone who shared our vision, regardless of their faith tradition. We had by now come to the attention of the Catholic “thought police” who were particularly active in Brisbane and surrounds between 2004 and 2011. We were reported to the Archbishop in both 2008 and 2011, and in his correspondence with the then Congregation Leader of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy, he expressed his support for what we were doing, and affirmed both its importance and our openness to all, regardless of their faith tradition.<sup>11</sup> In 2004 and 2006, we received adverse publicity in the conservative magazine, *AD 2000*, which comes out of New Zealand. I even received a letter from someone in New York accusing us of worshipping creation, rather than the Creator. She suggested that we should be called the Sisters of Recycling. I simply wished that we were just as well known by mainstream religious people in the local area. We were always conscious that we were a publicly Catholic Christian ministry of the Sisters of Mercy which was open to all in the interests of the wellbeing of the whole Earth community as a response to widespread

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<sup>7</sup> See attachment 2 for copy of pamphlet *Walking the Earth* which was produced for this purpose

<sup>8</sup> See attachment 3 for copy of *Introduction to Eco spirituality*

<sup>9</sup> See attachment 4 for copy of article in *Social Alternatives*

<sup>10</sup> The *Earth Song Journal* is produced twice yearly by the Earth Song Project based in Melbourne. Their website is [www.earthsong.org.au](http://www.earthsong.org.au) This project has now finished.

<sup>11</sup> This correspondence is held in the archives of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane Congregation.

environmental degradation and human poverty. This was and is a responsibility that we take seriously.

It was always intended that we would initiate a dialogue with others in the Christian and multi-faith traditions about ecospirituality and its theological underpinnings. I prepared a booklet called *Ecology and Christian Faith*<sup>12</sup> which highlights the problems and the potential of Christian theology. Workshops on this material were offered initially at Four Winds. Our attempts to find some partners who would reflect on the connection between ecology and other faith tradition were not very successful at that time, even though we had some minimal involvement with a multi-faith centre at a university. We were accepted to offer a workshop at the Parliament of World Religions held in Melbourne in 2009, but generally the time had not quite arrived for the kind of Brisbane based multi-faith dialogue that we had envisaged.

By 2009, it was time for a transition for Earth Link. A report<sup>13</sup> was commissioned which led to the appointment of a part-time Property Manager and a part-time Director who had the potential to move into the programme area. The change-over to new leadership did not work, and it was deemed timely to sell the property. Earth Link moved completely offsite at the end of 2012, at which time I down-sized to the current strategies of resourcing, reflecting and acting. A core community continues to meet monthly for education and reflection. The main activities for carrying forward the vision and the mission are the e-newsletter which has about 900 recipients who form an online community, and the website which is updated in the light of the most recent newsletter. I respond to invitations for presentations and workshops, mostly in the area of ecospirituality, and Earth Link offers a few public events, such as a workshop on the encyclical of Pope Francis, and a discussion on the work of Naomi Klein. The demand has been minimal but constant for about three years, and indicates the potential of ecospirituality as a vehicle of transformation. Because of my work with Earth Link, I have also been in a position to act as a resource person for the Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, especially in the launch of *An Integrated Policy*

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<sup>12</sup> See attachment 5 for copy of booklet, *Ecology and Christian Faith*

<sup>13</sup> See attachment 6 for copy of report 2010



on *Sustainable Living*. That activity is outside the scope of this narrative, but is opening up new avenues for involvement.

Some developments in the last few years have changed the level of interest in ecological matters, and for the better. Since 2011, workshops introducing ecospirituality have been offered by the Australian Earth Laws' Association (AELA), and have been very well attended by a wide range of concerned people. The formation in 2011 of the Queensland Churches Environment Network (QCEN) as a commission of Queensland Churches Together provides a Christian ecumenical network that is proving very supportive and effective in promoting a Christian response to concerns for the whole Earth community. The release by Pope Francis of the encyclical *Laudato Si, On the Care for our Common Home* in July 2015, has brought remarkable energy to the conversation within and across faith traditions, and Earth Link conducted several events around the content of and responses to the encyclical.

It would seem that Earth Link's pioneering efforts since 2000 have situated us well for this moment in time, and into the future. I will turn now to consider the nature of the commitment of Earth Link, and some of the assumptions out of which Earth Link operates.

### **What does Earth Link stand for?**

Earth Link has a basic understanding that fostering the embrace of Heaven and Earth, manifested in the relationships between God, Earth and her inhabitants, is important for the wellbeing of Earth and cosmos. This is articulated in its vision, mission and principles.

The website is the public face of Earth Link, and its home page manifests clearly that

Earth Link is a community which envisions a world where there is respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community. We believe that the heart of this lies in deepening our bond with Earth.<sup>14</sup>

The mission of Earth Link to facilitate this process is introduced in the preamble to the booklet, *Introduction to Ecospirituality*:

In our times, there are ongoing shifts in our knowledge about the unfolding story of the Universe, the nature of matter, the interconnectedness of the web of life, the importance of the ancient Earth traditions and the list goes on. Many people are seeking to make meaning of these changes to deepen their own connections with

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<sup>14</sup> [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)

nature and the cosmos, to explore the implications for their own religious and spiritual traditions, and to name their experience of the Sacred. As we enter into this journey, we are articulating the spirituality of Earth Link.

We understand that the Earth Link spirituality comes from the transformative experience of deep bonding with Earth. Reflection has led us to believe that this is an experience of the Sacred, and that Earth and cosmos constitute for us a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery.

We go further to articulate five principles of ecospirituality:

- 1 Listen to the wisdom of Earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude;
- 2 Deepen your relationship with cosmos/Earth, beginning with your own particular place;
- 3 Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life;
- 4 Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living;
- 5 Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life.<sup>15</sup>

The themes that stand out in the Earth Link principles are listening, place, interdependence, acknowledging and honouring the Sacred in the web of life, and living in right relationships.

In the abstract to an article by the then Spirituality Team of Earth Link which was published in *Social Alternatives*, Philip Costigan wrote about the role of spirituality in an eco-centric culture, and about the contribution made by Earth Link as one response to an environment in crisis :

A spirituality which envisions the Sacred as intimately embodied in the Earth and the cosmos brings into force powerful emotions of reverence for all life and commitment to justice for the Earth. A deep bonding with nature, and recognition that humankind is only one element in the whole interdependent web of life, underpins this type of spirituality. Ecospirituality can offer a solid ideological and theological base for the current environmental movement. Because it taps into deep-rooted motivations and commitments it has the power to challenge radically, and change fundamentally, the destructive culture that exploits the earth, and transform it into a culture that is life-enhancing and eco-centric. The ecospirituality put forward by Earth Link encompasses a comprehensive set of experiences, beliefs, rituals and actions, and is one attempt to formulate a spiritual framework for living in ways that are more ecologically sensitive.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, a series of essays on the above principles developed in 2007 for Earth Link by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney

<sup>16</sup> Philip Costigan with Patricia Rose and Mary Tinney: "The Role of Spirituality in the Development of an Eco-Centric Culture," *Social Alternatives*, Vol 26, No 3, Third Quarter, 2007. This is available as an attachment to this thesis.

The principles of Earth Link highlight the importance of a contemplative attitude to Earth and cosmos, an open, attentive and listening stance. Earth Link encourages immersion in nature with a receptive attitude. This is based on an awareness that such an encounter is subject to subject, rather than subject to object. There is mutuality in the encounter. This “deep bonding” is key to the approach of Earth Link, and together we have come to the view that this is at the heart of the matter. This is the encounter that opens us to an appreciation of the intrinsic worth of nature, both human and other than human, and to an experience of the Sacred; however that is understood by the individual.

Ecospirituality, as Earth Link understands it, is a place-based spirituality. This is when my body, the body of Earth and cosmos, and the body of God may meet. The “deep bonding” mentioned above is with a particular place or places. These are not necessarily wild places, although some such exposure is recommended. They can be where you live or where you have fond memories of your associations with people and place. Many treasured encounters come from childhood, and sometimes remembering those encounters can help or hinder the encounter with one’s current place or places. Unless we know a place, we cannot read what it may be saying.

Earth Link is conscious that there are wisdom traditions, religious and otherwise, which give meaning to what we are encountering. These belief and value systems can be normative, and provide a community of concern. However religious systems, like economic and social ones, are often exclusive of environmental appreciation and concerns. Earth Link is conscious that most traditional systems, as mentioned in the section on context, are mired in classical, human-centred or anthropocentric world views. While contemporary theological writers are more and more working from evolutionary, science-aware frameworks, this is not the case in most faith communities. The ecospirituality booklet points to the paradigm shift that is needed if the interconnection of God and the Earth community are to be the basis of a faith response that respects the integrity of the web of life. It points to the agenda of theological revisioning that is required without actually developing it.

Earth Link recognises the importance of expressing honour, respect, and esteem for the Sacred, individually and in community through rituals and holistic living. We set up ritual places and spaces, mostly outdoors. We laid down a Cosmic Walk celebrating the unfolding story of the Universe over 13.75 billion years—a foundational story for Earth Link because of its potential for developing a sense of the place of humans in the story of evolution. We marked out safe walks through the property, and prepared booklets that mingled ecological information with the invitation to reflective moments. We prepared books that facilitated reflection on the hours of the day and the seasons of the year. We offered workshops with people like John Seed, an Australian influenced by the Buddhist tradition, who worked with Joanna Macy, an internationally recognised activist, to develop rituals and processes such as the Council of All Beings. In that process/ritual, people are invited to allow some aspect of nature to call them into partnership, and then to represent them at a Council of all Beings, where the humans prepare and don masks suggestive of the being that they represent. This is a very powerful way of getting into the shoes (so to speak) of the other. Earth Link continues, although to a lesser extent, to ritualise around the seasons of the year and the liturgical seasons of the church year. In this way it opens up the time-honoured tradition of “lectio divina” beyond listening only to the book of scripture to include listening to the book of nature.

Earth Link sees its strength in the field of changing attitudes, but its final principle is about living in right relations. We established some criteria for such relations with self, others, earth, cosmos and the Sacred. These include subject-subject relations with all, an ecocentric world view, relations that are partnerships rather than domination, and engagement as a participant in any action “with” Earth, not “for” Earth.

As noted in the section of the genesis and development of Earth Link, the project is not without history in the area of ecotheology. As an extension of the ecospirituality principle which invites people to “acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life,” I prepared a booklet entitled *Ecology and Christian Faith*. The work on ecospirituality had identified the need for a theology that integrated Earth, the human and the Sacred. The booklet explores the proposition that “Christianity is part of the problem of environmental degradation, but also that Christianity contains within it the promise of a better future if it

recognises the role that it can play with others who are addressing the environmental crisis.”<sup>17</sup>

The booklet is in two parts, the first being the Earth-human connection and the second being the Earth-human-Sacred connection. In the first section problems noted were hierarchical ranking and valuing and the licence which that gives to those higher up the ladder to exploit those down the ladder; dualistic distinctions between spirit and matter and between soul and body with the subsequent devaluing of the latter in each case; and the way in which the decision making in an anthropocentric society favours humans and their economic systems, often at the expense of the environment. Insights from cosmology and evolutionary theory were brought to bear to establish the place of humans within the Earth community. Insights from theology explored more meaningful Earth-human relations which recognise the distinctiveness of humans among other species, the limited and finite nature of all reality, and explored what our ultimate destiny might be like when we return to the dust of Earth.

In the second section on Earth-human-Sacred connections, I identified problems associated with the apathy within the Christian community based on a lack of awareness that our relationship with Earth/universe/cosmos is a dimension of Christian life. Other problems come from an outmode view of the cosmos “as having been launched in a finished form by the hand of the Creator, rather than as a dynamic, unfolding Universe in which Earth, humans and the Sacred are integral and connected parts of the process.”<sup>18</sup> Having established the interconnections, I went on to explore panentheism and Catherine Keller’s notion of “radical incarnationalism,”<sup>19</sup> which does not blur the distinction between Earth and divine mystery, but allows for intense and open-ended interaction between them. There is great potential in Christianity if we are willing to “reformulate our understanding of the Sacred whom we encounter in the midst of our contemporary living situations.”<sup>20</sup> In the rudimentary Trinitarian theology which follows, I consider the God who creates (and destroys), and Jesus who came among us, and God’s continuing presence among us as Spirit,

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Tinney, *Ecology and Christian Faith* (Self-published, 2009). There are no page numbers in this booklet.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 53

<sup>20</sup> Tinney, *Ecology and Christian Faith*

drawing us into fullness of Being. That theology explored the first Creation narrative in Genesis 1-2,4a as creation from within the unfolding story of the Universe rather than as creation from above. It acknowledged other rich creation accounts in Wisdom 8 and Psalm 104 while admitting that certain biblical texts do not reflect a genuine concern for Earth. I examined God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, 12-13 which acknowledges that destruction is a reality which does not negate God's love for creation. I then drew on Johnson's insights about Mystery present at the heart of the universe as an expression of loving self-surrender. Earth Link's theology acknowledged the centrality of the Christ event and identified Jesus as "the embodiment of the connection, communion, unity of all created reality with the Sacred, an embodiment of God's nearness, and indeed of God's love."<sup>21</sup> Jesus was recognised as one who "showed his own and future generations that matter is good and that it embodies the Sacred."<sup>22</sup> Taking Jesus as the norm for Earth and for humanity led naturally to Sallie McFague's map of what ecological Christianity might look like, and I quote it, as it contains the seeds which come to fruition in this thesis.

- The insistence on justice to the oppressed, including nature, and the realisation that solidarity with the oppressed will result in cruciform living for the affluent;
- The need to turn to the earth, respecting it and caring for it in local, ordinary, mundane ways;
- The recognition that God is with us, embodied not only in Jesus of Nazareth, but in all of nature, thus uniting all creation and sanctifying bodily life;
- The promise of a renewed creation through the hope of the resurrection, a promise that includes the whole cosmos and speaks to our ecological despair;
- The appreciation of the intrinsic worth of all life forms, not just of human beings; and finally
- Acknowledgement that human salvation or wellbeing and nature's health are intrinsically connected.<sup>23</sup>

Earth Link's theology went on to acknowledge God's presence in the Spirit in the unfolding story of the universe, "present in its autopoiesis or self-emergence, present in its groaning, present intimately in love at all time."<sup>24</sup> The loving presence of God among us does not remove suffering and death, but enables us to draw on the disturbing message from the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Sallie McFague, "An Ecological Christianity: Does Christianity Have It?," in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter GT Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 33

<sup>24</sup> Tinney, *Ecology and Christian Faith*.

death and resurrection of Jesus that there are “other sources of life, love and power than those being demonstrated by civil and religious leaders”<sup>25</sup> of his time and ours. This encounter with Mystery has the power to draw us forward into future fullness of being, even if this is beyond our imagination. With Catherine Keller, I was drawn to “an exploration of the future as whirlwind, an exploration of the creative edges of chaos which brim with potential.”<sup>26</sup> With this rudimentary theological framework, Earth Link strained forward in hope towards an ultimate encounter with Mystery, but also in the hope that it was making a contribution to the God-Earth-human connection.

Earth Link is a faith-based community response to the ecological crisis. It is a child of its time and reflects the language of the resources available to us in its formative and ongoing stages. We at Earth Link were very keen to be inclusive, and to use images and metaphors that were more easily accessible to those who gathered around it. Our inner circle included Christians, post Christians and proponents of Goddess religion. It is my experience that many people who are aware of environmental and other global concerns are caught between the classical and the evolutionary paradigms, and may be in a phase that Ilia Delio calls a new atheism, a needed phase of letting go of one God and making way for another. Such people are not so averse to ecospirituality, and I think that Earth Link might have discovered something in developing that as a focus when it did.

I believe that our vision that the whole Earth community is worthy of our respect, reverence and care is enduring. Our reverence leads us to recognise the sacredness of Earth as the place of encounter with the Sacred/the Divine/God. Our respect is based on our recognition of the intrinsic value of the whole Earth community. Our care comes from our oneness with the Earth community and our kinship with its members, and is amplified by our sense of its sacredness. Hopefully this vision takes us beyond treating Earth as an object for our gratification and exploitation.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, drawing on Catherine Keller, “No More Sea” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford Reuther (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 193

The ecospirituality and ecotheology of Earth Link are intended to enable Heaven and Earth to embrace in the lives of those who live in our emerging Universe. However Earth Link's story is also unfolding, and there is still much to learn from dialoguing further with the fields of ecospirituality and ecotheology. It is to these that I now turn.



## **Part 3: DIALOGUE WITH ECOSPIRITUALITY**



## Chapter 4 Thomas Berry-visionary leader

SUMMER ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise  
Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely behaviour  
Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier  
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,  
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;  
And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a  
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder  
Majestic—as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!—  
These things, these things were here and but the beholder  
Wanting; which two when they once meet,  
The heart rears wings bold and bolder  
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.<sup>1</sup>

In the ecospiritual experience, the beholder “sees” what is “here” with new eyes, the eyes of “rapturous love.” This loving presence is here and “but the beholder wanting.” Ecospirituality is an opportunity for Heaven and Earth to embrace in the depth of our being. Ecospirituality affords us the opportunity to view Earth with eyes that see not only the ordinary, but also the extraordinary.

In this chapter the focus shifts to ecospirituality. Thomas Berry has been a key figure in the development of what he sometimes calls “Earth-sensitive” spirituality. He has a profound sense of the identity of humans within the Earth community and their connection with the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, “Hurrahing in Harvest,” *Bartelby.Com*, accessed 13 March, 2017, <http://www.bartleby.com/122/14.html>.

Sacred. His identification of the principles of interiority, differentiation and communion allows for an embrace that respects the distinctiveness of the parts. He was the primary influence on Sister Miriam MacGillis OP, a Dominican sister who set up Genesis Farm as an Earth literacy centre in New Jersey in the USA. It was my participation in that programme which set me on the course which led to the formation of Earth Link. This chapter is an exploration of the work of Thomas Berry as the basis of an interrogation of Earth Link against his body of work. But first some clarification of the key concept of ecospirituality.

### Approaches to Ecospirituality

In common parlance many people identify as “spiritual but not religious.” With Bron Taylor I accept that the distinctions are not that clearly drawn. He offers a very inclusive description of spirituality:

Spirituality can...be understood as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one’s lifestyle and vocational choices.<sup>2</sup>

Such an approach is very helpful in the field of ecospirituality where one interacts with people with a deep connection to the environment. Their concern for the environment is passionate, and often based on a sense that there is something “more” in their encounters with nature, whether this is in their work, their activism, their gardening, walking, cycling, boating or camping. Some of them name this as a spiritual encounter.

Taylor’s real interest is in nature religion which he describes as “an umbrella term to mean religious perceptions and practices that are characterised by a reverence for nature, and that consider its destruction a desecrating act,” and whose adherents “often describe feelings of belonging and connection to the earth-of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems.”<sup>3</sup> He has a schema in which he distinguishes dark green religion “in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care”<sup>4</sup> from green religion “which posits that environmentally friendly behaviour is a religious

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<sup>2</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion, Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 10

obligation.”<sup>5</sup> He also has a schema for different types of dark green religion. While they share a value system based on felt kinship with the rest of life, humility about the place of humans in the universe, and a sense of interconnection and interdependence derived from scientific knowledge, he distinguishes them as being naturalistic or supernaturalistic, and by whether they are what he calls Gaian or animistic. So animists, who perceive that spiritual intelligence or life forces animate natural objects, can understand these forces to be natural or supernatural. Similarly Gaians, who understand that the universe is alive or conscious, can interpret this as natural or supernatural. Taylor developed his schema in order to see the patterns emerging in the meetings he had with those experiencing some sort of depth encounter with nature. It has the advantage of identifying commonalities and differences, although his demarcation of natural and supernatural would not seem to be the best categories.

Interestingly enough, Taylor makes special note of those who “use rhetoric of the sacred to express awe and reverence toward the ‘miracle’ of life,” and for whom “science has been an important source of such perception.” He goes on to postulate that “nonsupernaturalistic nature religion will likely become an important feature in the religious life of America and beyond, and that such religion will increasingly become a wellspring for environmental action based on kinship ethics and a reverence for life.”<sup>6</sup> He suggests that such developments into the future may warrant being described as religion, as it is accompanied by symbols, rituals and myths which traditionally give shape to a religion. He goes even further to identify a fourth category which he describes as a non- sectarian, civic religion such as is embedded in the Earth Charter. He suggests that “it may be that such a religion, in which an evolutionary story becomes intertwined with reverence for life and combined with practices designed to protect and restore nature, will play a major role in the religious future of humanity”.<sup>7</sup> A two fold emphasis on an awareness of reality as evolutionary and on concern for the plight of the environment experienced as sacred could well be the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>6</sup> Bron Taylor, “Religion and Environmentalism in America and Beyond” in *Religion and Ecology*, ed Roger S Gottlieb (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 602

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 603

unifying aspects of the many and varied expression of ecospirituality. They do seem common to the expressions that I consider in the next chapter.

Influenced by Taylor's work, I prefer to schematise ecospirituality along a continuum. At one end of the spectrum are the *Gaians*. Their approach is similar to that of James Lovelock<sup>8</sup>, whose biological work indicates that Earth has the properties of a living organism, and that of Lovelock's colleague, Stephan Harding, whose zoological work takes him to a sense of animate Earth.<sup>9</sup> That is the basis of their encounter with it. Further along the spectrum are those who name *Earth as Sacred*. They have a profound sense of encountering Mystery, however they might name it. For nontheists, such as biologist Ursula Goodenough and anthropologist Terrence Deacon,<sup>10</sup> their approach has all the hallmarks of a religious experience, inspiring awe and wonder and grounding their ethical behaviour. It is an example of animism. Further along the spectrum are pantheists who see Earth as identical with God or the gods. My fourth category is what Larry Rasmussen would call an *Earth-honouring faith*.<sup>11</sup> It is panentheistic in that God is in nature but not contained by it. There is an ever-expanding vocabulary to describe God's immanence and transcendence in this approach, and as this is the one adopted in this thesis; it is one on which I will expand. The spectrum would not be complete with including a more "other-worldly" spirituality which is predominantly *Earth deprecating*, but this will be mentioned only in passing in order to distinguish it from the vision of this thesis which is about the embrace of Heaven and Earth without losing the value and distinctiveness of either.

Any approach to ecospirituality needs to be respectful of such developments as, more often than not, these are the people most profoundly committed to working towards a better future for the environment, people with whom it is a privilege to collaborate for the wellbeing of planet and cosmos. My focus, however, will be on a "quest to deepen, renew,

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<sup>8</sup> James Lovelock, aged 98 in 2017, is the author of many books including *Gaia*, *The Ages of Gaia*, and *The Revenge of Gaia*

<sup>9</sup> Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth* (White River Junction, VT, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006)

<sup>10</sup> See Terrence Deacon and Ursula Goodenough, "The Sacred Emergence of Nature" in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 853-871, for an outline of their position.

<sup>11</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith, Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013)

or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions.”<sup>12</sup> That religion for me is Christianity.

### Christian Ecospirituality

I am interested in the emergence of a religious framework which is faithful to the core tenets of the Catholic-Christian tradition, and flexible about its articulation in the evolutionary era.

Sandra Schneiders, writing in the *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, acknowledges that “while spirituality as such is not necessarily religious, denominational, or confessional,” there is a place for the study of Christian spirituality.<sup>13</sup> She identifies three different approaches: historical, theological and contemporary. Historical spirituality locates spirituality “in a particular socio-cultural and temporal setting”; theological spirituality grounds it in the Christian theological tradition, and contemporary or anthropomorphic spirituality recognises that “all Christian religious experience is human and thus related to the spiritual enterprise of the human race.” She sees a place for them all within the academic context.

In her understanding of spirituality there is room for transcendence and for self-transcendence. She describes spirituality as “the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence,” and defines it as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>14</sup>

For Schneiders, the study of spirituality is the study of lived faith. Historically it has moved from being the domain of the religious elite who lived monastic or even apostolic life-styles to being the domain of all the faithful. This opening up of the understanding of spirituality has raised questions about the distinctiveness of Christian spirituality, which is also a concern of this thesis. She suggests that Christian spirituality is Christian “because of its

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 3

<sup>13</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality” in ed Arthur Holder, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Blackwell Reference Online, 2005), accessed 22 April, 2014, doi 10.1111/b.9781405102476.2005.00003.x , 2

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

relationship to the creed, code, and cult of the church's tradition.”<sup>15</sup> A strong emphasis on this connection can be described as theological spirituality which is helpful in analysing the experiences and evaluating the data that emerges in the spiritual journey, but is not intended to be prescriptive. As with practical theology which is the methodology for this thesis, Christian spirituality is not a case of “applied” theology, but rather about the dialogue between spiritual experience and the insights of the tradition in order to further enliven the lived experience, an understanding which influences the shape of this thesis in its progression from experience to dialogue with tradition and back to experience.

Contemporary spirituality, which Schneiders calls the anthropological approach, focuses on the person, on lived experience. It begins with the premise that human beings are inherently spiritual:

Human beings are characterized by a capacity for self-transcendence toward ultimate value, whether or not they nurture this capacity or do so in religious or nonreligious ways. Consequently, spirituality as a feature of humanity as such is existentially (though not always experientially) prior to any particular actualization of spirituality as Christian, Buddhist, ecological, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

Such an approach is holistic in its attitude to persons and recognises that life is lived within a context which influences one’s beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Contemporary anthropological spirituality is “not only a complexification of the holistic approach to the human subject of religious experience, but a heightened awareness of the dimensions and influence of “place” and “space” (both inner and outer), globalization, ecological crises, the validity of religious experience outside one's own tradition, scientific developments, and cultural currents.”<sup>17</sup> Ecospirituality is an expression of this heightened awareness.

Christian ecospirituality takes its place within this broader context. I do find, however, this comment from Schneiders worthy of consideration:

The challenge for those who approach the study of spirituality from the more anthropological perspective is to keep the specifically Christian character of the discipline in focus and to resist the postmodern lure of universal relativism, nihilistic

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10

deconstructionism, rejection of all tradition and authority, and suspicion of personal commitment.<sup>18</sup>

This is a challenge which I will take up.

### **Thomas Berry (1914-2009)**

Thomas Berry epitomises in so many ways the embrace of Heaven and Earth. Core among his suggestions as to what is needed in order to redress the crises of our times is a spirituality that is deeply grounded in the emerging Universe. Bron Taylor described Thomas Berry as a classic example of dark green religion “in which nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore due reverent care.”<sup>19</sup> In what follows I will begin with some biographical details, capture his vivid sense of the devastation that humans are causing to the natural world, and move to his analysis of why that is so. Berry offers many suggestions about how to address the root cause of the current situation, and not least among these is the need to engage spiritually, recognising the sacred nature of all reality.

#### **Biographical details**

Thomas entered the novitiate of the Passionist order in 1934, taking the name Thomas after the great scholar Thomas Aquinas. He was ordained to the Catholic priesthood in 1942. Berry earned his doctoral degree in history from the Catholic University of America. His early interests included Asian history and religion, as well as the culture and religious life of indigenous people. He studied Chinese language and culture in China in the late 1940s. He served as an army chaplain in Europe in the early 1950s. Berry then taught the cultural history of India and China at Seton Hall in New Jersey, and at Fordham University in New York. He was director of Fordham’s graduate programme in the history of religions from 1955 to 1979. In 1970 he founded the Centre for Religious Research in Riverdale, New York, and was its director until 1987.

It was during this last period that he began to lecture widely on the intersection of cultural, spiritual and ecological issues. His writings on eco-spirituality and the human relationship with the Earth began in 1988. His writings include:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 10



*The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988)

*Befriending the Earth* with Thomas Clarke (Mystic, Co: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991)

*The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*, with Brian Swimme, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992)

*The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1999)

*Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* ed Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006)

Since his death in 2009, there has been a concerted effort to draw together his writings and to invite reflection on them and on his life. To date these include:

*The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, ed Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm (London: Orbis Books, 2009)

*The Sacred Universe, Earth, Spirituality and Religion in the Twentieth-First Century*, ed Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009)

*Thomas Berry, Dreamer of the Earth, The Spiritual Ecology of the Father of Environmentalism*, ed Ervin Laslo and Allan Combs (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2011)

*Recovering a Sense of the Sacred: Conversations with Thomas Berry* by Carolyn Tobin (North Carolina: Timberlake Earth Sanctuary Press, 2012)

*The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining the Earth Community*, ed Heather Eaton (Boston: Lexington Books, 2014)

Many of these volumes are collections of his essays, so the themes tend to recur, shaped by the context which gave rise to the essay.

I had the opportunity to meet Thomas Berry in 1999, and even then he was quite hard to understand as he mumbled. My abiding impression of him was how much he loved to engage in deep conversation. He welcomed challenges, arguments, anything that might get us all thinking and talking.

## Devastation of the Planet

With Berry, as with most people with a commitment to engage spiritually in an emerging Universe, the story began with the perception and experience of a lack of reverent care. He was profoundly conscious of the disintegration of the natural world. He describes the North American continent as “toxic in its air, its water, and its land and gravely diminished in the variety and abundance of its living forms.”<sup>20</sup> On multiple occasions he drew attention to the adverse impact of the white American need to conquer the land. He contrasted it with the respectful attitude of the native peoples, and the failure of the European arrivals to recognise the richness of what the indigenous peoples had to offer. He acknowledged the achievements in science, technology, industry, commerce and finance which have brought the human community to a new place, and lists as the most impressive achievements the “sense of personal rights, participatory governance and religious freedom.”<sup>21</sup> However, his core message is summed up when he says:

The Great Work, now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.<sup>22</sup>

He emphasised the centrality of cultivating mutually enhancing Earth-human relations.

## His Analysis of the Contemporary Situation

His analysis of the root cause of human devastation of Earth was human alienation from the natural environment. As a cultural historian, he traced the discontinuity between humans and nature back to the massive loss of life during the Black Death plague in the fourteenth century, and the subsequent negative attitude to the universe and the planet. The discontinuity was amplified by the growth of industrialisation, by Descartes’ understanding of the dualism between body and mind, and exacerbated by religious emphases on the need to be redeemed from this material and sinful reality. The end product in our times is what he calls our “autism”, our “disconnect” from the natural world. He said that we have “lost our capacity for communication with the natural world in its inner life, its spirit mode,” and

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Berry and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the twenty-first Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 157

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work, Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1999), 2

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

that we are “illiterate as regards the languages of the natural world.”<sup>23</sup> I accept his analysis that behaviour based on that disconnection results in the ecological devastation of which we are part. It manifests also in our consumer society, and influences our economic, legal, political, cultural and religious systems. According to Berry, we need to begin the process of re-connecting.

Berry’s vision and goal underline his recognition of the value of Earth and cosmos and the reverent care that are their due. More specifically he identified the causes of our present situation as,

- 1 Our inability to understand that human beings find their fulfilment in the universe even as the universe finds it fulfilment in the human.
- 2 Our sense of Earth as primarily a natural resource for the unlimited use of humans....The presence of the Divine in the cosmological order was diminished in favour of the Divine as experienced in the historical order.
- 3 Rights as an exclusive privilege of humans.
- 4 Collaboration of the legal profession and the judiciary with the commercial entrepreneurial enterprise in the economic development of the country. <sup>24</sup>

#### **At the Individual Level**

The dominant anthropocentric paradigm which sees material reality as existing for the benefit of humans needs to become the anthropocosmic world view thus named by Mary Evelyn Tucker,<sup>25</sup> and to which I referred in the chapter on context. Berry gave considerable attention to promoting the new story of the universe as our sacred story. In collaboration with Brian Thomas Swimme, he presented the universe story, not only in terms of its core scientific understandings, but also as a new mythic creation story which reminds humans of their place in the Universe, their interdependence with all that has preceded them, as well as their responsibility for what is unfolding. For Berry the human is the universe become conscious of itself. In his own words:

By definition we are that reality in whom the entire Earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Berry, “The Emerging Ecozoic Period,” ed Ervin Laszlo and Allan Combs, *Thomas Berry, Dreamer of the Earth* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Tradition, 2011), 12

<sup>24</sup> Berry and Tucker, *The Sacred Universe*, 166

<sup>25</sup> John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, Island Press, 2014), 45

spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific.<sup>26</sup>

This is a noble vocation and a great responsibility that we generally do not seem to be living up to! Berry's approach is consistent with the cosmological anthropic principle, which derives from physics, and which allows for the universe to be unfolding in ways that inevitably lead to the emergence of the human.

For him, the cosmic and planetary stories underline the biological kinship of humans with the rest of that planetary community. He saw that the historical mission of our times is "to reinvent the human-at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience."<sup>27</sup> He suggested that we need to allow our deep psychic genetic coding, which places us within the Earth and universe stories, to define us more than our cultural coding, which includes the destructive tendencies of our society. Our alignment with the life systems needs to be reflective and critical, cognisant of Earth's complexity, and not just the embrace of some romanticized notion. Our insertion into a time-developmental or cosmological perspective enables us to recognise the differentiation of all individuals, their unique inner life and identity, and their capacity for communal bonding. He calls these the principles of differentiation, subjectivity and communion.<sup>28</sup> For Berry this is not just a story about matter. The human participation in the dream of the Earth is "an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process."<sup>29</sup> This is a holistic experience, and later I will elaborate on Berry's spirituality.

### At the System Level

It is, however, not the responsibility of individuals alone to address what Berry saw as the core problem, namely human-Earth disconnection. He is critical of the social, legal, political and religious systems as collaborating with the Western economic paradigm which allows for the dominance of one species over other species. In a system where only humans and

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<sup>26</sup> Berry, *The Great Work*, 174

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 159

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 162

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 165

corporations have rights, nature will always lose out. Hopefully he would be gratified by the work being done by the legal community to develop the field of Earth jurisprudence.<sup>30</sup>

Thomas Berry had a sense of the magnitude of the transition required in order to move away from the prevailing paradigm. He recognised that we are at the crisis point which could take us into a Technozoic era characterised by technological developments, or into what he calls the Ecozoic era, a primary aspect of which is that “we recognise the larger community of life as our primary referent in terms of reality and value.”<sup>31</sup> He included this new era with the Palaeozoic (600-220 million years ago, hereafter mya), the Mesozoic (220-65 mya) and the Cenozoic (65 mya until the present),<sup>32</sup> and saw it as a new geological era. He is not alone in recognizing the end of the Cenozoic in which humans have the capacity to shape not only our society but also the future of the Universe. Brian Swimme sees humans as a planetary power and reminds us of the responsibility that goes with that. Berry’s vision of what is already emerging in the Ecozoic era is genuinely poetic as he predicted:

As we finally become familiar with the language and the wisdom of the winds and the sea and the land and all the unnumbered forms of life that form the great community of the Earth, we finally realise that we are earthlings, that we are born out of the Earth, that we have no future except within the larger Earth community.<sup>33</sup>

### At the Religious Level

Berry was very concerned about the incapacity of traditional religions to respond to the current cultural, religious or ecological realities. His vision was of the dawning of a new human consciousness where “notions of a global society, one world, a planetary civilisation, or one Earth community are dawning.”<sup>34</sup> He sought to “galvanise” religions to be in tune with and responsive to these new realities. He argued that religions as we know them are finished. A new orientation is required. He was not dismissive of traditional religion, but

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<sup>30</sup> Cormac Cullinan, author of *Wild Law* (Claremont, SA: Sibernik, 2002, first edition) was very much influenced by the work of Thomas Berry, and that influence continues in the work of the Australian Earth Laws Association in Australia and the Centre for Earth Jurisprudence in the USA. The movement for the Rights of Mother Nature is strong in Bolivia, and such rights have been written into the Constitution in Ecuador.

<sup>31</sup> Berry, “The Emerging Ecozoic Period,” 13

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>34</sup> Heather Eaton, “Metamorphosis, A Cosmology of Religions in an Ecological Age,” *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining the Earth Community*, ed Heather Eaton (Boston: Lexington Books, 2014), 161

recognised that it could not go ahead on its own, and was aware that society could not go ahead without it. He did, however, acknowledge that a beginning was being made to bring religions into the ecological age.

Berry's ambivalence about the limits and the potential of traditional religions sharpened his critique, even as he looked for its possibilities. For example he said in *Evening Thoughts*:

Presently those of us who are heirs to the biblical tradition are trying to be religious in accordance with written scriptures and covenant relations with the divine based on a juridic model. This can be effective only as long as it functions within the awesome awakening to the divine evoked by our experience of the natural world.<sup>35</sup>

In 2009, the year in which Berry died, Mary Evelyn Tucker published a series of his writings as the volume, *Christian Faith and the Fate of the Earth*. It contains essays from 1985 to the year 2000. She makes the point that many of these essays were not publically available prior to this compilation. I find in them, and especially in the one from which the title of the book is derived, a balance in his awareness of the *problems* that arise in Christianity: its over emphasis on God's transcendence, its focus on the need for redemption from our Earthly reality, and the demands on time and energy that go into the relief of human injustice and suffering; with the *possibilities* that could come from a closer sense of Earth-human relations.<sup>36</sup> He observes that

The task is not simply economic or political--it is pre-eminently a religious and spiritual task, perhaps the most urgent task of all. Only religious forces can move human consciousness at the depth needed. Only religious forces can sustain the effort that will be required over the long period of time during which adjustments must be made. Only religion can measure the magnitude of what we are about.<sup>37</sup>

He does have several themes that could be taken forward into a theological framework such as his cosmological model of the Trinity with the "Father as the principle of differentiation; the Son as the icon, the Word, the principle of inner articulation; the Holy Spirit as the bonding force holding all things together in a creative, compassionate embrace."<sup>38</sup> He refers

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, ed Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 46

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Berry, *Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, ed Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (London: Orbis Books, 2009), 40-41

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 56

to Colossians 1, 17<sup>39</sup> and the Prologue to the Gospel of John<sup>40</sup> in support of his understanding of the cosmic dimension of the Christ event which goes beyond its significance just for individuals.<sup>41</sup> However, it is to other theologians especially Elizabeth Johnson, that I will be looking in order to develop an ecotheology which can inform ecospirituality.

### At the Spiritual Level

More than anything else, Berry saw the need for a spirituality which was deeply immersed in the unfolding story of the Universe and which recognised the sacred inner dimension of nature. This was not just a concept to him. In *The Great Work*, he referred to an experience in his childhood which became normative for him:

It was an early afternoon in May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene. The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my life at a...profound level. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky....

This early experience...has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good, what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good....

That is good in economics which fosters the natural processes of this meadow. So in jurisprudence, law, and political affairs—what is good recognizes the rights of this meadow and the creek and the woodlands to exist and flourish in the ever-renewing seasonal expression....

Religion too, it seems to me, takes its origin here in the deep mystery of this setting. The more a person thinks of the infinite number of interrelated activities taking place here, the more mysterious in all becomes.

The more meaning a person finds in the Maytime blooming of the lilies, the more awestruck a person might be in simply looking out over this little patch of meadowland.<sup>42</sup>

His ecospirituality builds on this “magic” experience from whence he makes meaning about what is good and what needs to be addressed in the major systems of society, whether they be social, economic, legal, political or environmental.

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<sup>39</sup> Col, 1 17 (NRSV): “In Christ, all things hold together.”

<sup>40</sup> John 1,1: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God”

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Berry, *Christian Future*, 56

<sup>42</sup> Berry, *The Great Work*, 12-13

Berry's spirituality built on this transformative experience of the meadow, which enabled him to call others to moments "akin to ecstasy."<sup>43</sup> This is an intimate experience of the natural world, an experience of the natural world as subject rather than as an object to be exploited.<sup>44</sup> It is even more--it is recognition of the numinous qualities of Earth.<sup>45</sup> It is the basis for our sense of the Divine, a sense that is diminished with the destruction of ecosystems. Berry's spirituality, shaped as it is in an emerging universe, is not only a Gaian sense of Earth as a living system, but also "a mode of being in which not only the divine and the human commune with each other but through which we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us."<sup>46</sup> In this he was influenced by the writings of Teilhard de Chardin who had a deep sense of divine presence within the very structures of the universe. Heaven and Earth embrace in the emergent, evolutionary spirituality of Thomas Berry.

Berry did not consider himself to be a theologian, although his professional training was in world religions. He described himself as a geologist. He called for changes in traditional approaches, and recommended leaving the tradition on the shelf for a while, while one became immersed in the universe story, revisioned one's place in it, and reconnected with nature. Berry's vision might become a reality if we follow his recipe:

We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world, from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the written scriptures to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us, from a spirituality concerned with justice only for humans to a spirituality of justice for the devastated Earth community, from the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman.<sup>47</sup>

### For the Future

Berry was deeply concerned about the fate of Earth. He identified the privileged position of humans and their disconnection from the natural world at the heart of the problem. He urged recognition of the primacy of Earth and universe, and a new intimacy of humans with

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<sup>43</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 132

<sup>44</sup> Berry and Swimme, *The Universe Story*, 243

<sup>45</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 73

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 72

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 133



Earth and universe of which they are part. He saw as valuable and good whatever advanced Earth and universe, including its inhabitants. This was not a merely material vision and strategy, but one that recognised the Divine present in Earth and cosmos as the source of its sacredness and of our encounter with the Divine.

For Berry, children are so important if this vision is to become a reality into the future. His conviction receives poetic expression in this oft quoted verse, *It Takes a Universe*:

The child awakens to a universe.  
The mind of the child to a world of wonder.  
Imagination to a world of beauty.  
Emotions to a world of intimacy.  
It takes a universe to make a child  
both in outer form and inner spirit.  
It takes a universe to educate a child.  
A universe to fulfil a child.  
Each generation presides over the meeting of these two  
In the succeeding generation  
So that the universe is fulfilled in the child,  
And the child is fulfilled in the Universe.  
While the stars ring out in the heavens!<sup>48</sup>

This is the Universe that Berry experienced as sacred. For him, the new story of the Universe is now our sacred story. He urged us to recover the book of nature as the primordial source of God's revelation. As he engaged spiritually in the emerging, evolutionary Universe, Heaven and Earth embraced. Berry can be our exemplar as we embark on or continue the same journey, convinced that we are moving towards a life-giving future for Earth and cosmos.

Berry would have been 100 in 2014. His legacy lives on. He was visionary in his times. His style was exhortatory. He urged people to appreciate the urgency of Earth's situation, and begin the Great Work of the "transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> <http://thomasberry.org/publications-and-media/it-takes-a-universe>, accessed, 14 March, 2017

<sup>49</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 3

Major themes in his ecospirituality weave through contemporary approaches since then, and provide material for an enhanced dialogue with the ecospirituality of Earth Link. It is to this material that I now turn.



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## Chapter 5 Resonances with the Work of Thomas Berry

There are many ways in which contemporary ecospirituality resonates with Berry's approach to ecospirituality, and animates and amplifies it. Some of these themes require further development in this thesis in order to scope a bigger picture of ecospirituality as a dialogue partner with Earth Link. They depict ecospirituality as

- Cosmic in scope and connecting spirit with all of life
- Attentive to the sacred inner dimensions of nature
- Open to transformative, mystical encounters with nature
- Motivated for justice for the whole Earth community

In such an ecospirituality, Heaven and Earth embrace in a way that is relevant in an emerging Universe.

### **Cosmic in Scope and Connecting Spirit with All of Life-**

Ecospirituality in the tradition of Berry is about connections-with self, with others, with the community of life, with the cosmos, with the Sacred, connections which respect differences. It is based on a meaningful and relevant cosmology which connects us not only to our own species but to the whole cosmic reality. After all, we are made of stardust! This bonding with the bigger picture of our existence is the type of spirituality worthy of the name, ecospirituality.

Spirituality is widely ascribed to in contemporary society; however some of it comes out of an anthropocentric worldview,<sup>1</sup> and is quite narcissistic. I agree with Ursula King when she says:

There is a great burgeoning of interest in spirituality, although much of this is rather unwholesome and not at all connected with ideas about the *world as a whole*. Much spirituality is too past-oriented and far too individualistic by being primarily focused on a person's inwardness. This goes together with the modern emphasis on individual self-development and personal fulfilment, based on trends in contemporary psychology. But this is not understanding spirituality *ecologically*, as a dynamic process and vivifying energy connected with *all of life*.<sup>2</sup>

She calls for “a different kind of ‘*spirituality-of-being in-the-world*’, a *spirituality of being connected* to the ordinary life in the world with its daily relationships and responsibilities, a spirituality that makes sense of our environment without and within.”<sup>3</sup> For her an ecologically balanced spirituality is one that is connected to the whole world. This is what Tucker and Grim would call an “anthropocosmic” perspective.<sup>4</sup> In support of her approach, King, a Teilhardian scholar, quotes from his work:

In truth it is impossible to keep one’s gaze constantly fixed on the vast horizons opened out to us by science without feeling the stirrings of an obscure desire to see people drawn closer and closer together by an ever-increasing knowledge and sympathy, until finally, in obedience to some divine attraction, there remains but one heart and one soul on the face of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

This is a far cry from notions that the spiritual life is about me and God, without adequate concern for the implications of deepening such a relationship. I am impressed by the approach of Baker and Morrison who see spirituality as having “an intuitive, contemplative

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<sup>1</sup> Larry L Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), 266. Rasmussen distinguishes strong anthropocentrism as putting “human concerns at the centre of moral ones while intentionally or arbitrarily placing nonhuman interests outside the circle of those concerns” from weak anthropocentrism which “grants intrinsic value to other-than-human nature” although it still gives humans “moral privilege of place in a ranking scheme that translates as dominion.” I reject both of these in this thesis in favour of an anthropocosmic worldview which balances interconnection and distinctiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula King, “One Planet, One Spirit,” *Ecotheology* 10.1 (2005): 71

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 72, italics hers.

<sup>4</sup> John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 56

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past* (London: Collins, 1966), 45

and action oriented character. As a journey, it stresses developing an awareness of self, consideration of the impact on others, and the feeling of universal connectedness.”<sup>6</sup>

Berry’s vision of the interconnectedness of cosmos, Earth, humans and the Sacred bears remarkable similarity to the cosmotheandric principle put forward by Panikkar.<sup>7</sup> As noted in the chapter on context, Panikkar describes the emerging religious consciousness as catholic or cosmotheandric. He presents it as deriving firstly from the primordial or ecumenic moment when humans, nature and the Divine were only vaguely distinguished, and secondly from the humanistic or economic moment when humans differentiated themselves from both nature and the Divine. The emphasis has been, and still largely is, on human individuation. He calls these “kairological”<sup>8</sup> rather than chronological moments, although there is some sequencing within certain cultures. His intuition is that the contemporary emerging cosmotheandric consciousness is one which would “maintain the distinctions of the second moment without forfeiting the unity of the first.”<sup>9</sup> Humans and nature share a common fate. He goes on to explain:

The cosmotheandric principle could be formulated by saying that the divine, the human and the earth--however we may prefer to call them--are the three irreducible dimensions that constitute the real....What this intuition emphasises is that the three dimensions of reality are neither three modes of a monolithic, undifferentiated reality, nor three elements of a pluralistic system. There is rather one, though intrinsically threefold, relation which manifests the ultimate constitution of reality.<sup>10</sup>

Panikkar sees the collapse of the humanistic or economic moment and the emergence of the cosmotheandric as an opportunity:

Modern Man has killed an isolated and insular God, contemporary earth is killing a merciless and rapacious man, and the Gods seem to have deserted both Man and Cosmos. But having touched bottom we see signs of resurrection. At the root of the ecological sensibility, there is a mystical strain; at the bottom of Man’s self-

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Baker and Robin Morrison, “Environmental Spirituality: Grounding our Response to Climate Change,” *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 4.2 (2008), 41

<sup>7</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience, Emerging Religious Consciousness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993)

<sup>8</sup> Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience*, 20. Panikkar does not define the term “kairological” but indicates that such moments have a “temporal character and even a certain historical sequence, although they do not follow the sequential pattern of linear and quantifiable time logically or even dialectically.”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 54

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60,

understanding is a need for the infinite and un-understandable. And at the very heart of the divine is an urge for time, space and Man.<sup>11</sup>

He sees it also as a time for reconciling different approaches to ecospirituality within the religious traditions, not in any sense of blurring differences, but in realising that they are all part of an integrated whole embracing, in his terms, Man, Nature and the Divine, or in my terms, Heaven and Earth. Not everyone would go along with Panikkar's blatant use of the "divine," or my use of "Heaven" as one of the vital elements of the whole vision, yet there is a growing sense of nature as sacred in a metaphysical sense that calls forth our respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community.

### **Attentive to the Sacred Inner Dimension of Nature**

As noted in the introduction to the previous chapter there is a range of approaches to ecospirituality from a sense of Earth as animate to that of Earth as sacred, embodying Mystery, however that might be named and understood. There are various points of entry into this awareness. Baker and Morrison differentiate *Environmentally Motivated Spirituality* in which experiences in nature transcend the material environment, and *Spiritually Motivated Environmentalism* where spirituality provides guidance and motivation to work on environmental causes.<sup>12</sup> In other words, immersion in nature can be spiritual, and spiritual experience can lead to greater environmental involvement. Berry also pointed to the mutuality of immersion and spirituality when he said that "recovery of the capacity for subjective communion with the earth is a consequence and a cause of a newly emerging spirituality."<sup>13</sup>

The awareness of the sacred inner dimension of nature is found in many places and people. Taylor drew on a wide range of interviews before putting forward his description of nature religion in which he identifies the sense of nature as sacred, having intrinsic value, and due reverent care as ecological values and core components of dark green religion.<sup>14</sup> These and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 77

<sup>12</sup> Baker and Morrison, "Environmental Spirituality", 41

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Berry, "The Spirituality of the Earth" in ed Charles Birch, William Eaken and Jay B McDaniel, *Liberating Life; Contemporary Approaches in Ecotheological Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 158

<sup>14</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 10

related values were identified in a study by Hedlund-de Witt<sup>15</sup> whose sample included nature-lovers/environmentalists and spiritual practitioners in Victoria, Canada. These people were already demonstrating environmentally responsible behaviour. She identified three distinct pathways to environmental responsibility: profound encounters with nature, contemporary spirituality, and some blend of the two. While distinct paths, they do interact with each other. In her interviews with the participants, and in her subsequent analysis of the data, she found that, at the level of values, they had far more commonalities than differences. Notable for this thesis is her evidence that they shared and demonstrated the following values: presence (having a sense of nature as alive and animated), interconnectedness (having a sense of oneness, wholeness, unity), and self-expansion (having a strong sense of meaning and purpose). This research is a valuable addition to the case study approach of Taylor in his study of nature religions.

There is an Australian aboriginal sense of sacred presence in the whole of reality. It is impossible for European Australians to enter into the deep aboriginal sense of land as spiritual, but it is salutary for us to learn from it. The lived experience of the whole Earth community as sacred is expressed poetically in the poem *Ah, White Man, Have You Any Sacred Sites?* which was written by the Australian indigenous poet, Denis Kevans:

Sacred means that, sacred, that's a place where spirits rise,  
With the rainbow wings of sunset, on the edge of paradise,  
Sacred, that's my father, that's my daughter, that's my son,  
Sacred,... where the dreaming whispers hope for everyone.<sup>16</sup>

In the rest of the poem he says, with great frustration, that there is minimal evidence of the sense of sacredness in the pollution of the rivers, in the extraction of bauxite, and in the empty cathedrals. He calls us beyond our present practices and spirituality.

Someone who has shared a special quality of Aboriginal people which she refers to as Dadirri is Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann from the Daly River in the Northern Territory. She

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<sup>15</sup> Annick Hedlund-de Witt, "Pathways to Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension of Nature Experience," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, 7.2 (2013):154-186

<sup>16</sup> Denis Kevans, from the book: "Ah, White Man, Have You Any Sacred Sites?," 1985 [ISBN0 9593 073]

speaks about this special quality of her people which is both an experience of the sacred inner dimension of nature and the practice that gives rise to it:

I believe it is the most important. It is our most unique gift. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language this quality is called dadirri. It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. We call on it and it calls to us. This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for. It is something like what you call "contemplation." When I experience dadirri, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is its listening quality and quiet, still awareness.

She speaks, too, of another part of Dadirri which is the quiet stillness and the waiting:

Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons. We watch the moon in each of its phases. We wait for the rain to fill our rivers and water the thirsty earth. When twilight comes, we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun. We watch the bush foods and wait for them to ripen before we gather them. We wait for our young people as they grow, stage by stage, through their initiation ceremonies. When a relation dies, we wait a long time with the sorrow. We own our grief and allow it to heal slowly. We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and our meetings. The right people must be present. Everything must be done in the proper way. Careful preparations must be made. We don't mind waiting, because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony. We don't like to hurry. There is nothing more important than what we are attending to. There is nothing more urgent that we must hurry away for.<sup>17</sup>

We Australians are privileged to share country with a deeply spiritual people. For them, the parts and the whole are intertwined and have always been so. Their sense of spirit is embedded in place, their spirit creates from within Earth, and is always intimately present. Indigenous awareness of the sacred inner dimension of nature is something that we Westerners need to take to heart as we shape the ecospirituality for our times. Christianity, as one of the major monotheistic religions, needs to regain this awareness.

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<sup>17</sup> Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, "Dadirri, The Spring Within" in Eileen Farrelly, *Dadirri, The Spring Within* (Darwin, NT: Terry Knight and Associates, 2003), ix



## Open to Transformative, Mystical Encounters with Nature

Encounters with the whole Earth community as sacred are mystical experiences which are often unmediated. Such encounters can be described as “the experience of a reality within or beneath the immediate material reality, and the experience of a oneness that includes and encloses everyone and everything.”<sup>18</sup> At other times they are prepared for by immersion in place and space, and/or by the cultivation of ecospiritual rituals and practices. Such experiences are often accompanied by emotions of awe and wonder. It is to these that I will now turn as I continue to flesh out resonances with Berry, and the light that this aspect can shine on the ecospirituality of Earth Link.

### Place and Space

Following on from the indigenous gift of Dadirri explored above is the strong indigenous sense of place as the medium for transformative, mystical encounters. I am moved by the words of Elsie Bancroft, Goori woman of the Gumbaingerr nation in the mid-north coast of New South Wales, as she reflects on the significance of her place:

*Sense of Place, they told me  
as I was standing there  
and I was taken back  
through the heat and the glare  
to when I was, oh, so small,  
barefoot and unaware,  
that wherever I am in Australia  
Sense of Place is there.*

*I love this land, Australia,  
land of my birth.  
My ancestors had sense of place  
when they were here on earth.  
I roam around Australia,  
bushland that I know.  
With me is sense of place*

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<sup>18</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 286

wherever I may go.  
The love of being Aussie is  
not the colour of your face.  
It's the feeling deep within  
that gives you  
Sense of Place.<sup>19</sup>

That “feeling deep within” is something that is sought in the ecospiritual journey through immersion in the landscape.

Place and space are important in ecospirituality. They are variables in the encounter. This is very different from the disconnection, the “autism” to use a phrase of Berry, which has marked the separation of people from nature during preceding centuries. This separation is seen to be a source of the abuse that humans are wreaking on planet Earth and the cosmos. It needs to be addressed if an ethic based on kinship is to take us into a different future.

Tucker and Grimm talk about the important role of religions as “weaving humans into the vibrant processes of Earth and cosmos.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, immediacy of contact with Earth and cosmos is an important aspect of ecospirituality. In the preface to *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Schneider says, “In our experience of the sacred the ‘where’ is as determinative as the ‘how’.”<sup>21</sup> Lane cogently makes the point that “religious experience is invariably ‘placed’ experience and that those places are frequently the most ordinary ones entered anew with awe.”<sup>22</sup> Lane posits four axioms to assist us in our understanding of place as sacred:

- Sacred place is not chosen, it chooses.
- Sacred place is an ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.
- Sacred place can be tread upon without being entered.
- The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal—at times quest is for centredness, and at others driven out from that locale.<sup>23</sup>

In ecospirituality we can be seized by the place and by the experience. We may or may not enter into relationship with a sacred place. In some cases, what could have become a Thou-

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<sup>19</sup> I have used this reflection over many years, and am unsure of its origins.

<sup>20</sup> John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 11

<sup>21</sup> Belden C Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), iv

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 28

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

place for us remains an It-place, shorn of any bond of union.<sup>24</sup> What stands out for me in Lane's study is his sense that the ordinariness of places can become extraordinary. In his most inspired analysis, he urges us to "binary vision"--a vision that can hold the ambivalence of seeing and valuing the ordinary, while recognising that "the ordinary is no longer at all what it appears."<sup>25</sup> He acknowledges differing cultural and religious traditions about place, and contrasts the Navajo Indian sense of spirit present in location with the Hebrew sense that location is important only if it lends itself to access to the encounter with Spirit.<sup>26</sup> He hails the message of Incarnation and of sacrament in the Christian tradition as the capacity to bind together the ordinary and the extraordinary. It is not about looking beyond the material, nor about imaging the sacred as subsumed into the material, but the capacity to hold the ordinary and the extraordinary in creative tension. Lane stands in the panentheistic tradition, and evidences a deep respect and reverence for sacred place.

In cultivating a sense of place, a receptive attitude to Earth is very important. It is about being open, attentive and aware. Panikkar refers to different religious and cultural traditions and how they understand looking and hearing. He favours the activity of hearing as one that where we are receptive at every level of our being. It is an activity of holding ourselves in readiness for the sound to penetrate us, and for the meaning to be understood holistically. By contrast, a person is more active in the process of looking, and insight is the result of the mind reaching understanding.<sup>27</sup> We need both an active and a receptive mode, and the capacity for what McFague calls a "loving eye."

One person who embodies the personal capacity to deeply encounter place and space in dialogue with his scriptural insights is Norm Habel, a retired scripture scholar who has specialised in Wisdom literature. He was the instigator of the Earth Bible project, and more recently has written *Rainbow of Mysteries, Meeting the Sacred in Nature*.<sup>28</sup> This more personal reflection verges on the mystical. He draws on his scriptural knowledge while being grounded in landscapes that he knows and loves. He reminds us of the need to acquire some

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<sup>24</sup> cf Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1966), 7

<sup>25</sup> Lane, *Landscapes*, 38

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>27</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *Cosmotheandric*, 148

<sup>28</sup> Norman Habel, *Rainbow of Mysteries, Meeting the Sacred in Nature* (Kelowna, BC: Copper House, 2012)

ecological knowledge of place in order to listen to what the land is saying. His is the insight expressed powerfully in the words of Job 12, 7-10, which is also the cornerstone of the recent work of Johnson whose ecotheological work forms a major part of this thesis:

Ask the birds and they will teach you;  
The birds of the air, and they will tell you;  
Or the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;  
And the fish of the sea and they will declare to you.  
Who among all of these does not know  
That the hand of the Lord has done this?  
In God's hand is the life of every living thing  
And the breath of all humankind.

### Religious Experience and Emotion

Ecospirituality has the potential to open us out to surprise and to the unpredictable, to awe and to wonder. In this vein, I savour the study by Fuller on the relationship between wonder and spirituality.<sup>29</sup> He studies embodied spirituality, and explores the emotion of wonder for its natural connection to religious experience. In his words, wonder is “an emotional response that promotes passive, receptive modes of attention in the presence of something unexpected rather than fight or flight responses.” Wonder is about receptivity and curiosity about what is possible. It disconnects us for a time from the pressures of our capitalist and consumer society, and takes us into another realm:

First, wonder is an emotion linked with approach and affiliation rather than avoidance. Wonder motivates attention and motivates a quest for increased connection and belongingness with the putative source of unexpected displays of life, beauty, or truth. Wonder is thus somewhat rare among the emotions in its functional capacity to motivate persons to venture outward into increased rapport with the environment. Second, wonder awakens our mental capacity for abstract, higher-order thought. Indeed, wonder seems to direct our cognitive activities to identify causality, agency, and purpose in ways that are not directly connected with our biological survival.

Fuller sees a natural fit between wonder and spirituality and religion. He quotes Dawkins whose sense of awe and wonder in the experience of scientific exploration of the natural world is very strong, and whose protest about linking awe and wonder with religion is even

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Fuller, “Wonder and Spirituality,” *The Journal of Religion*, 86, 3 (2006): 370

stronger. This emotional response may be an important shared experience among scientific naturalists such as Dawkins and those coming from a range of spiritual and religious approaches.

### **Ecospiritual Practice**

Moments of mystical encounter can be anticipated and prepared for, even if there is no controlling when ordinary moments become extraordinary. There is a wealth of material coming from the various approaches to ecospirituality and from within different religious and spiritual traditions. There seems to me to be much crossing over of these boundaries, and a garnering of riches from the different sources. Ultimately if one is to remain grounded, one needs to be discerning, and also not overlook treasures of the Christian tradition which may have become lost or put aside in the pursuit of a more other-worldly spirituality.

Gottlieb in his book on *Spirituality* pays considerable attention to spiritual practice.<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note the influence of the eastern religious practices on the emergence of evolutionary spiritualities in the United States of America and beyond. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, who now lives in France, has shared many mindfulness practices in ways that are accessible to Westerners.<sup>31</sup> Aurobindo (1872-1950), an Indian activist turned philosopher and religious leader, is recognised as a foundational influence in linking evolutionary perspectives and spiritual practice. Aurobindo continues to influence conscious evolutionaries<sup>32</sup> who seriously embrace meditation in order to release their controlling egos into a state of greater openness to all of reality.<sup>33</sup>

Christianity could seem impoverished when compared with the strong Yoga traditions of Hinduism, and the mindfulness practices of Buddhism. Granted, Christianity, along with

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<sup>30</sup> Roger Gottlieb, *Spirituality, What it is and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See Chapter 6 which is entitled "Practice, Practice, Practice."

<sup>31</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2008). This contains a collection of meditations which promote practices such as mindful breathing and contemplative walking.

<sup>32</sup> Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries, Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea* (New York, Harper Perennial, 2012), 289. Phipps refers to conscious evolutionaries as those who are aware that they must "wake up and choose to lend (our) conscious support to the most important endeavour there is—the conscious evolution of our species."

<sup>33</sup> Allan Combs *The Radiance of Being, Understanding the Grand Integral Vision; Living the Integral Life* (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 2002), 104-114

most of the world's religious traditions, has a long history of deprecating the natural world, but there have always been exceptions. As noted a little earlier, Tucker and Grim recognise that religions at their best have "woven humans into nature with rituals, symbols and ethical practices."<sup>34</sup>

At the individual level, meditation, often on a sacred text, is a practice that features prominently in the lives of religious communities and individuals. In contemporary ecospiritual practice, this "lectio divina" is being revisioned such that attention is directed to the "book" of nature. In the Christian monastic traditions, monks organise their days around regular prayer which acknowledge the hours of the day. They begin their day at dawn with Matins or Morning Prayer, follow it up with Lauds/Prime at 6am, and Terce, Sext, None which are three, six and nine hours later. They mark the transition from daylight to dusk with Vespers, and gathered for Compline before they retire for the evening. Granted, such a schedule fits best with a rural or semi-rural lifestyle where the hours in-between are often spent tending gardens. Adapting such practices to the lives of those who go out to work for most of the day needs to be creative so that it is not more exhausting than spiritual.

The Christian Liturgical Year is connected to the seasons of the year, but as experienced in the northern hemisphere, so there is a continual challenge to adapt as far as possible to local circumstances. The Eucharistic rituals which mark out these seasons of the liturgical year are another way of "weaving humans into the vibrant processes of Earth and cosmos."<sup>35</sup> Sacramental traditions in general begin with the stuff of Earth and remind us to see it with new eyes, eyes that recognise God's presence in the cleansing waters of Baptism, the sacred fire of Confirmation, and the soothing oil of the Anointing of the Sick. While recognising that it is important not to confine our understanding of sacrament to those formally defined in the various traditions, I will consider for a moment Eucharist as one sacrament in which Heaven and Earth embrace. It is usually celebrated in community where those gathered stand before and look into the eyes of God, even as they acknowledge their own limitations and weaknesses. Surely such behaviour includes their use and sometimes abuse of created

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<sup>34</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, 11

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

reality. They give thanks, “Eucharistia” being the Greek word for thanksgiving. They give thanks for “the transformation God has wrought in our lives and in our world,”<sup>36</sup> a transformation that acknowledges our human and ecological frailty, and our responsibility to “advance the peace and salvation of all the world.”<sup>37</sup> Those assembled gather as if at a meal bringing bread and wine, “fruit of the Earth and work of human hands,” which they begin to see not merely as food and drink, but as symbol and sign of God’s presence among them. They eat of this food and drink, and so enter “more deeply into communion with the things of the earth and the products of human work.”<sup>38</sup> This is surely a powerful ritual in which Heaven and Earth embrace, a ritual with the potential for a spiritual experience that goes beyond the dualism of matter and spirit into the oneness of all. This is captured most powerfully in these words from the “Eucharistic Prayer of the Cosmos” composed by O’Laoire:

(So) it is a covenant between us.  
It is the final covenant.  
A covenant to dissolve the illusions of separation;  
a covenant that opens your eyes  
to the realization  
that we are not separate from God;  
that we are not separate from each other;  
and that we are not separate from nature.

This remembering will take away  
the sin of living in a state of separation.  
Whenever you celebrate this ritual,  
remember that.<sup>39</sup>

He locates his Eucharistic prayer within a profound and poetic sense of the emerging, evolving Universe, and celebrates “the exquisitely choreographed dance between the ineffable transcendence of God and her imminent creation.”<sup>40</sup> In similar vein, Teilhard de

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<sup>36</sup> Gerard Moore, *Eucharist and Justice*, Australian Catholic Social Justice Series, No 39

<sup>37</sup> From text of Eucharistic Prayer III of the Roman Catholic liturgy

<sup>38</sup> Moore, *Eucharist and Justice*, 27

<sup>39</sup> Sean O’Laoire, “Eucharistic Prayer of the Cosmos,” accessed 14 March, 2017

<http://spiritsinspace.com/liturgy.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Chardin celebrated Eucharist in the steppes of Asia, without bread, wine or altar, but with a profound sense of the interconnection of Heaven and Earth:

On the horizon, the sun has just touched with light the outermost fringe of the eastern sky. Beneath this moving sheet of fire, the loving surface of earth wakes and trembles, and once again begins its fearful travail. Into my chalice I shall pour all the sap which is to be pressed out this day from earth's fruits.<sup>41</sup>

Across different religious and spiritual traditions it is becoming commonplace to enter into ecospiritual spaces using rituals that acknowledge the importance of the elements of earth, air, fire, and water. While I consider it important to relate the elemental realities to the physical environment in which any ritual takes place, Tucker and Grim offer some generic insights into the connection of persons and the elements. For them, air and sky have an orienting function, earth has a grounding function, while water is nurturing, and fire is transforming.<sup>42</sup> In the words of one such ritual, the elements have the power to "teach us and show us the way."<sup>43</sup>

Some other rituals are more intentional in their efforts to raise consciousness of our place in an emerging evolutionary world. In the Cosmic Walk developed by Miriam MacGillis, participants are invited to walk the spiral laid out on the ground, using a scale which gives a sense of the timing of key events in the unfolding story of the universe. Deep ecologists such as John Seed and Joanna Macy have also developed rituals which facilitate a sense of identification with nature and other species.<sup>44</sup>

Ecospiritual practices afford us the opportunity to experience the embrace of Heaven and Earth. They can open up to new ways of seeing reality, and of hearing its cries for our attention.

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<sup>41</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*, Ch 1, accessed 14 March, 2017.

[https://archive.org/stream/HymnOfTheUniverse/Hymn\\_of\\_the\\_Universe#page/n7/mode/2up](https://archive.org/stream/HymnOfTheUniverse/Hymn_of_the_Universe#page/n7/mode/2up)

<sup>42</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Religion and Ecology*, 38

<sup>43</sup> Chinook Blessing, accessed 14 March, 2017

[http://www.inhername.com/honor/devotions\\_chinook.html](http://www.inhername.com/honor/devotions_chinook.html)

<sup>44</sup> Joanna Macy, *Coming Back to Life, Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 1998). Macy designs processes that guide participants into conscious participation in what she calls the Great Turning, that is, into a sense of our identity as a species among other species.



## Motivated for Justice for the whole Earth community

Ecospiritual awareness is driven by the urgency of the environmental crisis. It has the potential to be the wellspring from which one derives motivation and sustenance to work for justice for the whole Earth community. There is a virtue approach to ecospirituality which is particularly relevant here. Gottlieb, its main proponent, has been influenced by Hinduism in which the embrace of Heaven and Earth is sought through living a virtuous life. Gottlieb is a prominent voice in linking spirituality, environmentalism and progressive politics. He devotes most of his book, *Spirituality*, to exploring why one *should* live a spiritual life. He sums up his book with the response that he received early in his life from Yogi Bhajan who said to him that he would never be happy, never have real peace of mind or serenity, unless he embraced a spiritual life, not out of any compulsion, but out of the option for happiness.<sup>45</sup> Gottlieb defines spirituality as “the belief that living by spiritual virtues (mindfulness, acceptance, gratitude, compassion, loving connection to other people, nature, and God) is the only way to achieve enduring contentment and goodness in the face of life's challenges,” and says further that “these virtues will benefit both the person who manifests them and everyone around her.”<sup>46</sup>

Gottlieb moves to a different level in the chapter on Nature. Having spent much time earlier in the book drawing on his extensive knowledge and experience of all of the religious traditions without labouring their metaphysical dimensions, he generalises from the conclusions reached about personal spirituality:

(Thus) nature spirituality in the modern age contains within itself the seeds not only of a personal but also of a social transformation. If the personal ego can make us sick as individuals, our collective ego of reckless industrialization and unrestrained consumption can make us ecologically sick as a society. If yoga and meditation are helpful responses to individual maladies of modernity such as high blood pressure and anxiety, so a spiritually oriented relation to nature may be our best response to the collective maladies of pollution and climate change.<sup>47</sup>

Gottlieb's approach serves as a reminder that the starting point for both spirituality and environmentalism is the self. A healthy and virtuous individual is likely to be a better

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<sup>45</sup> Gottlieb, *Spirituality*, Introduction, 2/4

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., Chapter 1, Spirit in Motion, 1/23

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Chapter 9, Spirituality and Nature, 3/24

member of the Earth community. An individual approach cannot be isolated from the various movements for justice for the whole Earth community, and needs to be in solidarity with those who are most affected.

Rasmussen as an ethicist extends the work of Thomas Berry with his development of the concept of an Earth community, which I have adopted in this thesis. He underlines the place of humans within the Earth community and the responsibility that emerges from that. He argues for “a seismic shift in the moral universe and in our industrial/post-industrial way of life. It is a shift from the encapsulated human self and human society to the ecosphere as center, boundary, and subject; from human justice to creation justice; and from my unbounded human community to the unbounded community of life.”<sup>48</sup> He advocates “explicit attention to the primal elements—earth, air, fire, water—as morally significant.”<sup>49</sup> Rasmussen’s ethical vision of an Earth-honouring faith is built on Luther’s notion that the finite contains the infinite. This provides the basis for valuing Earth as sacred and sacramental. Writing as a Christian monotheist, he draws on Luther’s theology of the cross to develop an Earth ethic based on entering into the pathos of the Earth community, and acting from a position of empathy. He calls for a conversion to Earth, a theme taken up by Papal calls to ecological conversion. These are themes which will recur in Johnson’s ecotheology.

In like vein, Panikkar points to the growing intimacy and sensitivity to nature evident in the ecological movement as a model of what is needed for the embrace of Heaven and Earth. There is a resurgence of nature based religions such as the Celtic tradition, and there is a new found respect for indigenous traditions. In the public arena, the United Nations have declared International Mother Earth Day on 22 April, and Ecuador has integrated the rights of Mother Nature into its constitution.<sup>50</sup> It is a good sign that the global community gathered in Paris in December, 2015, and set binding targets for the reduction of carbon emissions.

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<sup>48</sup> Rasmussen, *Earth Honoring Faith*, 195

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 94

<sup>50</sup> At the same time and adversely, most economic systems drive us into futures which place low priority on social and environmental concerns. In many ways this is symptomatic of clashing worldviews existing side by side. For a new worldview to gain traction, its various components, social, environmental and ecological, need to be in balance.

Decisions which respect the whole Earth community are very difficult to make within the dominant paradigm, but there are signs of hope.

Thomas Berry was visionary, and called individuals, communities and systems to what now might be called ecological conversion. In this chapter I have looked at ways in which contemporary ecospiritual understandings and practices and ethical schemas resonate with that vision. Berry did not engage extensively with theological questions about the nature of God, or the implications of evolutionary emergence for our understandings of God, Earth, cosmos and humans, and their interrelatedness. That requires a more focussed look at contemporary ecotheology which I will do using the material of Elizabeth Johnson. This next focus will provide another rich dialogue partner for Earth Link.

## **PART 4 DIALOGUE WITH ECOTHEOLOGY**



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## Chapter 6 –Seeds of Johnson’s Ecotheology

“Nature is one of the three main pillars of theology, along with God and humanity. What is needed now, I am convinced, is yet one more turn, a fully inclusive turn to the heavens and the earth, a return to cosmology, in order to restore fullness of vision and get theology back on the track from which it fell off a few hundred years ago.”<sup>1</sup>

In choosing to dialogue with the work of Elizabeth Johnson, I am engaging with someone who recognises, as noted in the opening quotation, that there are three main pillars of theology–nature, God and humanity. The embrace of those three is the focus of this thesis in its exploration of how to engage spiritually in an emerging Universe.

Johnson has been on the edges of my consciousness since the publication in 1992 of her ground-breaking work, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. In retrospect, I wonder if, in the process of my making a retreat around this work, the seeds were sown for the path that led to the formation of Earth Link. Liberated by her “freeing” of the symbol of God, I remember walking in the National Park near Jamberoo Abbey in New South Wales with the loud and repeated request to Divine Mystery to “speak to me of God.” I was startled when a rainbow lorikeet flashed by, quite close to me, and dazzled me with its vibrant colour and vitality. That was unexpected, and not to be ignored, even if I did not know fully its significance at the time, or know it even now for that matter!

In taking Johnson as an exemplar in the field of ecotheology, I will first explore her work as an example of changes in theology culminating in her comprehensive ecotheological work *Ask the Beasts, Darwin and the God of Love*, which was published in 2014. That work will

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, CTSA PROCEEDINGS 51 (1996), 5

be explored in depth in Chapters 7-10, establishing Johnson as the major dialogue partner in this thesis.

### Something is Changing

The development in Johnson's theological work bears witness to changes in theological understanding in certain sectors since the 1990s. The reaction to it also bears some scrutiny, because Johnson's popularity and her condemnation indicate both its timeliness and its threat to patriarchal power structures, especially in the Catholic Church.

Johnson, who is two years older than me, was born in 1941, and entered the Sisters of St Joseph of Brentwood, Long Island, New York. Her first degree was in science, and she took out a Master of Arts at Manhattan College around the same time, 1964. She began her professional life as a teacher. Johnson was influenced by the creative theological ferment of the second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church, and her doctoral work was in theology. In 1981, she was one of the first women to take out a Doctorate at Catholic University of America. It was entitled "Analogy/Doxology and their Connection with Christology in the Thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg." She joined the faculty of theology at that university where she remained for ten years, before joining the theology department of Fordham University in New York, where she continues to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson's major publications and presentations that are of particular relevance for this thesis include:

1992: *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*

1993: "Women, Earth and Creator Spirit," Madaleva Lecture in Spirituality

1996: "Turn to the Heavens and the Earth: Retrieval of the Cosmos in Theology,"

Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America

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<sup>2</sup> This summary is drawn from Patricia Fox, *God as Communion, John Zizioulas and Elizabeth Johnson and the Retrieval of the Symbol of the Triune God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 10-12

2007: *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*

2014: *Ask the Beasts, Darwin and the God of Love*

2015: *Abounding in Kindness, Writings for the People of God*

### Themes in Johnson's earlier work

There are seeds in the earlier work of Johnson which come to fruition in her specifically ecotheological work, *Ask The Beasts*. In *SHE WHO IS*, she stresses, with some urgency, that "the freeing of both women and men from debilitating reality models and social roles, the birthing of new forms of saving relationship to all of creation, and indeed the very viability of the Christian tradition for present and coming generations"<sup>3</sup> are simultaneously at stake. Her diagnosis is most clearly stated in *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* when she explores the interconnecting injustice of the marginalisation of women and of the destruction of the environment, linking them to the neglect of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> In order to track some of the development in her thought, I will begin with *SHE WHO IS*.

### *SHE WHO IS*

*SHE WHO IS* is predominantly about the "human flourishing of women,"<sup>5</sup> but it is inclusive of nature as a beneficiary of "speaking rightly of God."<sup>6</sup> Johnson's stated aim in *SHE WHO IS* is "to speak a good word about the mystery of God recognisable within the contours of Christian faith that will serve the emancipatory praxis of women and men, to the benefit of all creation, both human beings and the earth." She does this by drawing on "the new language of Christian feminist theology as well as on the traditional language of Scripture and classical theology, all of which codify religious insights,"<sup>7</sup> in order to develop liberating speech about God.

The structure of *SHE WHO IS* reflects Johnson's methodology, a liberationist approach which Fox identifies as the basic methodology of feminist theology. This theological approach is

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 15

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (hereafter *WECS*) (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 2

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 17

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

inductive rather than speculative. It emphasises that “faith’s quest for understanding must be rooted in the seed bed of, and must lead in turn to salvation in the concrete.”<sup>8</sup> Its stages are (1) critical analysis of inherited oppression; (2) the search for alternative wisdom and suppressed history; (3) the work of constructive new interpretation of tradition in tandem with the experience of women’s lives.<sup>9</sup> As it is also the basic methodology of her ecological work, *Ask the Beasts*, and of this thesis, it can serve as the framework for this exploration of her earlier work insofar as it foreshadows her major ecotheological work.

### *(1) Critical analysis of inherited oppression*

Drawing on the work of Radford Reuther, Johnson identifies the paradigm of oppression against women as the basic model for “projecting views of basic inferiority onto other subjugated groups, lower classes, conquered races, and nonhuman creatures.”<sup>10</sup> In her understanding, the androcentric paradigm, where male norms dominate over oppressed groups and species, is the underlying model of dominance wherever it occurs. But things are changing, and women are claiming their own agency and forging a new identity.

Johnson’s particular focus in *SHE WHO IS* is on women’s experience of conversion, and the way they speak about God. Johnson builds up to “speaking rightly of God”<sup>11</sup> with a critique of current speech about God. She joins the wider movement which calls for the demise of classical theism whose speech about God is increasingly being recognised as “humanly oppressive and religiously idolatrous.”<sup>12</sup> Johnson joins in constructive developments where speech about God is “being reshaped to include intrinsic relatedness to the world, alliance with human flourishing, liberating care for the poor, and greater mystery,”<sup>13</sup> rather than being preoccupied defending the monotheism of God, and God’s differentiation from the world. She argues that liberationist, feminist theology can offer this. Even in this work with its focus on women’s oppression, the subjugation of all species is noted, and liberation sought for them as well. She also seeks “speech about God in which the fullness of female

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<sup>8</sup> Fox, *God as Communion*, 17

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 28

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 21



humanity as well as of male humanity and cosmic reality may serve as divine symbols in equivalent ways.”<sup>14</sup>

## *(2) The search for alternative wisdom and suppressed history*

In *SHE WHO IS*, the first source for alternative wisdom is the experience of women. Awakened by social and cultural developments in the latter half of the nineteenth century, many women have been emboldened to reject their subordination and claim their own identity. Their fierce loving of self gives new depth and impetus to their fierce loving of God. Religiously they recognise something integrating about their experience of God:

Rather than being a distinct and separate experience, it transpires as the ultimate depth and radical essence of every personal experience such as love, fidelity, loneliness and death. In the experience of oneself as the very context of our own self-presence at these depths...we also experience and are grasped by the holy mystery of God.<sup>15</sup>

Depth encounters such as these enable women to experience themselves as made in the image of God and in the image of Christ. They move beyond male gender bound images of God and of Christ to a recognition that the core of this image resides in “coherence with the narrative shape of his compassionate liberating life in the world, through the power of the Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> This calls them to the mission of respect and liberation for all of God’s creation made in the image of God. All is sacrament of God’s presence.

Johnson searches scripture and its trajectories for emancipatory speech about God. She exposes the limitations of an over-dependence on Jesus’ use of the image of God as Father. The biblical images of Spirit and Mother are explored, and the image of God as Wisdom or Sophia is identified and explored as the “most developed personification of God’s presence and activity in the Hebrew Scripture.”<sup>17</sup> This retrieval provides “startling female personification of the mystery of God in powerful and close engagement with the world.”<sup>18</sup>

The third arena in which Johnson searches for alternate wisdom and suppressed history is classical theology. She affirms unequivocally the incomprehensibility of God. She critiques

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 47

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 65

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 87

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 100

any notion of revelation as capable of manifesting God in God's fullness. There are always limits to our knowing, but not to our loving. And yet we search for language with which to explore God's mystery, and Johnson argues that "language about divine mystery in male terms...is as legitimate and as inadequate as female and cosmic terms to express what is ultimately inexpressible."<sup>19</sup> While her exploration of the use of female terms in this work predominates, there are references also to the use of cosmic images, and to these I will return.

Having established earlier in *SHE WHO IS* the limits of the symbol of "God," and her intent to reshape it within this new context, Johnson draws attention away from any literal interpretation of the word to its usefulness as analogical speech which points towards our intuited sense of God. In the same way that Belden Lane referred to nature as revealing yet concealing God,<sup>20</sup> Johnson writes of the inevitability of speaking of God in terms that derive from our human experience, even as we are mindful of the incomprehensibility of God. In this context Johnson introduces by means of a simile the notion of a relationship of participation:

Similar to the way fire which is hot by nature makes wood hot by setting it on fire, the whole world exists by being lit by the fire of being itself, which people call God. Every creature that exists does so by through participation in that fire, the mystery of divine being.<sup>21</sup>

Johnson explores the sources for language about God, and affirms what she then describes as the "polyphony resulting from the human search for appropriate names for God."<sup>22</sup> There are treasures in the tradition, often hidden, and sometimes distorted, which embolden her to speak differently about God as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Mother-Sophia. She admits that these are biased towards the feminine as a counter balance to the predominance of the masculine, and she looks to the time when God can be called by many names.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 112

<sup>20</sup> Beldon C Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred, Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 39

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 114

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 120

There are some foundational retrievals within Johnson's constructive new interpretation of the tradition which have continuing relevance for her later ecotheological work, and it to these that I now turn for their elucidation of a Trinitarian theology that underlines God's solidarity with the cosmos. .

### *(3) The work of constructive new interpretation of tradition*

Johnson embarks on a Trinitarian theology intended to enable right speech about God and facilitate conversion for women, excluded as they are by the dominance of male language about God. She begins with a treatment of Spirit-Sophia, then turns to Jesus-Sophia and Mother-Sophia.

#### *Spirit-Sophia*

Johnson intended to follow the traditional sequence of naming the Trinity, but came to a point where that order needed to change in order to develop "a theology of the triune God that sets out from the experience of spirit; beginning with the interpreted experience of the Spirit and thinking through to the living triune God."<sup>23</sup> She explains the ordering that follows from experience:

There is a sense in which we have to be touched first by a love that is not hostile (the "third" person), before we are moved to enquire after a definitive historical manifestation of this love (the "second" person), or point from there toward the mystery of the primordial source of all (the "first" person)."<sup>24</sup>

In her pursuit of right speech about God, Johnson constructs a new interpretation of Trinity as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Mother-Sophia. In her treatment of Spirit Sophia, she points out that

There is no exclusive zone, no special realm, which alone may be called religious. Rather since Spirit is the creator and giver of life, life itself with all its complexities, abundance, threat, misery and joy, become a primary mediation of the dialectic of presence and absence of divine mystery.<sup>25</sup>

This opens the way to an understanding of different modes of revelation, or in her words, "the experiences that mediate holy mystery."<sup>26</sup> These include personal and interpersonal

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 122

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.,122

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 125

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,125

experience and community encounters, and historically have always included the natural world, not in any romantic way, but with due recognition of both the “Alps and Chernobyl” moments, the moments of grandeur and of devastation. Early Christian images drew on nature to express the intuition about the nearness and the otherness of God, and to point to a Trinitarian framework which gave meaning to experience. As Johnson points out:

Whether the Spirit be pictured as the warmth and light given by the sun, the life-giving water from the spring, or the flower filled with seeds from the root, what we are actually signifying is God drawing near and passing by in vivifying, sustaining, renewing and liberating power in the midst of historical struggle.<sup>27</sup>

Johnson argues that the forgetting of the Spirit and the underdeveloped state of pneumatology come at too high a price because what is being neglected is “nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world in its history of love and disaster.”<sup>28</sup> The field of the Spirit is all embracing, and the core of her analysis is that this forgetting underlies both the marginalisation of women and the devastation of Earth. The Spirit groans in the face of abuse out of her concern for the wellbeing of creation. Without interfering in the processes of nature, Spirit is at work:

Like a baker woman she keeps on kneading the leaven of kindness and truth, justice and peace into the thick dough of the world, until the whole loaf rises.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson explores analogies for this intimate presence of Spirit who remains at all times incomprehensible yet in relationships which could be likened to that of Mother, Friend, and Sister. Mindful of her earlier emphasis that analogies point to a reality and never explain it fully, she stresses that Sophia-Spirit is passionately involved. She is not objectively dispassionate and removed from our reality. This is an important theme in her later treatment of continuous creation.

### Jesus-Sophia

In her treatment of Jesus-Sophia, Johnson devotes considerable time to a revisioning of male-female relations and the way in which such a framework affects our religious notions. She critiques anthropology which overemphasises male-female differences and the subordination of one to the other. Instead she envisions “a different kind of community

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 127

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 131

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 137

laced by relationships of mutuality and reciprocity.”<sup>30</sup> I believe that such an approach opens the way for appreciation of an even more inclusive community which includes Earth. The model of mutual relations has implications for the identity of Jesus. Johnson makes this point:

Amid a multiplicity of differences Jesus’ maleness is appreciated as intrinsically important for his own personal identity and the historical challenge of his ministry, but not theologically determinative of his identity as the Christ nor normative for the identity of the Christian community.<sup>31</sup>

Johnson considers the mission of Jesus-Sophia and his suffering and death, indicating as they do that evil does not have the final word. She rejects any justification of suffering in favour of a theology of solidarity:

What comes clear in the event, however, is not Jesus’ necessary passive victimisation divinely decreed as a penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost.<sup>32</sup>

She names Jesus as the Wisdom of God, and recognises that one of the benefits of such an identification is that “a relation to the whole cosmos is already built into the biblical tradition, and this orients Christology beyond the human world to the ecology of the earth, and indeed, to the universe, a vital move in this era of planetary crisis.”<sup>33</sup> Jesus-Sophia embraced our earthiness, and in him, Heaven and Earth embrace in a special way.

### Mother Sophia

Johnson theologises about beginning and endings through a consideration of Mother-Sophia. She rejects the inaccurate biology of Aquinas which claimed the male as the life-giver and the female as the passive recipient, in favour of an appreciation of the appropriateness of reclaiming “the power and vulnerability of mothering as metaphor for God.”<sup>34</sup> Mother-Sophia is life giver in the beginning of all, and is the promise of wholeness of being in our home-coming at the end of the journey. This is a potentially inclusive approach to the bestowal of life in all its forms and the promise of fullness at the end of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 154

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 165

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 175

time. Its inclusivity is strengthened by a sense of the protective justice of Mother-Sophia for the wellbeing of what has been created. Johnson points to the need for theologians to open out their vision of wellbeing when she remarks that “the scope of inclusive justice must broaden to catch all creatures of this planet, present and as yet unborn, in the net of concern.”<sup>35</sup> This became a louder call in her subsequent writings. It follows from her quest in *SHE WHO IS* to acknowledge “God’s nearness in mystery.”<sup>36</sup>

Johnson continues her work of constructive new interpretation of tradition with “discourses about God’s Trinity, living being and relation to the suffering world....searched for their emancipatory potential.”<sup>37</sup> She seeks to free the symbol of Trinity from the dominance of male imagery and from literal interpretations. Her argument with classical theologies of the Trinity is that they have become too abstract and divorced from experience. After all, “Christian experience of faith is the generating matrix for language about God as triune”<sup>38</sup> with “three interrelated ways of existing within God’s own being.”<sup>39</sup> Johnson aligns herself with those who postulate a social Trinity with three persons, understood in a modern sense of that term, who are in social communion<sup>40</sup> and in open relationship with the world. She considers a wide range of theologians and their various models before synthesising:

Whatever the categories used there is reflected a livingness in God, a beyond, a with and a within to the world and its history; a sense of God as from whom, by whom and in whom all things exist, thrive, struggle toward freedom and are gathered in.”<sup>41</sup>

### Speech about the Trinity

With all due respect for the Christian Trinitarian tradition and the limits of any metaphors about Divine Mystery, Johnson moves to speak about the Trinity using female metaphors. She perceives three benefits in doing this—the metaphors can underline the mutual relations within the Trinity; the radical equality based on respect for distinctiveness within the Trinity; and the value of community built on diversity.<sup>42</sup> While Johnson’s concern in *SHE WHO IS* is

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 184

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 198

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 200

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 204

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 210-211

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 215-216

about the “human flourishing of women,”<sup>43</sup> this relational model of Trinity has the potential for development in her ecotheological work. I believe that the work of feminist theologians such as Johnson who highlight the model of relationships within the Trinity which value distinctiveness and mutuality can be extended productively when considering relations between humans and the rest of the Earth community.

Johnson next considers the extension of the relationships within the Trinity to the relations of Mother-Sophia with the created world. Having adopted a social model of Trinity where “being in communion constitutes God’s very essence,”<sup>44</sup> it follows that this is how Johnson sees God’s relationship with the created world:

Sophia-God and the world exist in mutual, if asymmetrical relation. Insofar as each is directed toward the other with reciprocal interest and intimacy, the relation is mutual. Insofar as the world is dependent on God in a way that God is not on the world, the relation is not strictly symmetrical.<sup>45</sup>

This, of course, is the core tenet of this thesis in its treatment of the relations that form the basis of the ecospiritual experience. Johnson does not see this intimacy as overwhelming the freedom of either party, but it does have mutual benefits: created reality is enhanced by the closeness of the relation, and “the glory of God is being manifest to the degree that creatures are most radically and fully themselves.”<sup>46</sup>

Johnson is critical of classical theism where the world does not have any impact on God, and of pantheism with its emphasis on the identification of God and world. She favours panentheism defined as “the belief that the Being of God includes and penetrates the whole universe, so that every part of it exists in him, but (as against pantheism) that this Being is more than, and is not exhausted by the universe.”<sup>47</sup> In keeping with her position on mutual yet distinct relations, Johnson’s adoption of panentheism allows her to recognise immanence and transcendence as correlative rather than oppositional.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 228

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 229

<sup>47</sup> ed F L Cross and E A Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1027

While a sense of God in the world has long been part of the tradition, a sense of the world in God has been less developed. Johnson aligns with the kenotic tradition of Philippians 2, 6-8<sup>48</sup> which allows for the understanding that “God’s generous self-emptying is the condition for the possibility of finite existence in its own autonomy, while the difference between Creator and creature is embraced by the One who is all in all.”<sup>49</sup> This allows for the embrace between the finite and the infinite, a theme which is also developed in *Ask the Beasts*.

### SHE WHO IS

As Johnson works towards naming Mother-Sophia as She Who Is, she stresses the “sheer aliveness” of God as the fullness of Being, an aliveness “whose act of being overflows, bringing the universe into existence and empowering it to be.”<sup>50</sup> She recognises that this aliveness is essentially love. It is the “ground of everything that is,” and also “the ground of what should and what we hope will be, the power of being over against the ravages of non-being. The intuition of divine being born in suffering points to eschatological shalom that challenges the present, in utter faithfulness.”<sup>51</sup> This relationship embraces the present and holds out a promise for the future, a future which gives meaning to the present with all its limits.

The experience of personal and global devastation which is the lot of many people and species raises many questions, and indeed, accusations, about the impassibility of the omnipotent God of classical theism. For many, including many theologians, a spectator God is “morally intolerable, intellectually inadequate and religiously repugnant.”<sup>52</sup> Johnson sees this as a “Kairos” moment in Christian theology as these thinkers reframe God’s suffering with created reality as freely chosen by God in solidarity with our finite reality.

Johnson reminds us that at the heart of the Christian message is the cross, the terrible death of Jesus which came as a consequence of his ministrations to those in need. She recognises

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<sup>48</sup> “Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 233

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 238

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 249



the potential of female metaphors for God in coming to terms with such suffering, accepted in freedom out of love. Birthing is one such experience where pain is integral to the emergence of new life. This is not a metaphor for dispassionate love, but for love which is affected by suffering. This is not about a powerless God in the face of such suffering, but about one who empowers “by signalling that the mystery of God is here in solidarity with those who suffer.”<sup>53</sup> Neither is it a glorification of suffering. It is not an invitation to embrace suffering as an end in itself, but a challenge to enter into it with courage and with the hope that comes from knowing that evil or even finitude does not have the last word.

In *SHE WHO IS*, Johnson broke new theological ground in response to the lived experience of women and, to a lesser extent, the devastation of Earth. Her journey continues over the next decades, first with *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, to which I will now turn.

### **Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit**

In 1993, the year after the publication of *SHE WHO IS*, Johnson gave the Madaleva Lecture at the Centre for Spirituality, at Saint Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana, an annual lecture honouring the sister of the same name who pioneered its programme in theology. The lecture follows many of the contours of her earlier work, *SHE WHO IS*, although her goal of a “flourishing human community on a thriving earth” is more clearly linked to the three basic relationships of human beings: to earth, among each other, and to God. For her goal to come about, all three must be “rethought together in a new vision of wholeness that begins with lifting up what has been disparaged.”<sup>54</sup> These are the three elements that are interconnected in this thesis, although I am giving less emphasis to the relationships among human beings, and more to the relationships between Earth and God, between Heaven and Earth.

Johnson begins with experience. In no uncertain terms, she pronounces on the current environmental crisis that she describes as ecocide. The Blue Planet is under threat because of irresponsible human behaviour, a motif to which she returns in her later ecotheological work. In keeping with her ecofeminist stance, she argues that “that analysis of the ecological crisis does not get to the heart of the matter until it sees the connection between

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 267

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *WECS*, 3

exploitation of the earth and the sexist definition and treatment of women.” As a theologian, she is “convinced that the distortion found in those instances influences the Christian experience and doctrine of the mystery of God.”<sup>55</sup> For her, there is a profound link between forms of exploitation and our capacity for relating to God.

In this lecture, Johnson moves quickly to analysis of root causes. She denounces hierarchical dualism as the “taproot” of the crisis. As a world view it favours humanity over nature; man over woman, and views God as disconnected as well as more significant than anything below in the chain of being. In this worldview, the lesser partner is valued primarily for its usefulness to the higher partner. The partners are seen as oppositional rather than in a dialectical relationship. God is at the summit of the chain of being, uncontaminated and disconnected from what is lesser. The price of hierarchical dualism is the devaluation of women and nature, and an impoverished understanding of God. In Johnson’s words:

What is being lost is nothing less than the mystery of God’s personal engagement with the world in its history of love and disaster; nothing less than God’s empowering presence active within the cosmos from the beginning, throughout history and to the end, calling forth life and freedom,-the mystery of God vivifying the world.<sup>56</sup>

Here her feminist theology is inclusive of God’s relationship with all created reality, and identifies the resulting impoverishment of our relationship with God.

Johnson draws on feminist theology and its relationship to women’s articulated experience:

Its most distinctive move is to consult women’s experience as a reality check for all religious statements and practices, recognising truth in those that promote women’s flourishing and untruth in those that diminish it, and as a neglected source of wisdom about the world that can generate insights much needed today.<sup>57</sup>

In a parallel move she draws on contemporary science “from the macroscale of astrophysics to evolutionary biology to the microworld of quantum theory” and its conclusion that “we are connected in a most profound way to the universe, having emerged from it.”<sup>58</sup> As

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 10

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 29

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 25

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 34

Johnson listens to the experience of the natural world, she espouses a new model to replace the worldview of hierarchical dualism.

As in her earlier work, Johnson searches for alternative wisdom. She presents the kinship model which “sees human beings and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life.”<sup>59</sup> Johnson adopts this model as part of her critique of the kingship model which is based on hierarchical dualism, and even the stewardship model which has resulted in some responsible behaviour towards all of created reality, but which “misses the crucial aspect of human dependence upon that which we steward.”<sup>60</sup> Johnson acknowledges the distinctive position of humans within the emerging story, but also acknowledges that “human intelligence and creativity rise out of the very nature of the universe, which is itself intelligent and creative.”<sup>61</sup> It is this new model of kinship and interconnectedness that she takes forward into the task of reclaiming and remembering Creator Spirit “who pervades the world in the dance of life,”<sup>62</sup> and developing an ecological ethic and spirituality, a concern that is of particular importance for this thesis.

Just as Johnson in *SHE WHO IS* reclaimed the biblical images of Spirit and Mother and the image of God as Wisdom or Sophia before moving to “speaking rightly about God” in terms of various manifestations of Sophia, she now continues her work of reclaiming cosmic symbols which have been “marginalised by a patriarchal imagination.”<sup>63</sup> Johnson draws on light, water and plant images to underline the “presence of the living God active in this historical world.”<sup>64</sup> This is no remote God, but the Spirit “who actually arrives in every moment, God drawing near and passing by in vivifying power in the midst of historical struggle,”<sup>65</sup> the indwelling, renewing and dynamic Spirit. Just as the Wisdom tradition provides the most comprehensive source for female images for God’s compassionate, creative presence, cosmic images drawn from scriptural sources “evoke better than abstract

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 44

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 41

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 42

words the presence of the Creator Spirit in the world, moving over the void, breathing into the chaos, pouring out, informing, quickening, warming, setting free, blessing, dancing in mutual immanence with the world.”<sup>66</sup>

Reclaiming female and cosmic images for the Spirit’s presence and action in the world opens up a treasure for relating to God, transcendent and immanent. In this understanding, created reality is valued for itself and drawn into partnership. In Johnson’s words, “The Spirit’s action does not supplant that of creatures but works cooperatively in and through created action, random, ordered or free.”<sup>67</sup> We are left with the mysteries of suffering and death, but more likely to recognise, even in them, God’s continuing compassionate presence, and our call to be part of that same action. The presence of God’s Spirit enables us to recognise created reality as sacred, and worthy of our respect and care, rather than seeing it as inferior and subordinate to higher levels of the hierarchy.

### Turn to the Heavens and the Earth

Johnson’s commitment to the reclaiming of Spirit as a basis of addressing experiences of marginalisation and of ecocide was evident in her call to Catholic theologians when she assumed the Presidency of the Catholic Theological Association of America (CTSA) in 1995. She exhorted them to “turn to the heavens and the earth.”<sup>68</sup> She named this as a task needing attention because, as she put it, “nature is one of the three main pillars of theology, with God and humanity, the Heavens and the Earth, with God and humanity, and it is critical for theologians to reclaim the cosmos as a theme in theology so that access to the fullness of theological revelation might be restored.”<sup>69</sup> Johnson, herself, continued to address this task, and her next major related work shows the development in her theology.

### Quest for the Living God

In 2007, Johnson published *Quest for the Living God, Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. It is just that, a mapping of frontiers where “insights into the living God are flaring forth in our day as a result of faith’s encounter with changing life-or-death experiences.”<sup>70</sup> The

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>68</sup> Johnson, CTSA Proceedings, 15

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God, Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 226

voices, while not claiming to be comprehensive, are diverse--“transcendental, political, liberation, feminist, black, Hispanic, interreligious and ecological.”<sup>71</sup> Many are from the peripheries of power and are taking their place in “contributing to the idea of God,” a living God “who is full of energy and spirit, alive with designs for liberation and healing, always approaching from the future to do something now.” Yet lest we think that we can contain God, Johnson reminds us that the term God also implies that “there is always more to divine Mystery than human beings can nail down. It prepares those who use it for astonishment.”<sup>72</sup>

This book also contains seeds of the ecotheology that is more fully developed in *Ask The Beasts*. It is the vehicle for reiterating much of the Trinitarian theology that was the backbone of *SHE WHO IS*. The God of Gracious Mystery that Johnson explores in this book is both ever greater and more near, as God’s transcendence and immanence are drawn together. This is a God of power and passion, but those terms are revisited in a way that “brings divine presence indelibly into the darkness of suffering that cries to heaven.”<sup>73</sup> In the chapter entitled “Creator Spirit in the Evolving World,” Johnson begins, as is her wont, with the context where encounters with nature are accompanied by both wonder and waste. Yet in those experiences, she recognises that “people of faith are rediscovering an ancient theme, namely, the presence and action of the creative spirit of God throughout the natural world.”<sup>74</sup> Johnson acknowledges that recent theology has not been very helpful in making meaning of this faith experience, and she repeats her diagnosis that this is due to shortcomings in the theology of the Spirit. For Johnson, “attending to the idea of the Creator Spirit brings to the fore the belief that the presence and activity of God pervade the world and therefore the natural world is the dwelling place of God.”<sup>75</sup> Divine presence is continuous, cruciform, and abides in the mode of promise. In summary she says:

Ecological theology proposes that the Creator Spirit dwells at the heart of the natural world, graciously energizing its evolution from within, compassionately holding all creatures in their finitude and death, and drawing the world forward toward an unimaginable future. Throughout the vast sweep of cosmic and biological evolution, the Spirit embraces the material root of life and its endless new potential, empowering the cosmic process from within. The universe in turn, is self-organising

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 64

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 182

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 187-188

and self-transcending, energized from the spiralling galaxies to the double helix of the DNA molecule by the dance of divine vivifying power.<sup>76</sup>

For our purposes, it is worth noting the inclusivity of this summary, which includes Johnson's consideration of suffering and death in nature, which when viewed through the perspective of Jesus' solidarity with the world in his suffering, death and resurrection, and the awareness of God's creation of the whole cosmos of which humans are a part, give ecological theology a warrant to "cross the species line and extend this divine solidarity to all creatures."<sup>77</sup>

Johnson goes on to consider theological models that enable her to conclude that "God makes the world...by empowering the world to make itself."<sup>78</sup> She herself aligns with the contemporary Thomist position which allows for primary and secondary causality with the Creator Spirit empowering within natural processes without intervening in a way that contravenes those processes. She will return to this topic in *Ask the Beasts*.

In *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson also explores the unfolding nature of the Universe, and points to the inadequacy of static or interventionist theologies in the face of newer understandings of the cosmos. Interestingly she refers here to the kenotic power so dramatically lived out in the life of Jesus unto his death by crucifixion. She understands such power, not as passivity in the face of adversity, but rather as "the power of giving oneself freely in love with the effect that others are empowered."<sup>79</sup> This same power can be understood as allowing space for "the genuine integrity of finite systems, allowing chance its truly random appearance."<sup>80</sup>

For Johnson, the retrieval of Trinitarian theology has the potential for dialogue in places of faith encounter such as those which feature in *Quest for the Living God*. As always she points to the challenges that ensue, whether these be theological retrieval, mystical engagement or prophetic action. The movement goes full circle from experience of lived reality, to the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 191

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 190

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 193

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 196

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 196

quest for the living God, and back to the experiential challenge implied in her vision which aims at “bringing into being a community of love.”<sup>81</sup>

It astounds me that Johnson was cast into the fire in the wake of this volume. I will consider briefly her experience of being the subject of a doctrinal investigation by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). In 2011, despite, or may be because of the popularity of *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson found herself at the centre of a storm when the Committee on Doctrine of the USCCB published a Statement on the book. Their diagnosis was that “this book contains misrepresentations, ambiguities and errors that bear upon the faith of the Catholic Church as found in sacred scripture, and as it is authentically taught by the Church’s universal magisterium.”<sup>82</sup> The statement challenged firstly her radical reconstruction of the idea of God as a critical response to post enlightenment modern theism, and then what it perceived as a false presupposition that “all names for God are metaphors.”<sup>83</sup> Paragraphs were dedicated to a critical reading of themes such as the God who suffers, names for God, God present in all religions, Creator Spirit in an evolving world, and Johnson’s treatment of Trinity. Johnson responded with “Observations” which she entitled, “To Speak Rightly of the Living God”<sup>84</sup> in which she addressed the content of the Statement that she perceived as misrepresenting and misinterpreting her work, and so providing an incorrect picture of her book. In her comprehensive response, Johnson outlined an agenda which could fruitfully open up conversation about fundamental issues such as the nature and craft of theology, different models of church and of revelation, as well as insights about modern theism and its relation to church teaching, speech about the living God, the suffering God, female images of God, God of the religions, and Creator Spirit in an evolving world. Johnson identified an underlying obstacle to their understanding her concern for mediating the content of faith in the contemporary situation. She named this as the preference of the Committee for certain formulas or sets of words and a specific

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 197

<sup>82</sup> Committee on Doctrine, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “Statement on Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God by Sister Elizabeth Johnson,” ed Richard R Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes, The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 183

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 187

<sup>84</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, “To Speak Rightly of the Living God,” ed Richard R Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes. The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 213-251

metaphysical system. She added an Appendix to her “Observations” when it became obvious that Father Weinandy, the Executive Director of the Committee on Doctrine was making new specific criticisms of her book in letters to individuals. These criticisms were not in the original Statement. In the letter accompanying the Appendix, Johnson indicated:

I am fully prepared to take responsibility for what I wrote and to correct it if it can be shown to be against the teaching of the church. But as a scholar, I am not prepared to be held accountable for what I did not write and do not mean.<sup>85</sup>

That was also the tenor of her “Observations.” The teaching authority of the Bishops was never called into question. In all her communications Johnson indicated her willingness to speak with the Committee, an opportunity that was not afforded her before the publication of the Statement or as part of the ensuing process.

In their response to Johnson’s “Observations,” the Committee of Doctrine of the USCCB indicated that it remained convinced that the book *Quest for the Living God* in fact fails to help the Church progress in her understanding of divine realities because “it does not sufficiently ground itself in the Catholic theological tradition as its starting point.”<sup>86</sup> Johnson insisted that *Quest* expresses the same faith “in different words but with the same meaning.” The Committee on Doctrine reiterated its original conclusion that although “the book at times displays an engagement with the Catholic theological tradition and remains in continuity with it, it also departs from that tradition at a number of crucial junctures.”<sup>87</sup> Johnson’s Statement of October 28, 2011, expressed her disappointment on issues of process, content and result. She stated her conviction about the validity of mapping frontiers of a legitimate theological understanding:

I want to make it absolutely clear that nothing in this book dissents from the church’s faith about God revealed in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.

*Quest for the Living God* was not banned, and continues to contribute to the encounter with Divine Mystery in the midst of contemporary situations. There remains the issue of whether

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<sup>85</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, Letter to Cardinal Donald Wuerl, 14 July, 2011, ed Richard R Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes, The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 250

<sup>86</sup> Committee on Doctrine, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), “Response to Observations by Sr Elizabeth A Johnson, CSJ, regarding the Committee's Statement about the Book,” ed Richard R Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes, The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 259

<sup>87</sup> Committee on Doctrine (USCCB), Statement, 199



Johnson is a credible dialogue partner for this thesis. After careful consideration of the documentation, I concur with this assessment of Gaillardetz, and decide in favour of Johnson:

Theology is, at its best, always a fragile enterprise. It moves forward tentatively, often exploring certain questions while leaving others behind. One finds in the committee's judgment little appreciation for the way in which theology contributes to the development of doctrine precisely through its elaboration of "new frontiers"....The current magisterial tendency to rush to doctrinal judgments with every new theological foray forgets Newman's important insight: divine truth, emerges only slowly, patiently, and always with a certain tentativeness. The work of theology is akin to the ministrations of a midwife; it is the work of theology to assist patiently in the birthing of God's Word in our time. By contrast, the rush to doctrinal judgment is not unlike the frantic father wishing to hasten the birthing process even if it places mother and child at risk.<sup>88</sup>

This thesis is about ecospirituality and its ecotheological underpinnings. This is a frontier where the presence of Creator Spirit in an evolving world is key to such a spirituality and to respect for the integrity of creation. It is a case where theology is "being invigorated and informed by scientific discoveries of today."<sup>89</sup> As a relatively new field there are areas where debate is vigorous as new insights and core beliefs are juxtaposed. This thesis is part of the exploration of that new frontier, and grateful for the contribution of Johnson's scholarship to the building of bridges between contemporary concerns and our faith tradition, reaffirming that tradition, and indicating areas where faith continues to seek theological understanding.

This chapter is a lead up to a study of Johnson's ecotheological work, *Ask the Beasts*. It has provided an opportunity to explore her foundational work which is taken forward to a more specific treatment of the interface of science and theology, and the insights that this might offer towards the urgent need to address ecological concerns of our time. It is to this work that I now move as part of the turning to the Heavens and the Earth.

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<sup>88</sup> Richard R Gaillardetz in ed Richard R Gaillardetz, *When the Magisterium Intervenes. The Magisterium and Theologians in Today's Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 251

<sup>89</sup> Johnson, "To Speak Rightly," 243



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## Chapter 7: Starting with Darwin

In 2014, Elizabeth Johnson published *Ask the Beasts, Darwin and the God of Love*. In her previous work, *Quest for the Living God*, she theologised about new patterns of encounter with Divine Mystery emerging from the considered reflections of communities of practice. Johnson in *Ask the Beasts* goes further to listen to the voice of the Earth community, or as she would call it the community of life. This is a new voice for theology and for practical theology, the methodology for this thesis. Johnson is, however, an appropriate dialogue partner for this thesis, and has much to contribute to understanding the vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth, of God and the Earth community. This theological framework can provide an important underpinning for Christian ecospirituality in general, and for Earth Link in particular.

### Setting the Scene

Johnson's focal question is "What is the theological meaning of the natural world of life?"<sup>1</sup> She offers this work as a way of moving from a sense of the natural world as value neutral and deriving its worth from its usefulness to humans, to a sense of its intrinsic value and worth as God's beloved creation whose destruction is sinful. This is a path to a position where action for justice for Earth is integral to one's Christian life.

Johnson addresses her question through a dialogue between Charles Darwin, especially his work *On the Origin of Species*, and the Christian creedal statement, the Nicene Creed. While Johnson stands firmly within the Christian tradition, and alongside other ecotheologians, her approach is distinctive. It is obvious from the title. She draws on Job for her starting point and operative approach:

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), xiv

“Ask the beasts and they will teach you” (12,7), says Job; speak to the birds of the air, the plants of the earth, and the fish of the sea and they will instruct you. On the face of it, this seems a simple thing to do: consult the creatures of the earth and listen to the religious wisdom they impart. Given theology’s longstanding preoccupation with the human drama, however...the invitation to consult the plants and animals harbors the demand for a subtle change of method....The effort to approach other species with concentrated attention to their story in all its struggle and delight creates an important shift in perspective....The focus has to shift to those who have been silenced, so that they are seen as of central importance in themselves. In a similar manner, the nascent field of ecological theology asks that we give careful consideration to the natural world *in its own right* as an irreplaceable element in the theological project.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson enters into the science-religion dialogue by examining Darwin’s evolution of species, and then moves from there to unfolding the relationship between the evolving world and God understood as Trinity. She concludes by acknowledging the harmful impact of humans, before locating them within the community of life and as members of the community of creation, all of which is in relationship with God. Such is the basis of the responsibility that comes from kinship in those communities, and which impels us to action for Earth’s welfare. This is a theology which is intended to benefit the natural world in a time of crisis by exploring how “love of the natural world is an intrinsic act of faith in God, to practical and critical effect.”<sup>3</sup> Chapters 7 to 10 of this thesis examine her work in detail as part of the dialogue with ecotheology.

At the outset Johnson draws attention to Darwin’s beautiful image of the entangled bank which is part of the concluding paragraph of *On the Origin of Species*. He reflects on the plants, birds, insects, worms and damp earth, and their “elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other and dependent on each other in so complex a manner.”<sup>4</sup> In like vein, Johnson invites her readers to read through the lens of their own entangled bank, such that we will recognise similar complexity in it, and work towards its wellbeing. This is my image for now, taken in the desert near Alice Springs

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., xv, italics are hers.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xviii

<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of the First Edition of On the Origin of Species*, annotated by James Costa (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 489



Johnson begins with a challenge to contemporary theology which she says needs to “broaden its anthropocentric focus for its own adequacy. It needs to reclaim the natural world as an essential element both theoretically and in practice, or risk missing one of the most critical religious issues of our age which will affect all foreseeable ages to come.”<sup>5</sup> Her focus is on the natural world or the world of life. She says that it is time to “bring the buzzing, blooming world of life back into theological focus.”<sup>6</sup> She “brackets” out humans from her understanding of nature, but not from her theological consideration of the community of life. Johnson also differentiates language about the natural world from language about creation which includes the added dimension of being “the living world in light of its relation to the God who creates it.”<sup>7</sup>

In her earlier work Johnson drew attention to the ecocide confronting the natural world. She juxtaposed people’s attitudes of wonder with the waste in their interactions with nature. Here Johnson sees the “ravaging of people and ravaging of the land”<sup>8</sup> as going hand in hand. They are symptoms of the same attitudes. Such a stance is, of course, consistent with the context painted in this thesis.

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 3

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6

## Religion–Science Engagement

Johnson highlights that hers is an engagement between religion and science, and a revisioning of theology in the light of newer understandings from science and other disciplines. Johnson quotes Mooney who puts a persuasive case for respect for the contribution of science and its relevance for Christian thought:

If God is in fact the all-encompassing reality Christian faith proclaims, then what science says about nature, whether physical, chemical or biological, can never be irrelevant to a deeper experience of God. For the sake of the integrity of the truth it seeks to teach and live by, theology needs to take account of how the world created by God actually works, according to the best of our current human knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Science and religion are different ways of approaching reality. For Johnson, they answer different questions: “Science is concerned with the world as a structured system operating according to natural causes,” and “Theology is concerned with the same world as related to God.”<sup>10</sup> Stoeger in another context compares and contrasts the two disciplines of science and theology. Both are oriented towards knowledge and understanding, while pursuing different fields of knowledge and using different methodologies. He summarises:

Theology is the discipline directed towards understanding God, the presence, action and revelation of God in our world, ourselves, and our response to that transcendent reality. The natural sciences, in contrast, are disciplines oriented towards a detailed qualitative and quantitative understanding and modelling of the regularities, processes, structures and interrelationships (‘the laws of nature’) which characterise reality.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson draws on Barbour, one of the founding fathers of the science-religion dialogue, who has at various times considered the theological implications of the physical sciences such as astronomy, quantum physics, thermodynamics and relativity, and the biological sciences such as evolution, genetics, neuroscience and ecology.<sup>12</sup> Barbour famously created a typology for the relations between science and religion. While this like all typologies has

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Mooney, “Theology and Science, a New Commitment to Dialogue,” *Theological Studies*, 52 (1991), 316

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 12

<sup>11</sup> William R Stoeger, “Reductionism and Emergence: Implications for the Interaction of Theology with the Natural Sciences” in *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, ed Nancey Murphy and William Stoeger (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 231

<sup>12</sup> These topics are covered in his books *Religion and Science*, *When Religion Meets Science*, and *Nature, Human Nature and God*.

been critiqued,<sup>13</sup> it puts some order into the debate. The four categories put forward by Barbour<sup>14</sup> and re-presented by Johnson are conflict, independence, dialogue and integration.

*Conflict* ensues when “one or both parties transgress the boundaries of their own discipline and make claims that overlap with assertions made by the other.”<sup>15</sup> Each party lays claim to the truth of their own position and refuses to be influenced by the insights of the other. In the area of evolutionary understandings such conflict is rife. Literal interpretations of the biblical account of creation are pitted against evolutionary theory, and scientific naturalism is pitted against metaphysical claims in religious systems.

Science and religion can be seen as *independent* or complementary, but lacking any constructive interaction. Johnson rejects this position for pastoral reasons because contemporary worldviews are shaped by information gleaned from many disciplines and sources, and individuals seek coherence between those sources.

In challenging the independence of science and religion and in moving toward her preferred model of *dialogue* between science and religion, Johnson quotes no less a source than Pope John Paul II’s exhortation to theologians to take up the challenge and critically and reflectively incorporate scientific findings:

Theology will have to call on the findings of science to one degree or another as it pursues its primary concern for the human person, the reaches of freedom, the possibilities of Christian community, the nature of belief and the intelligibility of nature and history. As these findings become part of the intellectual culture of the time, however, theologians must understand them and test their value in bringing out from Christian belief some of the possibilities which have not yet been revealed.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Barbour, “Response, Ian Barbour on Typologies,” *Zygon*, 37,no.2,(2002), 345-359

<sup>14</sup> Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1-4

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 7

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, “Truth Cannot Contradict Truth,” Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*. eds Robert Russell, William Stoeger and Francisco Ayala (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, and Berkeley, CA: Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1998), 4

A new benchmark for the science-religion dialogue is set by the tone and content of the 2015 encyclical of Pope Francis entitled *Laudato Si: On the Care of our Common Home*. While the word “evolution” barely features in the encyclical, it is acknowledged that “science and religion, with their distinctive approaches to understanding reality, can enter into an intense dialogue fruitful for both.”<sup>17</sup>

Dialogue is the third category in Barbour’s schema, a situation where, in Johnson’s words, “science and religion agree that they are distinct fields of endeavour, but rather than consider the other hostile or irrelevant, they approach each other with interested respect.”<sup>18</sup> The intent of this dialogue is mutual insight, rather than proof of the validity of religious aims. Johnson points out that theology has its own sources of knowledge, “the testimony of scripture” and the witness of the whole tradition to “the self-revelation of God,” while staying open to “be enlightened by another source of knowledge.” Her understanding of dialogue is based on the view that “the book of nature and the book of scripture...have the same author.”<sup>19</sup> I wonder if Johnson’s clarity on the sources of knowledge about God was influenced by criticisms that she received about *Quest for the Living God*. She argued then that the above was her position, and there is no doubting it in *Ask the Beasts*.

Barbour’s fourth model is *Integration* which has been summarised by Johnson as “akin to dialogue but takes it a step further. Here there is a deep connection between the content of the two fields as thinkers form a deep synthesis of scientific ideas with religious belief.”<sup>20</sup> As examples of the integration of science and religion Johnson points to the work of Teilhard de Chardin and process philosophy and theology understood as “an inclusive metaphysical position shaped by fundamental insights from both evolutionary science and Christian theological thought.”<sup>21</sup> I find Philip Clayton’s work on emergent panentheism quite exciting

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<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), accessed 8 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), #62. The encyclical demonstrates an awareness of the processes of evolutionary emergence, and the insights and challenges raised by it for understanding human emergence, *LS* 81.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 9

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 is the source of the above precis.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

as he works towards a systematic theological framework.<sup>22</sup> In general, Integrationists draw on a wide range of sources for theological knowledge, and often propose a “more systematic and extensive reformulation of traditional theological concepts.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps a step too far in this thesis?

Although not mentioned in Johnson’s work, I find it helpful to draw on the distinction that Barbour makes between natural theology and a theology of nature. Here it is explicated by Edwards in a tribute to Barbour:

Whereas a natural theology will start from the natural world and seek to draw plausible conclusions about issues such as the existence of a Creator, a theology of nature will take a stance from within the religious experience and communal life of a particular religious tradition and seek to integrate fundamental insights of this tradition with those of contemporary science.<sup>24</sup>

All of these models fall within the framework of a theology of nature. I have alluded earlier to models such as Religious Naturalism which would be natural theology.

Johnson tends towards the model of dialogue between religion and science. She clarifies that her choice of dialogue between science and religion allows her to “bring the resource of theology to bear in interpreting the world of life which evolutionary science describes,” and to advance her intention to work towards “practical cooperation for the preservation of the natural world.”<sup>25</sup> In fact she goes so far as to call this a fifth model in the science-religion dialogue. I am not convinced that this is another model, but it is definitely her and my preferred outcome. It is consistent with her stated aim in *SHE WHO IS*, which was to “serve the emancipatory praxis of women and men, to the benefit of all creation, both human beings and the earth.”<sup>26</sup>..As always, Johnson’s theology points to mystical practice and ethical action as the next steps.

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<sup>22</sup> Philip Clayton, “Toward a Constructive Christian Theology of Emergence” in *Evolution and Emergence: Systems, Organisms, Persons*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2007)

<sup>23</sup> Ian Barbour, “Response,” 350

<sup>24</sup> Denis Edwards, “Christology in the Meeting between Science and Religion. A Tribute to Ian Barbour,” *Theology and Science* 3, no2 (2005), 211

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 12

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 17



More specifically, Johnson's dialogue is between Darwin's book, *On the Origin of Species*, and the Nicene Creed. As Johnson summarises them, Darwin "demonstrated that the variety of life on earth has come into existence through ages-long, complex, and astonishing history; a game changer in the history of ideas," and the Nicene Creed is about God as "the incomprehensible mystery of love beyond imagining."<sup>27</sup> Johnson is obviously in admiration of Darwin's acuity as a scientist, the beauty of his writing, and the sensibility of his observations. While she is less glowing about the style of the Nicene Creed, she acknowledges the vibrancy of its insight that "God is the incomprehensible mystery of love beyond imagining."<sup>28</sup>

In listening to the beasts, Johnson hears them saying that they are fecund and exuberantly alive, and that they suffer and die. As a theologian, she also hears the message that they are created, receiving their existence as "a continuous gift from the living God who is the creator of all."<sup>29</sup> She correlates those learnings with the presence of the Divine Spirit, with divine suffering in solidarity in the person of Jesus Christ, and the gift of life from the Creator God who draws all things forward into "transformation in glory." This framework foreshadows the shape of the dialogue that comes after her examination of Darwin's work which is the substance of Chapters 2 to 4 in her book.

Johnson's leaning toward a model of dialogue between science and religion provides a suitable framework for this thesis in its exploration of the theological underpinning of spirituality in an emerging Universe. The key elements are present, Heaven and Earth, and what follows in her book is an examination of the ways in which they embrace without blurring their distinctiveness.

### Introducing Darwin

Johnson begins her reflections on *On the Origin of Species* by locating it within the personal and professional life of Darwin. A keen observer of nature from his childhood, Darwin eventually settled into being a man of natural science after forays into medicine and divinity.

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<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 16

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 16

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 17-18

His expedition aboard *HMS Beagle* was the turning point in his career as it afforded him extended time in South America where he had the opportunity to observe, record and analyse the “geological relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent,”<sup>30</sup> and lay the foundations for his theory that “species descend from other species via a branching process governed by natural selection.”<sup>31</sup> His scientific reputation was growing as was his family of ten children, although the death of three children, and most notably their second child, Annie, caused great grief to Darwin and his wife, Emma Wedgwood.

Johnson paints a rich portrait of the man, husband, father and philosophical naturalist. She describes *Origin* as “a carefully crafted, beautifully written argument....the ripe fruit of decades spent observing and thinking about the history of the land and the sea and the living organisms that inhabit them.”<sup>32</sup> Its “lucid writing, at times lyrical and laced with creative metaphors” meant that it was very readable and welcomed by those interested in its cultural and religious implications. Darwin continued to develop his ideas until his death in 1882, by which time his “new idea” was being accepted as a theory of evolution.

Johnson summarises Darwin’s core insights thus:

In face of the widespread scientific and religious assumption that species come into being independent of each other by separate acts of a divine Creator, and the view that they remain immutably themselves throughout their existence, *On the Origin of Species* is one long argument that species are in motion, coming into being from previous species by a process that can be explained naturally, without appeal to a supernatural cause.<sup>33</sup>

Darwin’s is a theory of descent with modification which he came to call natural selection. While descent can be traced to ancestors, variations that enhance the capacity to survive are also evident. The naturalists and the religious establishment were divided in their response to his findings. Some treasured models were called into question, in particular the independent and special creation of each and every living organism. Darwin suggested that it was still possible to appreciate their beautiful design, but now by reference to natural causes rather than the direct intervention of a divine Creator.<sup>34</sup> This flew in the face of

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<sup>30</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 1

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 19

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 27

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 33

contemporary understandings that species are brought into existence by separate and distinct acts of Creation, and remain immutably themselves throughout their existence.

Darwin's argument was vigorous, and Johnson likens it to the energy used to "reshape the governing paradigm of a whole field of study."<sup>35</sup> This was a new scientific and cultural paradigm, and it also challenged the religious paradigm, the implications of which are still being worked out today. While Johnson briefly enumerates the doctrinal understandings that are called into question by Darwin's findings<sup>36</sup>, she does not look to him as a "model of faith."<sup>37</sup> She traces the movement in his religious experience: from his sense of wonder as he looks at the natural world with a consciousness that it manifests the Divine, through to a numbing sense of alienation from the views of his contemporaries and even from nature, all without his denying the existence of God.

Johnson trawls through Darwin's book for moments that reveal his love of the natural world, moments of encounters that could be considered revelatory. Given the focus in this thesis on ecospirituality, it is worth quoting Johnson's paraphrase of Hines whom she calls on to underline her sense of Darwin's sacramental attitude:

In a world where the loving kindness of God is everywhere present but often overlooked...the church's sacraments break through the fog and call attention to this reality. Using embodied things like bread, wine, oil, water, they name and celebrate grace for a moment, thereby allowing divine presence to gain a stronger foothold in our lives. By extension certain events, persons, words, objects or rituals can be considered a kind of sacrament analogous to the church's seven. They allow the grace of God, everywhere present, to break through in this or that instance.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 36. Johnson points out that challenging the direct creation of every species has implications for literal readings of Genesis texts, and subsequently of biblical authority, understandings of how God acts in the world, the problem of suffering in the face of massive extinctions, the dignity of humans as the image of God in the light of their evolution from lower species, and beyond that to understandings of original sin and redemption through the cross.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>38</sup> Michael Hines, "Finding God in All Things: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects," ed Thomas Landy, *As Leaves in the World* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 91-103

Darwin's is the same sense of "beholding" that we meet in the poem *Hurrahing in Harvest* by Gerard Manly Hopkins which is quoted in full in Chapter 4, and which reminds us that : "these things, these things were here and but the beholder wanting."<sup>39</sup>

Darwin as naturalist models a way of looking/beholding that is at the heart of the ecospiritual experience. His experience also points to the dislocation that comes with the emergence of a new scientific paradigm as its proponents struggle to promote understanding and acceptance within scientific, social and religious communities. Johnson recognises Darwin's multi-dimensionality in her selection of him as a dialogue partner for her ecotheology.

### On the Origin of Species

Johnson devotes a long chapter to Darwin's book, *On the Origin of Species*, with its "one long argument" that "over millions and millions of years species of plants and animals have descended from original parents, along the way diversifying and going out of existence, due to the workings of natural selection. In a word the origin of species is from one another."<sup>40</sup> Johnson studies this work from beginning to end.

Johnson traces the way in which Darwin unfolds his argument, beginning with his own experience and that of many of his contemporaries of selective breeding of plants and animals in order to increase quality and productivity. He cultivated pigeons and strawberries, and appealed to that experience to establish that there are three main ingredients in the unfolding of species, namely variation, selection and inheritance.<sup>41</sup> There must be existing variation or diversity in the one species, a conscious choice is made to select desirable traits, and those traits must be able to be inherited. Darwin builds from there by pointing to variation, selection and inheritance in nature. In contrast to Linnaeus' system of classification of the animal, vegetable or mineral kingdoms according to similarities within phyla, classes, orders, families, genera and species, Darwin emphasised the variation that emerges over the course of history. He pointed to the sequence where slight variations become well-marked and ultimately merge into sub-species, distinct species, large genera

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<sup>39</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, *Hurrahing in Harvest*, accessed 13 March, 2017, <http://www.bartleby.com/122/14.html>

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 45

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-48

and ultimately an insensible series. His interpretation of variations in nature leads to the idea of natural selection which “works on numerous small differences in a gradual but cumulative fashion so that changes amplify over time, and new species emerge.”<sup>42</sup>

Darwin turns then to address the way in which natural selection occurs. He points to the reality of variation in species rather than their immutability, and, using many examples, demonstrates that the mutual relations between species do not guarantee their survival. Johnson notes his deeply ecological vision and comments on the dynamics that he is explaining:

The natural world’s beauty is due to the mutual interaction of species in the struggle for life. It is due to birth, thriving, suffering and death which have brought forth organic beings having beneficial dependencies upon each other or advantageous adaptations over their competitors or enemies.<sup>43</sup>

After Darwin establishes the presence of variation, he moves to a presentation of the theory of natural selection whereby favourable variations are preserved, and injurious variations are rejected.<sup>44</sup> He sees two dynamic principles at work: through *divergence*, a species can split into new varieties and species; and through *extinction* the species with less effective forms can become rare and ultimately die out.<sup>45</sup> The longer term result of these incremental adaptations is the spread of a desirable trait through the species, and ultimately, over geological periods, the origin of new species in dynamic relations with their surrounding communities. The result, as Johnson notes, is that organisms are “ever more beautifully adapted to their life’s situation.”<sup>46</sup>

Historically the story of the evolution of species can be compared to a tree of life. Johnson presents Darwin’s diagram of the units of natural life, and explores his understanding of how species of the one genus diverge, give rise to new species in some instances, or become extinct. Her mind boggles as she explores this notion, and she notes that Darwin also recognises natural selection as a “truly wonderful fact.”<sup>47</sup> Johnson sums up this insight:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 56 drawing on Darwin, *Origin*, 81

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 57

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 56

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 64

All organic beings, living and dead, are related to one another, historically and biologically. All take their place in a single narrative of creative struggle, divergence, thriving, death, extinction, and further breakthrough. Common descent with modification by natural selection is the explanatory principle which interprets how species originate from one another, naturally. Our era reads this as a profound ecological insight.<sup>48</sup>

Johnson outlines the objections that Darwin puts forward for his own work, the support for his theory that comes from fossil records throughout time, and from the variations of plants and animals around the globe, that is throughout space. Darwin's geological and palaeontological study of the fossil records provides important, if incomplete, evidence for his theory about the "slowly changing drama"<sup>49</sup> of the process of evolution by natural selection. The fossil records provide stark evidence of the extent of extinction, and of the modification of related species. As Johnson notes:

By tracking the history of life back into deep time, *Origin* demonstrates the strength of the argument that all forms of life, ancient, recent, and now living, unroll through the eons as one grand natural system, linked by generation. Coming forward through successive intervals, divergence creates a blooming of intensely beautiful, different forms while extinction erases their ancestors.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly Darwin's study of geographical distributions of species enabled him to postulate that "species originate in one place from a common parent, then migrate and diverge, unless stopped by an impassable barrier."<sup>51</sup> In a culture where both similarity and difference were interpreted as the result of multiple separate acts of creation, Darwin was at pains to establish both common origins and variation brought about by adaptation to local conditions, and to draw up scenarios for the migration of species from their places of origin. Darwin can see that his theory is faithful to what can be observed.

In the second last chapter of *Origins*, Darwin considers how his theory of common descent makes sense when brought to bear on various biological disciplines. The science of classification, comparative anatomy, comparative embryology and the study of rudimentary or atrophied organs can be viewed differently when studied in terms of the genealogy of

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 65

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 81

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 82

various species, and not just on biological structure. Darwin asserts that this chapter alone provides a convincing argument for his theory of common descent.

In his concluding flourish he states that his scientific observations lead him to the conclusion that “all organic beings have descended from some primordial form, into which life was first breathed.”<sup>52</sup> He acknowledges the difficulty of accepting that the dynamics of natural selection could be the workings of the natural world, summarises the key data supporting his argument, and affirms that these variations are better explained by his theory than by seeing them as independent acts of creation. He does this without ruling out the need for a Creator. In his words:

To my mind it accords better with what we know of all the laws impressed on matter by the Creator, that the production and extinctions of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual.<sup>53</sup>

The way in which he concludes seems indicative of the spirit of appreciation with which he approaches his work and the complexity of the tangled bank:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one: and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>54</sup>

Johnson in turn lauds Darwin for his contribution to literature, to science, and recognises that his work “stands as a watershed for human awareness, profoundly altering our understanding of the natural world, and just as profoundly of our membership in the evolving community of life.” Darwin is truly an effective dialogue partner for her in her search for “the theological meaning of the natural world of life.”<sup>55</sup>

Johnson draws her own working understanding of evolution from this work of Darwin. She summarises:

*On the Origin of Species* is a sustained argument showing that all living beings on earth are related through common descent from simple ancestors, their diversity explained as a result of natural processes....Species originate by the action of

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<sup>52</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 484

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 488

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 490

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, xiv

natural laws, not supernatural acts of special creation. They change, rather than remain immutable.<sup>56</sup>

Then she extracts key features of evolution as a whole. I have previously quoted from this material at length in setting the context for this thesis, but in summary the key features are kinship whereby species are interrelated by common descent, the emergence of novelty and genuine newness, cumulative body relationship which build on what went before, death which enables new forms of life to emerge, and a trend towards greater complexity of relationships such as the movement from matter to life to consciousness to self-consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

In order to ascertain the validity of Darwin as a dialogue partner, Johnson examines contemporary understanding of his theory. She notes the consequences of the flawed process of taking Darwin's biological theory as a basis of intentional, human behaviour, and using it to justify discrimination. She indicates how developments in genetics work with Darwin's insights and establish them more firmly as core principles. Certain developments about the pace and mechanisms of evolution render some of Darwin's detail inaccurate. Looking at his work through a cosmological lens, Johnson recognises the dynamics of the evolution of life on Earth as resonant with the unfolding story of the Universe. She allows contemporary understandings to highlight the "drumbeat" of ecological sensibility that pervades Darwin's work and culminates in his vision of the tangled bank with its "elaborate forms of plants, birds, insects and worms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner."<sup>58</sup> It is a short step from there to her highlighting his "grand summarising symbol" of the tree of life, his "gorgeous" symbol which is "a branching, interconnected system with kinship in every pore."<sup>59</sup>

Johnson draws this conclusion:

For all the subsequent shifts, the book's one long argument remains standing on strong legs: life evolves....The theory of evolution offers a dramatic tale filled with struggle and serendipity, tragedy and surprises, the concrete end of which is not yet known.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 100

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 101

<sup>58</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 489

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 120

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 121



The evolutionary backdrop drawn by Johnson from her study of Darwin is of a piece with the context painted in this thesis. Her study affirms her choice of Darwin as a dialogue partner, and my study affirms my choice of Johnson as dialogue partner. Johnson's transition from the science to the subsequent theological chapters of *Ask the Beasts* is inspirational. In words that are reminiscent of her focal question, Johnson reminds us that "the theory of evolution is theologically consequential," and poses the question, "How shall we speak of the overflowing love of the creating, redeeming, re-creating God of life in view of evolution?"<sup>61</sup> It is to this task that she now turns.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 121



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## Chapter 8 God's presence and action in an evolutionary world.

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson transitions from science into theology by looking at nature through the eyes of Job:

Ask the beasts and they will teach you...  
The hand of the Lord has done this.  
In his hand is the life of every living thing (Job 12, 7, 9-10).

She keeps her eyes on Darwin's image of the tangled bank, but now she enters into the world of religious affirmation. She sees the tangled bank as "created," a declaration that does not belong to science but is "the expression of a basic trust that the universe has an ultimately transcendent origin, support and goal which renders it profoundly meaningful."<sup>1</sup> Its vitality is a gift from God's hands, a gift which brings it to reality and sustains it in existence, and without which it would not exist at all. As indicated previously in this thesis in the section on ecospirituality, there is a widespread intuition among those who immerse themselves deeply in the natural world that it is sacred, that it has an inner dimension. This part of Johnson's book expresses that intuition in overtly religious terms. Its insights are fundamental to engaging spiritually in an emerging Universe out of a sense of continuing Divine presence.

Johnson draws on classical creation theology which encompasses "original creation in the beginning, continuous creation in the present here and now, and new creation at the redeemed end time."<sup>2</sup> In the Hebraic-Christian tradition, plants and animals have a reference point beyond themselves in the "overflowing generosity of the incomprehensible God who freely shares life with the world."<sup>3</sup> God's presence is there as origin, source and

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 123

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 123

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 124

goal. It is an ongoing and dynamic presence, and Johnson borrows the metaphor of the singer keeping the song in existence at all times to give the sense of immediate and sustained presence.<sup>4</sup> God's presence is traditionally known as the Spirit who also "continues to draw the world to an unpredictable future, pervaded by a radical promise at the ultimate end of time."<sup>5</sup>

Johnson argues that it best suits her dialogue with Darwin to begin by exploring *creatio continuo*, to begin with the here and now, with God's Spirit as "ground and bearer of all evolutionary life."<sup>6</sup> We know from her earlier works that this is her preferred starting point, grounded as it is also in her diagnosis that neglect of the Spirit underlies both "exploitation of the earth and the sexist definition and treatment of women,"<sup>7</sup> which she sees as interconnected. Johnson does not stop there as she is cognisant of the impact of evolutionary emergence, and the theological questions that arise as one comes to terms with the unfolding nature of reality which is driven by capacities that are inherent in it. In response to these concerns she considers ways of approaching God's action in evolutionary emergence.

As in previous works, the first step in Johnson's methodology is critical analysis of inherited oppression, this time oppression of the natural world. She points to the anthropocentric focus of current theology, and traces its origins. As in *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, Johnson points to hierarchical dualism as the philosophical mindset which has elevated spirit over matter. Originating in Hellenistic dualism, spirit and matter were seen as polar opposites and their differences were stressed. As a consequence, soul was seen as superior to body and humans were superior to the rest of the created order. In a patriarchal order, it was a short step to seeing men as superior to women. With Descartes, the human mind was differentiated from matter, and ordered as superior to it. These influences made their way into theologies which highlighted the supernatural over the natural, and grace, understood as God's gift,<sup>8</sup> as superior to and separate from nature. Theologically, interest

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, ed. Brian Davies (New York: Continuum, 2003), 103

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 124

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 10

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 126

in creation waned in favour of interest in redemption, and God's action in the biblical history of salvation was seen as more significant than God's action in the cycles of nature. In terms of spirituality, the journey was one of ascent from the lesser to the greater in a way that devalued Earth in the pursuit of Heaven. Earth Link does not subscribe to this view, so is glad that in *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson seeks a different starting point, that of "the presence of the Spirit throughout the world in the act of continuous creation."<sup>9</sup>

### God's Presence in Continuous Creation

Continuous creation, as understood by Johnson, affirms that "rather than retiring after bringing the world into existence at some original instant, the Creator keeps on sustaining the world in its being and becoming at every moment."<sup>10</sup> Drawing on her other dialogue partner, Johnson finds this truth implied in the Nicene Creed with its affirmations of God as Creator in the beginning, and Spirit as "Lord and Giver of life." This is the vivifier, the life giver.

As in her previous work, Johnson searches the sources of revelation for insights that have been overlooked. The biblical tradition is replete with images of a dynamic and omnipresent God, and it is there she begins her search before turning to Aquinas for insights into the relationship between God and world. Some of these insights are also evident in the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*.

From the Hebrew scriptures, Johnson draws attention to the life-giving action of the Spirit in moving over the waters in the process of creation (Gen 1,2), renewing the face of the Earth (Ps 104,30), filling creation with God's presence (Wis 1,7), and being intimately present everywhere. This is one such reassuring quote:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning or settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
Even then your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast (Ps 139, 7-10).

She also points to the balance that the biblical writers find between God's transcendence and immanence. This is the God who is over and above all, but who is also present and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 128

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 128

engaged with all that is. God who holds all in the palm of God's hand is loving and compassionate. God is personally engaged in this anthropocosmic reality at all times and in all places, not only in human experience, but with deep love for all the living:

For you love all things that exist.  
You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living,  
For your imperishable spirit is in all things (Wis 11,24; 12,1).

The whole of the natural world is imbued with Spirit, and not to be denigrated or demeaned for its materiality. Heaven and Earth do really embrace.

Johnson moves then to the emergence in early Christian times of the Trinitarian instinct about God as both ineffable and present. In the depths of their experience, the early Christians had a sense of the ineffable Creator, had encountered Jesus present among them personally, and had a sense of his continuing resurrected presence with them. The post-resurrection faith of the community issues forth in this blessing: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you". (2 Cor 13, 10)

In the second century, Irenaeus was the first to attempt to capture this Trinitarian instinct more systematically. Around that time, Tertullian in Africa came up with various metaphors for the relationship between the Trinity and nature, a reference that recurs in Johnson's work. He uses nature metaphors such as sun and water, and root, shoot, and fruit of a tree to capture the presence of the incomprehensible God who is "unleashed" in the world. To take just one as Johnson presents it:

If God the Father can be likened to the sun, source of light and heat, then Christ is the ray of sunlight streaming to earth (Christ the sunbeam, of the same nature as the sun), and the Spirit is the suntan or sunburn, the spot of warmth where the sun actually arrives and has an effect.<sup>11</sup>

Subsequent developments in Trinitarian theology have at times become more conceptual and abstract, while at other times, they are enriched with understandings of the relationality within God's being and beyond. As part of her reclaiming of Spirit, Johnson appeals to Aquinas' sense of Spirit as "God proceeding by love," the bond of mutual unity and love in the inner life of the Trinity and in action in the world. The Spirit is indeed the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 131

“holy mystery of God’s own personal being”<sup>12</sup> who is continuously present and active in the process of continuous creation, a presence that demands our conscious attention as we respond to nature with wonder, and face the consequences of our waste.

### **Images of God as Wind, Water, Fire, Bird and Wisdom**

Images of God as the male, authoritarian figure in the sky, or in Heaven, do not serve us well as we seek to deepen our appreciation of God’s continuous presence in the community of life. The biblical tradition is rich with cosmic images that have been ignored while humans were at the centre of our world view and theology. For Johnson these images expand “the notion of divine presence beyond analogy with a human person.”<sup>13</sup> The other advantage is the dynamism inherent in images of powerful natural forces such as blowing wind, flowing water, and blazing fire. In her words, “they can surround and pervade other things without losing their own character; their presence is known by the changes they bring about.”<sup>14</sup> The animal metaphor that Johnson uses, the bird, long associated with the Sacred in primal religions, is an image which conjures up the experience of brooding and flying free. Her image of Holy Wisdom is an extension of her earlier Trinitarian work, this time with attention to Wisdom’s cosmic reach. For Johnson and for us, these images open up new avenues for thinking about God’s presence in the natural world, and for providing language for articulating such insights. I would say, by way of corollary, that this opening up of ways of imaging God is of particular relevance for ecospirituality. The biblical references can open our eyes to a long tradition of using analogies drawn from nature to capture a sense of God’s presence, and conversely, the encounter with natural forces can be interpreted with reference to the presence of Holy Mystery.

Johnson is quite lavish in her exploration of these images. She piles them up one on top of the other, and accumulates them into a rich picture of the dynamic presence of God in what she refers to as the community of life, and which I refer to as the Earth community. Perhaps my favourite is the image of “Ruach,” understood as wind or breath. When Earth Link was located on an escarpment of the D’Aguilar Range, we called the cottage by that name. It

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 134

had the biblical connotation, but also reflected the weather at that site! One of the things you notice about wind is that you cannot see it unless it is carrying particles, yet you can definitely feel it. Breath is a vital sign of life. In the biblical world of Genesis 1, 1-2, the ruach of God breathed the world into existence. It breathed life into dry bones, and reminded the people that the same could happen to them (Ezek 37, 1-4). The wind filled the room where the frightened disciples were gathered in the wake of the death of Jesus, and filled them with courage in the midst of their confusion (Acts 2, 2,4).

Johnson moves from the dynamism of wind to various forms of water, whether trickling or rushing, fresh or salt. Water makes up the biggest part of living organisms. To the people in exile wandering in the desert, Isaiah spoke of God's faithful presence in terms that they would understand: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry land" (Is 44, 3), and he assured them that God would bless their descendants. Again when the disciples were crowded together in fear, Peter reminded them of Joel's promise that God would pour out his Spirit on them (Acts 2, 18). Augustine made his own contribution to the understanding of God's presence permeating all of creation by likening it to a sponge saturated in water.<sup>15</sup> God's presence is not stinted but superabundant.

The picture builds up with the image of fire as a symbol of God's fiery and enlightening presence. Like wind and water, fire can also be destructive, and symbolic of God's wrath. The book of Exodus tells us that it was in the context of a burning bush that Moses received the revelation of who God is, and of his enduring presence with them on their journeys. God's flaming presence in the tongues of Pentecost fire set their hearts ablaze (Acts 2, 3-4). Even Stephen Hawking whose atheism is well known, and whose knowledge of and marvel at the wonders of the universe are also well known, asks the question "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?"<sup>16</sup> For those with a faith orientation, that fire is an analogy for the spark of the life-giving presence of the Spirit.

In the Mediterranean region, the bird is an ancient symbol of the feminine deity, and, in contemporary times, it is the widely used symbol of the peace dove. Crossing over to the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 174

Hebrew religious tradition, the protective aspect of the bird's wings features in passages such as Psalm 17, 8: "Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings." Early Syriac Christian imagery uses the brooding, motherly bird to describe the actions of the Spirit towards her children, and present in the conception, birth and death of Jesus. Augustine comments on the Genesis creation text which says that "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen 1, 2), likening that image to one where "the warmth of the mother's body in some way also supports the forming of chicks through a kind of influence of her own kind of love."<sup>17</sup> This animal image draws attention to the creative, nurturing role of the Spirit, and enhances our understanding of the relational presence of the Spirit.

In her final image Johnson revisits the Wisdom tradition, which featured prominently in her feminist imaging of Mother-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Spirit-Sophia. She again quotes Augustine who speaks of how the Wisdom of God "took our weakness upon herself and came to gather the children of Jerusalem under her wings as a hen gathers her chicks."<sup>18</sup> This is multilayered Wisdom Christology. Johnson points to the way in which the biblical figure of holy Wisdom has cosmic scope. She is present with God at creation (Ps 8 22.-31), is a teacher of "what is secret and what is manifest" (Wis 7, 22), is present, "pervading and penetrating all things" (Wis 7, 24), and defeats all evil (Wis 7, 29-30). This image of Wisdom points to the all-pervading presence who "reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and (she) orders all things well" (Wis 8, 1). Wisdom is identified with God's spirit in her attributes (Wis 7, 22), and, even more importantly, linked to the mystery of God's being as a "breath of the power of God" and an "image of his goodness" (Wis 7, 25-26). Johnson points out that while there is no direct identification of God and Wisdom, the way in which she moves and functions helps our understandings of the Spirit.

Johnson concludes by reminding us that "these symbols provide guidance for how to think about the hidden presence and activity of the Spirit of God in the natural world,"<sup>19</sup> a

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, I.36

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., I.36

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 143



presence which loves, pervades and vivifies, while remaining transcendent, incomprehensible Mystery.

### Understanding God's transcendent presence

Johnson now turns from biblical discourse with its more emotional, experiential approach to the "expansive presence of God in the world as infinite, life-giving love,"<sup>20</sup> to the philosophical conceptual discourse of Thomas Aquinas in so far as it contributes to understanding God's transcendent presence.

She begins exploring the personal presence of God to all creatures with the insights of Aquinas. In his quest to establish that "God alone is the source of everything,"<sup>21</sup> Aquinas worked with the notion of God as Being itself, while all else participates in or receives that that being as gift. Johnson adds Trinitarian theological insight to the mix, such that God's being is understood not as a static substance, but rather as a relational reality which Kasper captures as "self-communicating love."<sup>22</sup> To be in relation is not an optional extra, but of the very essence of Godself. This dynamic Trinitarian insight means that God's being is "self-giving love beyond imagining."<sup>23</sup>

Johnson goes on to consider the relations between God and all that is not God. The very act of creation sets up a relationship of dependence on the source and sustainer of all. For all things to have being, they must be in relation to Being itself, and Aquinas concludes that "God is in all things, and innermost."<sup>24</sup> Yet the distinction between Being itself and the recipient of being maintains the distinctiveness of each according to its own nature.

Johnson follows Aquinas as he asks if God is in all things, and she draws on his image of fire as she explains:

Just as fire ignites things and sets them on fire, the Spirit of God ignites the world into being. This obviously happens in the beginning but doesn't stop; just as the sun brightens the air all the day long, the presence of the Spirit sustains creatures with the radiance of being as long as these exist.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 143

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 144

<sup>22</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 156

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 145

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, I,8,1

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 146

She uses this symbol as an analogy for the Spirit dwelling in the innermost regions of the whole Universe. The everywhere-ness of the Spirit, to coin a word, is not tangible. It does not occupy space. Speaking of God's presence is faith language for the understanding that God is in all things and places, but not contained by them. Aquinas argues also that all things are in God. Contemporary theology calls this relationship panentheism, and Johnson's explanation is that "the world is indwelt by the presence of the Spirit while at the same time it is encompassed by divine presence which is always and everywhere greater."<sup>26</sup> Here, as in her previous work, she distinguishes it from pantheism which "conflates God and the world,"<sup>27</sup> and from unipersonal theism "which posits God as a transcendent cause."<sup>28</sup> Johnson espouses this widely held position as respecting both the immanence and transcendence of God, even as it opens up "a kind of asymmetrical mutual indwelling, not of two equal partners, but of the infinite God who dwells within all things sparking them into being and finite creatures who dwell within the embrace of divine love,"<sup>29</sup> insights which are of vital importance to the practice of ecospirituality within an emerging universe. This is when Heaven and Earth embrace.

Aquinas uses the notion of participation to understand this relationship further, a notion which Norris Clarke explains as having three elements: an infinite source, finite things, and a link between the two.<sup>30</sup> As Johnson explains Aquinas, God, in creating, bestows vitality "in a creaturely way to what is other than Godself."<sup>31</sup> In accepting this gift of being, all creatures share or participate in Being itself. The gift is freely given, and the receiver relies on the gift. This participation applies to all of the natural world, "not divinely, but as created, that is, existing and acting according to its own finite nature."<sup>32</sup> Johnson gives an example by considering "goodness." God alone is good, but creation which is rich and exuberantly alive partakes in that goodness. The more rich and diverse that creation the more God's goodness is reflected "for in knowing the excellence of the world we may speak

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 147

<sup>30</sup> W Norris Clarke, "The Meaning of Participation in St Thomas," *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 265

<sup>31</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 147

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 148

analogically about the One in whose being it participates.”<sup>33</sup> Johnson goes on to establish that we cannot denigrate the merely natural, when, in faith, we understand that it exists due to its participation in the fullness of God’s life.

The natural world, the entangled bank, is sacred. It is imbued with a spiritual presence which holds it in existence. It is the dwelling place of God. In Johnson’s words, “Earth is a physical place of extravagant dynamism that bodies forth the gracious presence of God. In its own way it is a sacrament and a revelation.” Its materiality embodies “the active presence of the holy Giver of life,” an understanding that is acted out in the sacraments of the Church, itself “constituted as a sacrament of Christ’s presence for the world.”<sup>34</sup> Matter does reveal, in the biblical sense of teaching us about God. It can be seen as a book that reveals in much the same way as does Scripture, an image favoured by Augustine, who exhorts people to observe Heaven and Earth and see the works of God.<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein, Hopkins observed and exclaimed that “the world is charged with the glory of God.”<sup>36</sup> This motif is present in *Laudato Si* where we are reminded that “God has written a precious book....a constant source of wonder and awe.”<sup>37</sup> Nature can also be “raw in tooth and claw,” and to that we must return, but Johnson does not explore those messages from nature at this juncture.

Awareness of nature as revelatory is not new in the Christian tradition, and it continues to be richly developed in the thought of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*. This is superb prose and rich food for ecospiritual reflection:

The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains, everything, are, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. For anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 149

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 151

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 68:6,” *Sermons III/3*, trans Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 225-6

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*, accessed 8 March, 2017.  
<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gods-grandeur>

<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home*, (hereafter *LS*), 85, accessed 8 March, 2017, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square, going back to those places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.<sup>38</sup>

And there is more. Edwards summarises these references in the encyclical:

Other creatures “speak” to us of God’s love, are a “caress” of God, a “precious book” whose letters are the multitude of created things, a “manifestation” of God, a “continuing revelation” of the divine, a “teaching” that God wishes to give us, a “message” from God, and a “divine manifestation.”<sup>39</sup>

Alongside the revelation from Scripture which Johnson richly presents, here is revelation from nature, before which we need to be open, attentive and aware.

The emerging universe is seen by science as natural. Faith encourages us to see it as the dwelling place of God who created it and sustains it in existence through the presence of the Spirit. It is sacred, and worthy of our respect, reverence and care. The emerging Universe is now known to be unfolding according to its own dynamics, and that raises new questions about the way in which God acts in the universe. It is to this that Johnson turns next.

As in the case of listening to diverse voices and their searches for God at the edges of established power which formed the subject matter of *Quest for the Living God*, Johnson’s listening to Darwin’s tangled bank and its evolutionary story causes her to pose a new question which takes her beyond the theology of God’s presence (which is relevant in either a static or evolutionary view). She asks, “If indeed the current design is the result of a long history that can be explained by natural laws known to us, how are we to understand not just the presence but the activity of God?”<sup>40</sup> The Universe is emerging through its own innate powers, yet Job’s reflection on the beasts reminds us that what is happening is due to the hand of God. How do these perspectives go together?

### The Action of the God of Love

God as monarch has been the dominant model for the God who rules directly over his subordinates and nature such that they predictably fulfil his design. Natural selection poses a significant disruption to that model because it manifests that variations have been

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<sup>38</sup> LS 84

<sup>39</sup> Denis Edwards, “ ‘Sublime Communion’: The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si*,” *Theological Studies*, 77, no.2 (2016), 384, doi: 10.1177/0040563916635119

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 154

occurring over eons of time. As Johnson points out, “the absence of direct design, the presence of genuine chance, the enormity of suffering and extinction and the ambling character of life’s emergence over billions of years are hard to reconcile with a simple monarchical idea of the Creator at work.”<sup>41</sup> So she poses a new dilemma: “How to understand the presence of the Spirit of God acting continuously to create in the light of evolutionary discoveries about the entangled bank?”<sup>42</sup>

The constructive new theological interpretation that she offers is that “God’s creative activity brings into being a universe endowed with the innate capacity to evolve by the operating of its own natural powers, making it a free partner in its own creation,”<sup>43</sup> a model based on love rather than power over. This is no deistic God who creates and then leaves the world to its own devices. This is no monarchical God who manages every detail. It is rather that the Giver of life “freely and generously invests nature with the power to organise itself and emerge into ever-new, more complex forms, and to do so according to its own ways of operating.”<sup>44</sup> It is always being called forward to newness while being empowered from within.

Johnson goes on to understand God’s action in the natural world as an extension of our understanding of God’s saving action throughout history. She draws on Rahner’s argument that “if we see the created world emerging, thanks to the self-giving love of God,”<sup>45</sup> then the most helpful framework is that of grace, or God’s graciousness. God’s action in Christ through the Spirit is currently the model of God’s action in creation. Johnson draws on various sources in the tradition which argue that God’s action in human beings enhances rather than detracts from their existence. Irenaeus’ famous saying is that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.”<sup>46</sup> God’s glory and human vitality are directly correlated.

Johnson draws on insights about grace as experienced by humans and extends them to all species. She infers that “the belief that God is faithful and acts consistently provides a warrant for thinking that as with humans, so too, with the natural world from which we have

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>46</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeresis*, 4.20.7, see also 3.20.2 and 5.3

evolved. The gracious God, Spirit proceeding as love in person, is present to bless and enhance natural powers rather than to compete with them. With such a love there can be no anxiety about control.”<sup>47</sup>

This love is lived out in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus understood as “compassionate self-giving love for the liberation of others,”<sup>48</sup> a love which flows over to all. This is a new take on God’s omnipotence as empowering rather than overpowering. It is love that enables the flourishing of the other and their autonomous development. God who dwells in the midst of creation empowers nature to work towards its own fullness. This allows for the emergence from lesser to greater complexity of life forms. Johnson summarises this paradigm of love in this way:

In a theological perspective, this whole process is empowered by the Creator who as love freely gifts the natural world with creative agency. Its relation to the living God is marked simultaneously by ontological dependence and operational autonomy.<sup>49</sup>

The action of the God of love enables natural processes, and the natural world enters into the process with its own integrity.

### **The relation between divine and created agency in an evolving world**

God’s action in evolutionary emergence is an area of considerable theological discussion. Johnson indicates that “a large cadre of theologians endorse the idea of nature’s independent working as shown by evolution. They diverge mightily, however, over how to think about the relation between divine and created agency in an evolutionary world.”<sup>50</sup> Johnson gives a snapshot of a range of positions: Single action theory (eg Gordon Kaufman et al), Top down causality (eg Arthur Peacocke), Causal joint theory (eg Polkinghorne), Organic model of world as body of God (eg Sallie McFague), Kenotic self-emptying love (eg John Haught), and Process thought (eg John Cobb).<sup>51</sup> Despite their considerable differences, they are all seeking to understand how “the creating God as ground, sustaining power, and goal of the evolving world acts by empowering the process from within” while respecting

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<sup>47</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 158

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 158

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 160

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 160

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162

“the freedom of the natural world to evolve consistently with its internal laws as discovered by contemporary science.”<sup>52</sup>

Johnson herself espouses the scholastic position of primary and secondary causality whose basic principle is that “the creative activity of God is accomplished in and through the free working of secondary causes.”<sup>53</sup> She argues that this position is still appropriate within a dynamic evolutionary world view, as it protects the distinction between Creator and created, while allowing for a sense of co-creation. Johnson establishes first the distinction between an ultimate cause and a proximate cause. One is the “Cause of all causes,” and the other participates in “the power to act, as things that are burning participate in the power of fire.”<sup>54</sup> She draws on Aquinas’ argument for the agency of creatures according to their own nature. She summarises: “It is characteristic of the creative power of God to raise up creatures who participate in divine being to such a degree that they are also creative and sustaining in their own right.”<sup>55</sup> Just as creatures participate in God’s being and goodness, they participate in God’s agency. God’s agency in creation gives creatures their own autonomous agency. God’s exercise of ultimate causality does not fill the gaps of any secondary or creaturely action:

God’s act is not a discrete ingredient that can be isolated and identified as a finite constituent of the world. In this sense the world necessarily hides divine action from us. The living God acts by divine power in and through the acts of finite agents which have genuine causal efficacy in their own right.

Johnson then discusses divine governance of the world where primary and secondary causality are related to final causation understood as “a creature’s innate tendency toward a goal.”<sup>56</sup> This self-direction, integral as it is to creatures, is a natural inclination toward good, and ultimately toward participation in divine goodness. In scholastic terms, God’s immanence is present as final cause, or in biblical terms, it is “reaching from one end of the world to the other” (Wis 8,1).

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 164

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 165

Johnson indicates how this understanding of God as immanent Ground of all Being is consonant with the evolutionary understanding of the autonomy of all that is. God as ultimate cause endows beings with their participation in divine being, agency, and goodness, which they then act out. God exercises power by giving causative power to others. God is not just another secondary power, but rather “the Spirit of God continuously interacts with the world to implement the divine purpose by granting creatures and created systems their full measure of efficacy.”<sup>57</sup>

The neo-Thomist position which Johnson adopts has its critics. Ian Barbour accepts its strengths in respecting the integrity of natural causal elements, but questions its effectiveness when it comes to random events. Johnson addresses this criticism later. Arthur Peacocke criticises those who use the analogy of artisan (eg lumberjack) and instrument (eg axe) to explain the neo-Thomist position as reducing God as artisan to being on the same level of causality as the instrument, and overlooking the autonomy of the natural world. Johnson agrees with this and indeed develops the criticism further. John Polkinghorne argues that this theory is an assertion without due consideration of how God’s purpose is acted out. Johnson critiques his causal-joint theory which allows for direct intervention as compatible with the indeterminate nature of open systems. She sees it as a violation of the intrinsic value of the natural order. She goes further to critique his idea of divine intervention as just another secondary cause.

Johnson asserts that the ultimate/proximate dynamic is effective only within the context of the “overarching notion of the Creator God as the absolute Living One, pure wellspring of being, and the concomitant notion of creaturely participation.”<sup>58</sup> For her that overarching conviction allows for the world to evolve in its own way while manifesting God’s Wisdom.

I am drawn to the “whole-part” and “top-down” model of Peacocke<sup>59</sup> when considering God’s action. In the case of emergent reality, the whole and the parts have different causal powers that are interrelated but independent. The whole transcends the parts, yet can have

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 166

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 168

<sup>59</sup> Arthur Peacocke, “Emergence, Mind, and Divine Action: The Hierarchy of the Sciences in Relation to the Human Mind-Brain-Body,” ed Philip Clayton, *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergent Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 275-277



a downward influence. Peacocke is careful to avoid any suggestion of direct divine intervention in specific aspects of the natural evolutionary process. He suggests that:

By analogy with the operation of the whole-part influence in natural systems, I have in the past suggested that, because of the 'ontological gap/s' between the world and God is/are located simply *everywhere* in space and time, God could affect holistically the state of the world (the whole in this context) at all levels. Understood in this way, the proposal implies that patterns of events at the physical, biological, human and even social levels could be influenced by divine intention without abrogating natural regularities at any of these levels.

This analogy is limited to the relationship between God's intention and the whole system which in turn influences the parts or various levels.

Peacocke also admits the limits of his approach when he says:

I hope that the model described above so far has a degree of plausibility in that it depends only on an analogy with complex natural systems in general and on the way whole-part influence operates in them. It is, however, too impersonal to do justice to the *personal* character of many (but not all) of the profoundest experiences of God.

The debate goes on. However, as a basis for ecospirituality, it is timely to recognise, with Peacocke, that "because of the 'ontological gap/s' between God and the world which must always exist in any theistic model, this is only an attempt at making intelligible that which we can postulate as being the initial effect of God experienced from, as it were, our side of the ontological boundary."

So what about the emergence of the new, of those chance occurrences which seem to be a mark of the evolutionary process? Biologically there is an interplay of law and chance. Johnson clarifies the meaning of these terms:

Law refers to an orderly suite of natural forces that govern how the universe works. These principles, read off from the regularities observed in the world, hold true in all ordinary circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

Law accounts for predictability in what could otherwise be chaos. Law is not pre-ordained, but is based on description and analysis of what is happening. Chance, on the other hand refers to "the crossing of two independent causal chains that intersect for no known reasons that can be figured out in advance."<sup>61</sup> This is the realm of the unexpected, of open-

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<sup>60</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 169

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 170

endedness. When law and chance work together there is scope for newness with some constraint, such as when natural selection deems that variations more suited to the environment thrive while other variations do not endure.

When it comes to theological reflection on the interplay of law and chance, Johnson indicates that “theology has traditionally allied God with lawful regularity,”<sup>62</sup> with having a plan and a purpose. There are definitely laws in nature which can be understood to reflect “the faithfulness of the living God, reliable and solid as a rock.”<sup>63</sup> However, the evolutionary emergence of the new, apparently by chance, can be seen as reflecting “the infinite creativity of the living God, endless source of new possibilities.”<sup>64</sup> This newer emphasis on creativity points to the way in which “the natural world participates in its own creation.”<sup>65</sup> The Creator Spirit is present in these processes. As Johnson puts it, “Divine Love empowers the structure of creation which operates with its own integrity, all the while supporting unfolding events as they weave into regular patterns toward the realization of an ever more complex whole.”<sup>66</sup>

Evolutionary emergence has opened up new understandings of matter. This is known in some circles as the new materiality. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the Universe is evolving from “inanimate to animate to intentional states, emerging into greater complexity from within.”<sup>67</sup> In that process a new biological form can emerge which “gathers up what has preceded it, shaping this material into a more complex unity. What emerges has distinctly different properties and functions from what went before, though still composed of the same fundamental matter.”<sup>68</sup> It transcends yet includes what went before. Such understandings challenge the view of matter as inert and static, (an attitude typical of philosophical dualism), and stress instead its emergent properties.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 173

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 173

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 174

Turning to theology, Johnson refers to Rahner who speaks of matter's "capacity to transcend itself."<sup>69</sup> Rahner considers firstly the dynamic unity of matter and spirit in the human person. Body, mind and spirit act as one. By extension, Rahner suggests that "matter develops out of its own inner being in the direction of spirit."<sup>70</sup> This capacity for self-transcendence is innate, not something added on. He understands this as a process of becoming whereby nature "reaches an inner increase of being proper to itself...and does this not by adding something on but from within."<sup>71</sup> Rahner takes this insight into an understanding of divine presence as something so intrinsic to the creature that "the finite being is empowered by it to achieve a really *active* self-transcendence and does not merely receive this new reality passively effected by God."<sup>72</sup> Matter can emerge into life and into spirit, into a relationship with Divine presence active within.

Johnson calls to mind those theologians who are exploring new artistic metaphors to capture something of the relation of the Giver of Life to the cosmos unfolding autonomously from within. The Creator Spirit is likened to the composer of a fugue who builds up a composition from a theme which is embellished in counterpoint. The Spirit can be likened to a jazz musician who improvises spontaneously on a theme, or an improviser in a dramatic performance. Similarly the Spirit is likened to a choreographer creating in collaboration with the dance troupe, or the designer of a game of cards. Gone is the controlling ruler. Rather the quest is for an understanding of faith that renders a fair account of the intense creative activity of both Creator and creation."<sup>73</sup> For Johnson a theology of the Spirit contributes much to this quest. For her, "infinite mystery of self-giving love, the Creator Spirit calls the world into being, gifts it with dynamism, and accompanies it through the by-ways of evolution, all the while attracting it toward a multitude of 'endless forms most beautiful'."<sup>74</sup> The action of the Spirit is based on loving respect for creaturely freedom and autonomy.

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<sup>69</sup> Karl Rahner, "Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World", *Theological Studies*, 5 (1975), 164

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 165

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 175

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 162

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 178

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 178

Johnson returns to the biblical images of the Spirit—blowing wind, flowing water, burning fire, brooding bird, holy Wisdom—who moves with the dynamic and creative community of life. Job’s faith vision when he looks at the beasts and the diversity of Darwin’s tangled bank can work together, giving intrinsic value to the natural world in its own right and as the dwelling place of God.

Recognition of the intrinsic value of all reality is a new insight for official Catholic thought, and receives vigorous attention in *Laudato Si*. In Catholic thought up until now, we have been exhorted to care for creation because of its importance to humans, a social justice perspective with merit, but which is not inclusive of the whole of reality. Pope Francis exhorts people to respect and protect ecosystems. They are created in love.<sup>75</sup> Humans do use them, but that use is tempered by a new awareness:

We take these systems into account, not only to determine how best to use them, but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system.<sup>76</sup>

Johnson firmly establishes that ecosystems are valuable because “the Spirit of God dwells in them,”<sup>77</sup> and they are the locus of our encounter with God. In them Heaven and Earth embrace, to use the metaphor of this thesis. The Earth community is moving toward fullness in God at the end of time. This is a message that resonates when considering Christ in his life, death and resurrection in solidarity with groaning creation, a topic to which Johnson turns next.

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<sup>75</sup> *LS*, 76

<sup>76</sup> *LS*, 140

<sup>77</sup> *LS*, 88



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## Chapter 9 Creation Groaning yet Filled with Hope.

Pain, suffering and death are present in biological evolution as a necessary condition of survival of the individual and transition to new forms long before the appearance of human beings on the scene. So the presence of pain, suffering and death cannot be the result of any particular human actions, though undoubtedly human beings experience them with a heightened sensitivity, and more than any other creature, inflict them on each other.<sup>1</sup>

The evolutionary story is marked by break down as well as creativity. Darwin's findings remind us that evolution comes at a cost. His theory of descent with modification raised new questions about the value and inevitability of suffering and death. Johnson addresses these questions in the chapter where she "links the Creator Spirit present and active in the world with the love of God made known in the death and resurrection of Christ, beginning with the groaning and then moving to hope."<sup>2</sup>

### Beginning with Groaning

We know from her previous work that Johnson has given serious consideration to this question as it has been developing in the wake of the Holocaust disaster. In *SHE WHO IS*, Johnson considered the mission of Jesus-Sophia and his suffering and death, indicating as they do that evil does not have the final word. She rejects any justification of suffering in favour of a theology of solidarity:

What comes clear in the event, however, is not Jesus' necessary passive victimisation divinely decreed as a penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human* (Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 1993), 68-69

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 184

human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost.<sup>3</sup>

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson needs to go further to make meaning of Paul's observation in his letter to the Romans: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now" (Roms 8, 22). He includes the whole of creation in the suffering and the promise of the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Roms 8, 21).

Johnson notes that biologically the emergence of sentience also meant the emergence of the capacity for experiencing pain, as well as forms of heightened awareness which can serve to alert species to danger. The greater the sensitivity, the greater the capacity for suffering and for pleasure. Fossil records bear witness to the extinctions, not only of individuals, but sometimes whole species. Natural selection means that some less well adapted species come to an end creating more opportunity for the better adapted. Johnson confines her observations to "extinctions that happen spontaneously in nature apart from the actions of the human species."<sup>4</sup> She returns later to the topic of the actions of humans with due attention to its gravity. The extinctions Johnson is considering are morally neutral. Similarly, no-one was to blame for the fate of the minor-bird chick that I saw recently. It had fallen from the nest, and was trying in vain to make its way back up the tree, only to keep falling and losing ground. I would not be optimistic about its future, even though its parents were trying to fend off further potential harm from other species. Johnson notes the inevitability of such pain and death: "The laws known to us which have brought about the entangled bank, so pleasing in its beauty, have also rendered it a place of pain and death."<sup>5</sup>

Johnson goes on to theologically frame the conversation that is needed about this reality. As she did with the question of human suffering, Johnson rejects theodicy which seeks to "construct a rational defence of God's goodness and power in a world where evil occurs."<sup>6</sup> Such justification creates a situation of passive acceptance of enormous suffering and the

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 156

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 185

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 187

political and economic situations that can give rise to it.<sup>7</sup> Rather she seeks “a theological inquiry that takes the evolutionary function of affliction at face value and seeks to reflect on its workings in view of the God of Love made known in revelation.”<sup>8</sup> She stays with what she has learned from her study of Darwin, and seeks to address that suffering independently of human ethical responsibilities. In the process she differentiates herself from the likes of Celia Deane-Drummond and John Haught who are concerned to engender resistance to, rather than passive acceptance of the inevitability of suffering and death in creation. Johnson acknowledges that such resistance is very important, but wishes to begin her explorations in this chapter by listening to the beasts, by acknowledging “the finite character of the natural world and...its role in the evolutionary process.”<sup>9</sup> She affirms this as an expression of the autonomy of natural processes.<sup>10</sup> From that starting point she indicates that “the most fundamental move theology can make...is to affirm the compassionate presence of God in the midst of the shocking enormity of pain and death.”<sup>11</sup> God in the Hebrew scriptures is a God of pathos, variously delighted and full of lament for the devastation of land and people. The Christian tradition is built on the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, one who entered into the beauty and the pain of an earthly existence, to the point of dying a tortuous death. However, in the experience of encountering the resurrected Christ, the tradition came to the belief that the death of Jesus was not the end, but indeed part of a new creation which forms the basis of hope. Johnson now seeks to explore the connection between the groaning of creation and the God of Love,

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson would probably agree with Delio’s suggestion that the real theodicy question is “not why God allows bad things to happen to good people, but why we abandon God in the face of suffering.” See Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, God, Evolution, and the Power of Love*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2014), 83

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 187

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 191

<sup>10</sup> The autonomy of created reality is also supported in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home*, (hereafter *LS*), 2, accessed 8 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), 99: “One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole without thereby impinging on its autonomy.”

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 191

and draws on her earlier exploration of God present in Jesus Christ in solidarity in the midst of suffering.

In the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis is also very aware of the groaning of creation, but whereas Johnson is intent on “listening to the beasts,” his focus is on the Earth-human interaction, and he quickly looks at human causes even as he reminds us of our kinship with groaning Earth:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. *Nothing in this world is indifferent to us.*<sup>12</sup>

## Moving to Hope

Johnson finds “the deepest point of connection with the groaning of creation”<sup>13</sup> in the identification by the post resurrection community of Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us. In identifying Jesus with the Hebrew personification of Wisdom, they linked him with the “creative, revealing, and saving presence of God”<sup>14</sup> acting in the world. The Johannine community recognised him as the Word, as the “coming of God’s personal self-expressing Word, full of loving kindness and faithfulness, into the world.”<sup>15</sup> The Word was creative and life-giving in continuity with the Genesis narrative, and that Word assumed flesh in the person of Jesus. This self-utterance of God became flesh and lived among them. This was not a mere appearance, but as Johnson puts it, it was “taking the ancient theme of God’s dwelling among the people of Israel a step further.” It “affirms that in (a) new and saving

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<sup>12</sup> *LS*, 2

<sup>13</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 193

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 194



event the Word *became* flesh, entered into the sphere of the material to shed light on all forms within.”<sup>16</sup>

The Danish theologian Niels Gregersen coined the phrase “deep incarnation” which Johnson explains as “this radical divine reach through human flesh all the way down into the very tissue of biological existence with its growth and decay, joined with the wide processes of evolving nature that beget and sustain life.”<sup>17</sup> Creator and created are radically connected in the person of Jesus. Jesus in turn is radically connected to the stuff of the universe. As Gregersen says, Jesus bears “the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life story of the Earth.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus is bonded, not only to humans whose form he took, but to the Universe which gave rise to his matter. In the Incarnation, Jesus assumes the universe, not just human flesh.

This understanding is a distinct contribution of Christianity, given its core belief in the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Our understanding of both God and the universe are impacted by the notion that “the one transcendent God who creates and empowers the world freely chooses to join this world in the flesh, so that it becomes a part of God’s own divine story forever.”<sup>19</sup> The incarnation has implications for all created reality. It is united with God in a new way. Pope John Paul II puts this very clearly:

The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense of everything that is ‘flesh’: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The ‘first-born of all creation’, becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of humanity—which is also ‘flesh’—and in this reality with all ‘flesh’, with the whole of creation.<sup>20</sup>

Jesus became incarnate in the whole of creation, “harsh, perilous, mighty, universal, impenetrable, and mortal though this material stuff be.”<sup>21</sup> Johnson reminds us that Teilhard

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 195

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 196

<sup>18</sup> Niels Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001), 192-207

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 197

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Lord and Giver of Life, On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*, 50, accessed 31 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_18051986\\_dominum-et-vivificantem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html),

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 198

de Chardin appreciated all of matter as a divine milieu “charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused by the Incarnate Word.”<sup>22</sup> This deep incarnation of God in matter is a vital union with many consequences for engaging spiritually in an emerging Universe.

## Revealing the Heart of God

In Jesus Christ we gain remarkable insight into the way in which God relates to the world. We learn that God’s creative dream for the world is indeed good news for all, especially the lost, the lowly, and also the lilies of the field. He worked for the wellbeing of all reality in a way that integrated body, mind and spirit. In the words of McFague, “liberating, healing and inclusive love is the meaning of it all.”<sup>23</sup> And that love is inclusive of all parts of any ecosystem.

Jesus paid a very high price for this commitment. He suffered an excruciating death at the hands of his captors. As distinct from the suffering and death that is integral to the evolutionary process, the death of Jesus was “a contingent event resulting from an expedient decision by political authorities. Far from being the result of a natural process, the crucifixion was historical, unpredictable, unjust, the result of human sin.”<sup>24</sup> Here the relation between the Creator God and creation is expressed in a new way. God’s immersion in matter involved dying, a “seemingly non-godly characteristic.”<sup>25</sup> Paul in Philippians saw Jesus Christ as one who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born human, and becoming obedient, even to death on a Cross” (Phil 2.7). This is a far cry from the model of an omnipotent and distant monarch. Instead it reveals a God who is “self-emptying, self-limiting, vulnerable, self-giving, in a word, creative Love in action.”<sup>26</sup>

In the biblical tradition, there is a strong sense of God’s compassionate presence with suffering creation. As the Israelites wandered in the desert after their escape from oppression in Egypt, God assured Moses that he “knew” of their suffering (Exodus 3,7). Johnson points out that “what is new in view of the cross is divine participation in pain and

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<sup>22</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 70

<sup>23</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 161

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 202

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

death from *within* the world of the flesh. Now the incarnate God knows through personal experience, so to speak.”<sup>27</sup> She sums this up very concisely: “God suffers.”<sup>28</sup>

Classical theology has long sought to hold together an understanding of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus which they have expressed as a hypostatic union. Johnson draws on the more contemporary theology of Walter Kasper who points to the unexpected, shocking death of Jesus on the cross as “the unsurpassable self-definition of God.”<sup>29</sup> This suffering, freely chosen, is an expression of love.

Humans in the intensity of their suffering find here a God with whom they can identify, a God who cries out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27, 46, 50) Drawing on Moltman, Johnson points out that:

It is as if by inhabiting the inside of the isolating shell of death, Christ crucified brings divine life into closest contact with disaster, setting up a gleam of light for all others who suffer in that same annihilating darkness.<sup>30</sup>

This is a personal message, and it is also a political one. Liberation theologians see in the death of Jesus an expression of solidarity with others who die by edict of political leaders. It is also an ecological message. Johnson again draws on Gregersen’s understanding of deep incarnation when she says:

The logic of deep incarnation gives a strong warrant for extending divine solidarity from the cross into the groan of suffering and the silence of death of all creation. All creatures come to an end; those with nervous systems know pain and suffering. Jesus’ anguished end places him among this company.<sup>31</sup>

In Jesus, God enters into the evolving world and the inevitability of pain and death, or in the words of *Laudato Si*, “One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross.”<sup>32</sup> Johnson quotes this reflection of Arlen Gray on the last words of Jesus on the cross because they sum up, in very dramatic language, biblical and doctrinal teaching on the death of Jesus:

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 203

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 203

<sup>29</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 194

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 204

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 205

<sup>32</sup> *LS*, 99

I suddenly understood that in his final death scream Jesus gathered up all of the earth's suffering throughout all time, bound it up and presented it before the heavenly throne, not in reams of words but in a sacred package encompassing the sorrows, the sufferings, the lost dreams of all creation, all peoples, all times, all conditions, and carried it directly to the pulsing, loving heart of the living trinity, where it is now. Jesus screams, and he, full of grace and truth, thereby took his and all anguish and transfigured it into a means of touching God.<sup>33</sup>

There was and is more to the experience of Jesus in his identification with material reality. There must be, or we would not be talking about the Christ event some centuries later. Johnson does not espouse any notion that Jesus' resurrection was a return to his former biological state, yet it conveys a message about physicality. The followers of Jesus experienced him as risen, not only in spirit but also in his body. They had a strong sense of encounter with him after his death, and recognised him as the "firstborn of all creation" (Col 1, 15). Death is not the whole of the story, either for Jesus or for our valuable Earth. The Pauline community understood this as the beginning of something new, as the promise of fullness of life.

Johnson takes Gregersen's deep incarnation into deep resurrection which she says "extends the risen Christ's affiliation to the whole natural world."<sup>34</sup> The risen Christ takes corporeality in all its manifestations into the heart of God. Christ freely became part of the emerging universe, experienced its limits, gave of himself unto death, and moved beyond that into fullness of life in God. Johnson draws attention to the moment in the Easter liturgy when it is celebrated that all creation shares in the transition from darkness to light:

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour,  
Radiant in the brightness of your King!  
Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!  
Darkness vanishes forever!

Death is the preface to life and to a new mode of relationship for Christ, for us and for all creation. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si*, "The creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and

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<sup>33</sup> Arlen Gray, privately published meditation, shared in personal correspondence with Elizabeth Johnson.

<sup>34</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 208

the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.”<sup>35</sup> Or in the words of Delio, “finite life is released from its limits to become part of something more than itself, a new whole of cosmotheandric life, new relatedness with God and cosmos that we name the risen Christ.”<sup>36</sup> We have a source of hope for the whole community of life in Christ’s solidarity with the emerging Universe.

### In the Beginning

In the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis points to the biblical understanding that “the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected.”<sup>37</sup> His context is the chapter called “The Gospel of Creation.” Johnson’s context is her Trinitarian theology which is in dialogue with the evolution of species in the light of the theories of Darwin. She began with continuing creation (*creatio continuo*) as she said that this best suited her dialogue with Darwin and the beasts. Now she looks at creation “beyond time,”<sup>38</sup> namely in the beginning (*creatio originalis*) and in the new creation (*creatio nova*).

Johnson begins with an important orientation to thinking and theologising about issues which are not open to observation, such as creation and the end times. Science postulates about how things began, and where they are going, and is continually making advances. Theology engages with the how and the why and where to, based on “the living tradition’s knowledge of God’s graciousness given through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.”<sup>39</sup> These are faith assertions emerging from the lived experience of grace in the present, extended to beginnings and endings. They are not based on empirical data, but rather “predicated backward and forward beyond time, to where no experience can go.”<sup>40</sup>..Their strength comes from the sense that “as the living God is now, so God was and will be.”<sup>41</sup> The faith assertion of the Jewish people was that the God who liberated them in the Exodus, and who would redeem them when in exile, was the one who created all that is, and who will be

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<sup>35</sup> *LS*, 100

<sup>36</sup> Delio, *Wholeness*, 201

<sup>37</sup> *LS*, 73

<sup>38</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 212

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 212

faithful into a blessed future. Johnson adopts this “hermeneutic of the present experience of grace”<sup>42</sup> to link the God of the beginning with the God of the end, and make the case for the action of Holy Mystery in creating life and working towards its ultimate fulfilment beyond death.

Johnson turns to the message from the beasts that they are created. They “do not explain or ground themselves, but are brought into being by God’s creative word.”<sup>43</sup> Creation is a gift from the Giver of life. Matter itself is not divine.<sup>44</sup> Johnson reads the creation narratives of the first two chapters of Genesis with a focus on the beasts, birds, plants and fish, and identifies the religious message of both that “God is the Maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them.”<sup>45</sup> Later, when Christianity encountered the Greco-Roman world, it distinguished itself from pantheism, and gnosticism by capturing this key belief with the expression of “*creatio ex nihilo*,” creation from absolutely nothing. Johnson considers three possible meanings of creation from nothing. Firstly that there is only one source of all that is, namely Infinite Mystery. Secondly it signals the goodness of all things, including material creatures, and thirdly it signals that the existence of the world is a free gift—not a necessity, but an act of God’s own gracious, loving will.<sup>46</sup> Reality, as created, is God’s good gift given in love.

Contemporary evolutionary science challenges any notion that creation happened literally in a week as depicted in the mythic narratives of Genesis. Knowledge about the emergence of the Universe, currently dated around 13.7 billion years ago, does not challenge the basic premise of Genesis that “whatever the manner in which the present world came into being, it would still be ontologically grounded in God’s creative act.”<sup>47</sup> This grounding is also a feature of God’s continuous creation of both Universe and species. The emergence of life around four billion years ago and the subsequent flourishing of species find their ultimate ground in “the God of Love as creating Source.”<sup>48</sup> In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the God

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 213

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 215

<sup>44</sup> This point is also clearly made in *LS*, 78

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 215

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 216

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 218

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 208

who created does not use creation to wreak havoc, despite the reality of drought, floods and fires. God entered into a covenant relationship with “every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth” (Gen 9, 16), which is an assurance of God’s presence and remembering from the beginning and into the future.

### At the End

As Johnson considers *creatio nova* (the new creation) at the end of time, she faces squarely some of the scientific hypotheses about the inevitability of the Universe, the sun and species coming to an end, and distinguishes scientific from religious perspectives. She indicates that there is uncertainty about whether the universe is on track to an implosion or an explosion. It is agreed that the Sun is half-way through its life and that its potential development into a red giant, maybe in about five billion years, will bring about the end of our planet and life as we know it.

Religious thought has had a preoccupation with the end times since the first century which has given rise to apocalyptic language and scenarios. Mind you, there was much of that around at the end of the last millennium as well! It does contain a message of hope, despite signs to the contrary. As noted above, Johnson highlights that such future scenarios are extrapolated from current knowledge and experience. She sums it up this way: “What such speech does do is affirm the core conviction that all of reality exists within the embrace of God’s gracious love, and that it is going toward a fulfilment yet to come.”<sup>49</sup> Just as the creation story places reality in God’s hands, the end times are about a return to the fullness of the love that originated, sustained and will draw it into wholeness beyond its finite existence.

Johnson turns next to cosmic redemption where she considers the inclusion of all of creation in the process of redemption. The motifs of “atonement, satisfaction and sacrifice”<sup>50</sup> have dominated theological understandings for some time. She attributes the origins of this preoccupation to Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, although she recognises that in his hands this was about recognising God’s mercy in making satisfaction for the sinfulness of finite humans. This descended into an exaltation of “Jesus’ necessary passive victimisation, divinely decreed

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 221

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 223

as a penalty for sin.”<sup>51</sup> Our primary identity became that of sinner, an identity that still dominates the language of liturgical practice. Johnson points to developments during the last century which enshrine the centrality of “the mystery of grace poured out in the crucified and risen Jesus,”<sup>52</sup> yet use concepts such as “liberation, reconciliation, healing, justification, victory over the powers, living in peace, fullness of life, being freed from slavery, adoption and new birth as God’s children,”<sup>53</sup> as ways of interpreting the centrality of the experience of redemption. A study of cosmic redemption has been more recent.

Johnson begins by revisiting scriptural texts which are inclusive of the whole of creation, for example the hymn in Colossians which celebrates Jesus in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the Cross” (Col 1, 20). The book of Revelation envisions the end time when all things will be made new (Rev 21, 5). Johnson acknowledges the more cosmic scope of theologies of redemption in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, before taking up Rahner’s discussion of the cross. He highlights God’s gift of grace in creation, and the offer of forgiveness through the Incarnation. Liberation comes from the realization of God’s love and forgiveness, rather than from the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the Cross. Rahner was influenced by a school of thought coming from the Franciscan Duns Scotus who maintained that the incarnation would have taken place whether human beings had sinned or not,”<sup>54</sup> a position that distinguished him from that taken by Aquinas and others who would argue that “the world was created good; our first parents sinned, ruining their relationship with God; therefore, in mercy, the Son of God became incarnate and died in order to restore the relationship.”<sup>55</sup> Scotus’ position, in contrast, is about the dynamic of God’s unfathomable love which is always actively seeking union. The death of Jesus is still about redemption, but Johnson interprets its efficacy here, as in her earlier work, “not in satisfaction rendered to a God whose honor has been violated, but in the presence of divine love in the flesh enacting an historical solidarity with all who suffer and die.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 158

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 223

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 223

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 226

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 226

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 226



And so for the community of life, which is not capable of sinning, but which manifests its finitude at every moment, its transfiguration is part of resurrection hope. The bodily Jesus rose into a new creation which foreshadows the future for all reality. Johnson summarises: “Christ carries the whole creation towards its destiny. His resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of all flesh. Or so Christians hope.”<sup>57</sup> This is the language of faith, the faith that “the encompassing mystery enacted in Jesus Christ through the Spirit bears creation forward with an unimaginable promise toward a final fulfilment when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15, 28).”<sup>58</sup>

Johnson concludes her reflection on this movement in hope and faith into fullness of life in God with a consideration of animal Heaven. At one level, I wondered why this question mattered, until I read some of the positions that exclude all other-than-human species from the vision of wholeness and fullness of life in God. For example, Aquinas, as presented by Johnson, sees plants and animals as valuable only for their usefulness to humans, and so when humans cease to need them, they will have no future. Those who see the “symmetry” between creation and redemption, to use Santmire’s framework, recognise the biophysical world as created and valuable in its own right, and for them this position of Johnson’s is feasible:

Affirming that the promise of new creation includes all creatures as individuals in a way appropriate to their nature is not a foolish construal. Based on the belief that the Giver of life indwells each creature to empower its life within the evolutionary process, and that the same Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ accompanies each creature in its pain and dying, this position figures it would be discordant with the fibre of creative love to allow any creature just to disappear.<sup>59</sup>

I note with some amusement, that Johnson drawing on Edwards, allows for some separation between mosquito Heaven and human Heaven!

To this point, Johnson’s scope has been defined by Darwin’s scope, and her focus has been on the “theological meaning of the natural world of life.”<sup>60</sup> She has not allowed the intensity of her gaze to veer towards an anthropocentric view where the natural world could derive

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 233

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., xv

its meaning only from its human connection. In this she really attempts to listen to the beasts. She summarises what she hears:

Continuously fired into being by the Giver of life, the living world is the dwelling place of God. Ontologically dependent on the Creator, it is empowered with the autonomy befitting a finite creature to operate freely in the course of its own evolution. In solidarity with the perishing of Christ who shares its flesh, it is a groaning, cruciform world, destined for resurrection. Existing in absolute dependence on its Maker, it bears the promise of new eschatological life, heading toward a final fulfilment, thanks to the *Alpha* and *Omega* whose fidelity knows no end.<sup>61</sup>

Her gaze has been on “those who have been silenced.”<sup>62</sup> It is now time to look at those who have done the silencing and revisit their relationship to the community of life, and the ethical responsibilities that flow from that.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 235

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., xv





## Chapter 10 Humans in the Community of Life

The title of Johnson's chapter, "Enter the Humans" points to both the continuity and the discontinuity between the species that she has been considering thus far and the human species. Our materiality is continuous with the stuff of stardust, and "we humans...share a genetic heritage with every other species of the tree of life, a biological kinship encoded in each cell of our body."<sup>1</sup> Our distinguishing capacities of "self-reflective consciousness and freedom,"<sup>2</sup> or of "mind and will" to use the classical terms, were new capacities for the Universe. This, of course, is consistent with the worldview which is the vision of this thesis, and for which I am using the symbol of the celtic triquetra.

### Humans within Evolution

Johnson locates *homo sapiens* within the story of evolution. Our story is out of Africa, with the emergence of primates, which diversified into gorilla, chimpanzee and hominid lines.<sup>3</sup> Our immediate hominin ancestors, *Australopithecus*, were bipedal, and moved increasingly to live in the open savannah rather than in the forests. The earliest expression of the genus homo was *homo habilis*, and according to the fossil records, it and its successors had physical capacities and cultural abilities that indicate the development of mental processes. This was not a linear development in any one geographical location. Variations on the theme are being found in various parts of Africa, Europe and Asia, and many of the lines died out to the point where *homo sapiens* is now the only survivor.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 237

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 236

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 237 Note that "many of our extinct ancestors are now called hominins. But it's not technically wrong to call them hominids—all members of Hominini are also members of the subfamily Homininae and the family Hominidae." Refer to <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/whats-in-a-name-hominid-versus-hominin-216054/#mAI3IZOzILQHW8kZ>, 99, accessed 31 March, 2017

Johnson points out the distinguishing characteristics of *homo sapiens* as “self-consciousness, use of language, and tremendous fluidity in behaviour.”<sup>4</sup> Given the importance of establishing the evolutionary emergence of mind, I am also drawing on Bellah’s work where he parallels the developmental stages of children with that of the development of human culture. He identifies that children pass through stages which he names unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual representation.<sup>5</sup> He notes the similarity between his work and that of Donald’s framework of episodic, mimetic, mythic and theoretic stages of human culture.<sup>6</sup> The unitive/episodic stage is evident in mammals that have attention and intention, characteristics that we share with them. The enactive/mimetic stage (ca 2mya) is marked by the early human capacity for “mime, imitation, skill and gesture,”<sup>7</sup> which are uniquely human features. At a later stage (ca 250,000-100,000ya) there is evidence of the capacity for mythic/symbolic thought which Bellah presents as “a unified, collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors-beyond episodic to a comprehensive modelling of the entire human universe.”<sup>8</sup> At this stage there is a capacity for narrative and for ritual which is a feature of tribal societies of the time. There is also a capacity for making meaning. It is, however, with the transition from tribal to archaic societies (ca 1,000 BCE) that we see what is commonly known as the beginning of civilisation. Conceptual/theoretical cultures such as that of Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia bear all the signs of religious practices. Bellah draws on the work of Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilisations*,<sup>9</sup> to draw this conclusion which I think points to the emergence of human capacity for religion as part of human development:

My reading of Trigger’s study reinforces my sense that what makes archaic society different from its predecessors is a complex religio-political transformation that gives rise to two ideas that are essentially new in the world: kingship and divinity, in many ways two parts of a single whole.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 117

<sup>6</sup> Merlin Donald, *Origin of the Modern Mind: Three Stages in the Evolution of Culture and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991)

<sup>7</sup> Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 125

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>9</sup> Bruce G Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilisations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

<sup>10</sup> Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 212

Johnson in her turn marvels at the “intellectual and volitional powers”<sup>11</sup> of the mind which science explains in terms of its material functions, but which can be seen as evidence of the emergence of new capacities which require new levels of explanation. She points out that the field of understanding mind-brain relationships is a very lively area of research currently.

She goes on to highlight the distinctiveness of human consciousness which by now is a player in the very process of evolution. She indicates some ways in which the human is described:

In view of their singular self-reflective inwardness, cognitive powers, and freedom of action, their philosophers describe them as persons composed of body and soul, rational animals, spirited selves, embodied spirits, spirit in the world. Religious teachers add that they are created in the divine image and likeness, being a complex unity whose body comes from the dust of the earth, and whose soul is breathed into them by God, each one gifted with unique dignity.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly at this point Johnson does not begin her consideration of the relationship between humans and the rest of the community of life. She leaves this quest until a little later when she develops a Christian anthropology which builds on her sense of human embeddedness in the evolution of life on Earth, and takes that through the process of retrieval that characterises her work on the patriarchal suppression of women and its effects on their spirituality.

I am at a point where I do not see the necessity for a theology that posits the direct creation of each individual human “soul” as the basis of human dignity, distinctiveness, and the capacity to relate to the divine. Just as Darwin’s findings gave the lie to the direct creation of every individual species, I believe that an understanding of the evolutionary emergence of the human with the capacity for self-reflective consciousness and freedom can give the lie to the direct creation of every soul, without the loss of an appreciation of the uniqueness of each person and their capacity to relate to their Creator.

In like vein, I do not think that humans alone are the *imago Dei*. This has traditionally been related to their distinguishing capacities for self-reflective consciousness and freedom. Understanding the whole community of life as sacramental and reflective in a finite way of

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<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 239

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 240

the infinite God opens the way for recognising the whole of reality as imaging God, without any presumption of understanding God's incomprehensibility.

### Negative Human Impacts on the Community of Life

Johnson moves next to ethical considerations. The human species is currently having a very mixed impact on the community of life, of which it is part. The richness of its biodiversity is threatened. The moment is now for facing and addressing negative human impacts. Johnson draws on McKibben's work *Eearth*<sup>13</sup> and other sources to paint a picture of the geophysical effect that humans are now having on this planet, and draws specific attention to population growth, resource consumption, pollution and the extinction of species which document the reality of an Earth in crisis. She concludes:

If human beings were to wake up to the grandeur of the dying world, fall in love with life and change their behaviour to protect it, much of the current dying off could be slowly brought under control. But in our day the dire situation appears to be accelerating, with humanity's rapacious habits driving species to extinction faster than new species are able to evolve. The tree of life is thinning out.<sup>14</sup>

Johnson moves from the scenario of destruction to a call to conversion, in much the same way as *Laudato Si* moves from its statement of the problems according to the best knowledge available to a vision of integral ecology and to a call to action at every level of society. There are good reasons for attending to the state of the planet. One is intergenerational in the sense of maintaining the planet for future generations. Johnson refers to Haught's sense of the "promissory character of the natural world...(which) is due to the inexhaustible vitality of God who created it."<sup>15</sup> The evolving world manifests the potential for increasing complexity and vibrancy. It is full of promise that we cannot abort by our carelessness. Johnson adds the theological perspective which should urge us to greater responsibility:

In its continuous creation by the empowering spirit, its redeeming solidarity in the flesh of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, its origin and ultimate future in the faithful love of the creator, and its sacramental and revelatory character in all concrete beauty, suffering and surprise--from every theological angle the tree of life

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<sup>13</sup> Bill McKibben, *Eearth* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2011)

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 253

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 254

calls forth respect and responsible love. As its bare, natural, evolving self, it is worthy of this.<sup>16</sup>

The failure to respond in this way is being called out by ethicists as the sin of biocide, ecocide, or geocide. Such devastation of the planet has repercussions at many levels. Johnson quotes the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines who see that such treatment of nature “defaces the image of Christ which is etched in creation.”<sup>17</sup> The Catholic tradition has taken the lead since Pope John Paul II’s call for ecological conversion in the 1990 message for World Day of Peace. It continues in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis who follows the Eastern Orthodox tradition in classifying the abuse of nature as sin, sin against Earth and against her people:

For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life—these are sins.<sup>18</sup>

Johnson lauds the extension in Catholic thought of respect for life as embracing both human life and the rest of creation. The moral imperative extends to both. Our failing in this area requires repentance and a change of heart. Johnson spells out the intellectual, emotional and ethical dimensions of such a conversion, and says quite lyrically that

In sum, ecological conversion means falling in love with earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love.<sup>19</sup>

In similar vein, Pope Francis uses emotive language to capture the felt conversion that is needed to foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness:

First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God’s loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (cf. Mt 6:3-4). It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 255

<sup>17</sup> Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, “What is Happening to our Beautiful Land? A Pastoral Letter on Ecology,” eds Drew Christensen and Walter Grazer, *And God Saw that It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment* (Washington, USA Catholic Conference, 1996), 316

<sup>18</sup> Address in Santa Barbara, California (8 November 1997); cf. John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (New York, 2012)

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 259



without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us with all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems and in offering ourselves to God "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable" (Rom 12:1).<sup>20</sup>

So why is this not happening on a larger scale? Johnson's book culminates with her vision of a new paradigm to replace the current overarching paradigm of dominion which, directly or indirectly, can be seen as the root of oppression of nature. In like manner, *Laudato Si* presents a vision which is very much about communion with nature, with other humans and with God. But first to Johnson.

### A New Paradigm-from Dominion to Communion

Something is not working if we have come to this state of environmental degradation. Johnson in the course of asking the beasts has found treasures in the tradition that indicate that "loving life on earth, far from being foreign to the living tradition of Christianity, is actually supported by its core cherished beliefs about God revealed in scripture and condensed in the creed."<sup>21</sup> There is, however, a tradition of inherited oppression, to refer back to her usual first step in the reflection process. Elsewhere she has pointed to the worldview of hierarchical dualism which is embedded in religion and culture as leading to a devaluing of nature. Here she points to the tradition of human dominion that arises from the creation narrative in Genesis 1, 28. It paints "human beings at the apex of the pyramid of living creatures with rights over otherkind."<sup>22</sup> Johnson puts a more positive spin on the problematic text. In one interpretation, the courtly origins of the tradition that gave rise to the first Genesis narrative point to an understanding of dominion as exercising delegated responsibility from the ruler. The mandate to preserve species is also there in the story of Noah and the ark in Genesis 6, 19. The creation story in the second chapter of Genesis has quite a different tone. Adam the Earth creature is given the mandate to "till and to keep" (Gen 2,15), which is generally interpreted as about cultivation and care. This narrative is seen as the basis of kinship, of the "earthly solidarity women and men have with each other

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<sup>20</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 2015, 220, accessed 8 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 260

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 261

and the rest of creation.”<sup>23</sup> Cardinal Turkson in a speech not long before the launch of *Laudato Si* used this passage to suggest that humans had been doing too much tilling and not enough keeping!<sup>24</sup> The attitude which he is critiquing would be reinforced by the problematic text of Psalm 8, 6 which speaks of God’s design this way: “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.”

*Laudato Si* is strong in its insistence that Genesis 1, 28 be interpreted more appropriately. Even if “we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”<sup>25</sup> Instead, “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes.”<sup>26</sup> The encyclical continues, “In our time the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinate to the good of human beings, as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish.”<sup>27</sup> Rather, “they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness,”<sup>28</sup> because God loves them. “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God’s love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection.”<sup>29</sup>

But damage has been done. The hierarchical worldview so typical of the priestly and royal systems of the time has passed over into western culture. As noted in the chapter on Context in this thesis, it underpins Western economic, social and environmental norms to the present day. As Johnson notes, “Slipping its biblical bonds, the notion of dominion has supported rampant use and abuse of the earth.”<sup>30</sup> At its best, the call to responsible stewardship has curbed some excesses, and its core tenets are laudable. She continues: “A steward is a person who manages another’s property or financial affairs, one who administers material wealth as the agent of another. The core of theological stewardship is the belief that the earth and all of its resources belong ultimately to God. With

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 264

<sup>24</sup> Peter Turkson, “Integral Ecology and the Horizon of Hope: Concern for the Poor and for Creation in the Ministry of Pope Francis” (Dublin, Trocaire Lenten Lecture, Maynooth, 5 March, 2015)

<sup>25</sup> *LS*, 67

<sup>26</sup> *LS*, 69

<sup>27</sup> *LS*, 69

<sup>28</sup> *LS*, 140

<sup>29</sup> *LS*, 77

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 265

overwhelming generosity, God entrusts these good things to human beings, gifting us with their use.”<sup>31</sup>

Increasingly, problems are being identified with the notion of stewardship within a Universe that is emerging. Johnson points to a few of these. One is that “it envisions humans being independent from the rest of creation and external to its functioning. Lacking a deep ecological sensibility, it establishes a vertical top-down relationship, giving human beings responsible mastery over other creatures but not alongside them or open to their giving.”<sup>32</sup> Such a model is not adequate to underpin the conversion to responsible use of resources, especially for those who have developed a world view based on evolutionary emergence. Johnson suggests that there needs to be “a different conceptuality of the human place in the world, religiously speaking. Such an alternative presents itself in the biblical view of the community of creation.”<sup>33</sup>

I completely subscribe to Johnson’s articulation of problems arising with the vision of humans as external to the rest of creation, a position that is again enshrined in *Laudato Si*. While I laud the encyclical’s critique of certain notions of dominion,<sup>34</sup> its new assertion of the intrinsic value of all creatures independent of their usefulness,<sup>35</sup> and its insistence on God’s affection for them,<sup>36</sup> it seems that the church’s rightful assertion of human dignity and uniqueness is still couched in language that takes humans out of their evolutionary interdependence with all species.

Pope Francis acknowledges the problematic issue of a culture based on human mastery over nature, which he refers to as “excessive anthropocentrism”:

Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; these in turn are the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society. An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 265

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 266

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 267

<sup>34</sup> *LS*, 67

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 140

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 77

between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.<sup>37</sup>

He does not reject outright the notion of anthropocentrism, but critiques its excesses. He warns against replacing it with biocentrism with its potential for denying the worth of human beings “as possessing a particular dignity above other creatures.”<sup>38</sup> He insists that “a correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, and much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the ‘Thou’ of God.”<sup>39</sup> Personally I believe that the dignity of human persons can be respected by acknowledging their distinctive place based on their unique capacities, without resorting to hierarchical language. There is an intermediate position between anthropocentrism and biocentrism which I adopt in this thesis, which locates humans in relationship with nature and the Divine, without any claim to equality, and with full recognition of their uniqueness. Johnson’s paradigm of the community of life and the community of creation contributes much to this understanding.

Johnson searches for alternate wisdom and suppressed history by building up the biblical vision of the *community of creation*. Evolutionary biology points to the existence of the community of life which I also call the Earth community:

Historically, all life results from the same biological process; genetically, living beings share elements of the same basic code; functionally species interact without ceasing. Human beings belong to this community and need other species profoundly, in ways more than other species need them.<sup>40</sup>

Humans are within the community and within the cosmos, rather than over and apart from it, a world view which I previously referred to as anthropocosmic. Enter a theocentric worldview, which orients such an interdependent world to God. As established earlier in exploring the religious significance of this interdependence, “In its origin, history and goal, the whole world with all its members is ultimately grounded in the creative, redeeming God

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 116

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>40</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 267

of love.” The theological construct of the community of creation is founded on the belief that “all beings are in fact creatures, sustained in life by the Creator of all that is.” This is the case for humankind and other species, and this commonality before God is stronger than their differences. In their kinship all are “grounded in absolute, universal reliance on the living God for the breath of life.”<sup>41</sup> This pattern of relationship, which locates us humans alongside other creatures and stresses interconnectedness without blurring differences, gives a new impetus for ethical behaviour based in that new relationality with one another and the wider whole which can supercede notions of dominion. This is the worldview advocated in this thesis.

Biblically this notion is rich. Johnson has been looking at the community of life through the eyes of Job throughout her book, and she goes there now for an extended study of Chapters 38-41. Job has come upon hard times, and his friends argue that he must have sinned. Job maintains his innocence, but his suffering is very real. Eventually God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, and asks “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?” (Job 38, 4) The questions go on and on as God draws attention to the scope of the physical world and the qualities of the wild yet free animals and the fearsome beasts. These creations are a far cry from anything which has been subject to human dominion, yet they are revelatory.

Johnson draws out three points from commentaries on the book of Job. Firstly, its preoccupation is with the meaning of suffering, and in this case the suffering of a good person. Its conclusion on that subject is that ultimately it is a mystery to be respected. Secondly, God rebukes Job’s friends who want to insist that Job’s suffering is sent from God as punishment for sin. These chapters, however, are brimming with wonder and power, and Job shifts his position: “I had heard you by the ear but now my eye sees you” (Job 42, 5). Finally, Johnson sees this passage as modelling a relationship of humans with God and the rest of creation. Far from seeing human dominion, “Job is led to see divine activity in the awesome, independent working of the natural world over which he has no mastery, not only technologically but also theologically.”<sup>42</sup> The creatures have their own value, and in observing them Job finds Wisdom, and a recognition of his own place within what Johnson calls the community of creation. Our assumptions of human superiority are seriously

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 268 is the source of the above quotes.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 272

challenged by this narrative. There can be a very positive outcome if “humbled and delighted by the other life around us, we can grow to know ourselves as members of the community of creation and step up to protect our kin.”<sup>43</sup>

Johnson continues to make a case for the community of creation and for the place of humans within that community by referring to that great creation song of praise, Psalm 104. Once again it is by observing the whole community of life, the sky, the earth, the sea, the vegetation, the animals, the people and the rhythms of the day that we discern God’s presence and give praise:

O Lord, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all,  
the earth is full of your creatures (Ps 104, 24).

In this theocentric worldview, people take their place “within the wider world which enjoys its own direct relation to the Creator.”<sup>44</sup> There is a diatribe towards the end that calls for a vigorous end to sinners, which may mean those who disrupt the harmony of the creation, but the final note is one of praise because of God’s presence in all that is.

In Psalm 148, old and young people take their place along with angels, sun, moon, mountains, hills, trees, princes and rulers in actively giving praise to the Creator who gave them life. Johnson makes a point about the order in which God’s creation is named in this psalm. While the humans may come at the end, the angels come first, and she notes:

Rather than the pattern of dominion which climaxes the appearance of humans in Genesis 1, and different from the hierarchical chain of being found in medieval thought, here is an interwoven assembly of everything from sky, sea, and land, each one part of a grateful community of creation praising God.<sup>45</sup>

Together they praise God without concern for who among them is the most valuable. Johnson then considers whether all creatures are capable of giving such praise. This metaphor is an extension of the human capacity to give praise, but one which contains a valuable insight which Johnson puts this way: “By virtue of their being created, of being held in existence by the loving power of the Creator Spirit, all beings give glory to God simply by

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 273

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 275

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 276

being themselves.”<sup>46</sup> By their very existence they are oriented to God, as are we. Our challenge is to be attentive to this and join in the song that they are already singing. This can remind us of our place in the community of creation:

At this time of ecological catastrophe, praying with a sense of participation in creation’s praise of God allows people to recover a healthy sense of their own human place in the world as created beings alongside our fellow creatures.<sup>47</sup>

Moving from the Psalms to the Prophets, Johnson listens to Creation mourning and lamenting, often as a result of human action. The fate of the people and of Earth are interconnected. Hosea laments:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish;  
together with the wild animals and the birds of the air,  
even the fish of the sea are perishing (Hos 4, 1-3).

As with the experience of land praising, we have the image of land mourning. This is devastation caused by human action, which ought to be a familiar theme to us. Negative actions by one part of the community of life have implications for the rest of the community. All is not lost, however, and just as Paul in Romans 8, 18-23 hears creation groaning in the hope of being set free, so the prophets proclaim “that the mercy and steadfast love of God will establish justice in a disordered world, and this hope is announced with a vigor equal to their denunciation of human wrong-doing.”<sup>48</sup>

Johnson sums up this vision of the community of creation and extols its potential in words that locate humans in relation to God and to the rest of the community of creation. It is appropriate to quote this fully:

The biblical vision of the community of creation opens a life enhancing avenue of relationship. Departing from a long history of interpretation, it scoops up the Genesis notion of dominion and places it within the mutual interactions of all beings as creatures in relation to the living God who creates and redeems. The community model brings forward at the most fundamental level our theological human identity as created, our biological embeddedness in the natural world, and our reciprocal

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 276

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 278

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 280

interdependence with the other species, and the life-giving systems that support us all.<sup>49</sup>

This is the context in which we live out what she calls the ecological vocation. Our call to love extends to the whole community of creation. Pope Francis calls this the call to care for our common home. Johnson acknowledges the adoption of various religious practices such as contemplation, asceticism, and prophetic action for justice, reframed in ecological terms. She acknowledges that “the prophetic dimension of the ecological vocation still beckons the churches for the most part.”<sup>50</sup>

*Laudato Si* is one response to this beckoning, and its favourable reception from so many quarters has demonstrated that the Churches have a role to play which can be welcomed by the broader society. It presents a vision in which “communion” is paramount. The word features at least a dozen times in the encyclical. At other times, the refrain is that “everything is connected.”<sup>51</sup> At times it is the vision, at times the diagnosis, and always part of the solution.

This encyclical acknowledges in a way that is new to formal documents of the Church that “because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all living creatures are dependent on one another.”<sup>52</sup> Humans are located within this community:

Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.<sup>53</sup>

The interconnectedness is stressed again here:

This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. Here I would reiterate that “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 280

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 284

<sup>51</sup> *LS*, 91

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 89



Our creation draws us into communion. Christ who “incorporated into in his person part of the material world”<sup>55</sup> draws us into God’s fullness. Through our immersion in this web of relationships, we are reminded that “everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity”<sup>56</sup>. The challenges are great, but so are the sources of hope

In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him! <sup>57</sup>

In 2016 after the publication of *Ask the Beasts* and after the encyclical was promulgated, Johnson drew attention to “one theme that runs like a silver thread through all of the encyclical’s multifaceted teaching. This is the sacred value of living plants and animals in and of themselves in a community to which human beings also belong.”<sup>58</sup> She clearly identifies the resonance between *Ask the Beasts*, and *Laudato Si*.

In an exhortatory style similar to the final paragraph of the encyclical quoted above, Johnson concludes *Ask the Beasts* by recapping the movement from asking the beasts what they could teach us, to listening to their scientific, theological and ecological messages. She reminds us of the urgency of taking up a commitment to ecological wholeness if we are to move towards the vision that must guide us at this critical time, namely that of “a flourishing humanity on a thriving planet, rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God.”<sup>59</sup>

## In Response

In a discussion at the meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in June 2014, Johnson participated in a panel discussion on her book, *Ask the Beasts*. In replying to the other panellists, Johnson summed up her book:

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 235

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 245 The use of masculine pronouns is unfortunately in the official English translation.

<sup>58</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “From Pyramid to Circle: The Community of Creation,” *Theological Studies* 77,no.2, (2016), 486, doi: 10.1177/0040563916640694

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 286

In a nutshell, this project consists of swivelling our gaze away from the fascinating theological mirror that reflects our own faces, and toward looking out the window at the evolving natural world now under threat. Beholding creation on its own, non-anthropocentric terms, the book aims to show how loving the Earth arises as an intrinsic part of faith in God, rather than just an add-on.<sup>60</sup>

In my opinion, she has achieved this purpose. She has looked outwards to the context in which she wrote, namely one where Earth can rightly be seen as oppressed, and she has painstakingly sought to hear its/her voice, using Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* as a core text through which to "listen to the beasts" as we are urged in Job 12,7. At the outset she indicated her focal question: "What is the theological meaning of the natural world of life?"<sup>61</sup> The other party to her dialogue was the Nicene Creed, chosen as "a core expression of Christian belief in the one God who creates, redeems, vivifies, and will bring the world to fulfilment."<sup>62</sup> That creed is also well enshrined in liturgical practice.

In her signature style, she begins with the Creator Spirit who is present and active everywhere, sustaining all creation in existence, accompanying them through death, and empowering evolution's creative advance."<sup>63</sup> Note that this is a dialogue between faith and evolutionary science, based on the acknowledgement that each has a distinct contribution to make. She explores, not yet definitively, the significance of the God of love joining "groaning creation personally in the flesh,"<sup>64</sup> and the redemption or healing of the whole cosmos in union with the resurrected Jesus. She is undiluted in her critique of the human contribution to the current state of the environment, and of the hierarchical and dualistic world views which afforded us a position of dominion. She retrieves the biblical insight of the community of creation, which, in our times, can build on the evolutionary understanding of the interconnected Earth community,<sup>65</sup> and place all in relation with the Trinitarian God within a community of creation. From this new place in the scheme of things, Johnson regularly reminds us of the need for conversion to loving Earth, and the ethical responsibilities that flow from being part of that community.

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<sup>60</sup> Johnson, "From Pyramid to Circle," 479

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, xv

<sup>62</sup> Johnson, "Pyramid," 480

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 482

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 482

<sup>65</sup> This is not a term Johnson uses. As her emphasis is on listening to the plants and animals, she refers instead to the community of life.

Johnson is a very appropriate dialogue partner in this thesis, because of these key concepts outlined above. They are consistent with the new direction proposed in the Introduction, they amplify the framework of Thomas Berry which has strongly influenced Earth Link, and they resonate strongly with the message of *Laudato Si*. There is another very important and quite pragmatic value in adopting Johnson as a dialogue partner for a community based initiative. Her prose is lucid, passionate and sometimes lyrical. In other words, it is readable, even when the concepts are challenging! Johnson's theology is grounded in reality, in experience that we can relate to. Even within one book, *Ask the Beasts*, she provides a comprehensive framework for those seeking to reconcile their faith with the concepts and information flashed before them on a daily basis. She charts a shift to a new paradigm, and something of what is involved in the journey, not all of which is pleasant! This theology can nourish us even as it challenges us to a future that has to be different. It calls us to love Earth, to listen to it, to "respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community,"<sup>66</sup> and in so doing to encounter the God of love who is present now, and holding out a promise of wholeness and fullness of life.

Johnson's theology points not only to the embrace of Heaven and Earth, but to the mystery that we celebrate in the *Exultet*, that song of joy used during the Easter vigil, which speaks of the "truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to human." The embrace becomes a wedding. This is truly one of the greatest love stories that can ever be told!

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<sup>66</sup> From the vision statement of Earth Link

## **Part 5 ENHANCED PRACTICE**



## Chapter 11 Affirmations and Challenges

The goal in the Theological Reflection Process which I am using for this exercise in Practical Theology is enhanced practice, in this case for the Earth Link project whose existing principles and practice gave rise to the focus of this thesis. In response to its critical question, I propose that we engage spiritually in an emerging Universe if we have a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth that is informed by contemporary science, if we underpin that with an ecotheology that recognises Heaven and Earth as interconnected while respecting their differences, and if we have an ecospiritual praxis that is open, attentive to, and aware of divine presence in all that is.

There are multiple ways in which Earth Link is affirmed by revisiting the context, and entering into dialogue with the ecospirituality of Thomas Berry and the ecotheology of Elizabeth Johnson and Pope Francis. There are also ways in which it could develop. The affirmations and challenges are identified in this chapter, before I propose enhanced principles for Earth Link in the concluding chapters.

### Revisiting the Context

Earth Link has always operated out of an awareness of a crisis facing Earth and her people. It has sought to reflect on and analyse this crisis and its causes. With Pope Francis, we would concur that this situation is manifest in pollution and climate change, issues around water, loss of biodiversity, changes in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society, and global inequality.<sup>1</sup> As Pope Francis says, “we need only take a frank look at the facts to see

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 20-60, accessed 8 March, 2017 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

that our common home is falling into serious disrepair.”<sup>2</sup> Earth Link is affirmed because it has engaged with these issues at local, regional, national and global levels through adoption of best practice on its property, engagement with conservation groups, by offering education and training about permaculture and forest management, and through active participation in environmental advocacy about a range of issues, from those pertaining to the local bioregion right up to participation in a United Nations Global Summit on Sustainable Development, and activities of the Mercy Global Action desk at the United Nations. Earth Link’s enduring concern is with what lies under these symptoms, and in this it is extended by a more comprehensive analysis of worldviews leading up to and including the contemporary or evolutionary world view.

Earth Link has always been steeped in a cosmological and evolutionary world view. In its “Introduction to Ecospirituality” it is noted that:

In our times, there are ongoing shifts in our knowledge about the unfolding story of the universe, the nature of matter, the interconnectedness of the web of life, the importance of ancient Earth traditions, and the list goes on. Many people are seeking to make meaning of these changes, to deepen their own connections with nature and the cosmos, to explore the implications for their own religious and spiritual traditions, and to name their experience of the Sacred.<sup>3</sup>

This orientation is affirmed by the contextual analysis in this thesis which reminds us that:

The twentieth century has seen some extraordinary discoveries, and notable among these are developments in cosmology, Darwin’s theory of evolution and the emergence of quantum science. Debates rage as theology either denies, defends, or responds creatively to these discoveries. Barbour refers to this as the *contemporary period*, and Ilia Delio calls the emerging world view *evolutionary*.<sup>4</sup>

Earth Link is affirmed in having adopted as foundational the unfolding story of the Universe. Understanding evolution as story reminds us of its unfinished nature. The kinship of all species in their cosmological and biological origins flows from this story, a story of interconnectedness which does not obscure differences.

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<sup>2</sup> LS, 61

<sup>3</sup> *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, a series of essays on the above principles developed in 2007 for Earth Link by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 1 of this thesis

Earth Link is extended by the terminology of an “anthropocosmic”<sup>5</sup> world view which then needs to be taken up into the theocentric worldview which is developed in the ecotheology of this thesis. It is extended by understanding the mechanisms of evolutionary emergence in order that its science-religion dialogue is adequately informed. This is a newer understanding of the dynamic within the evolutionary process itself which enables movement from simple to more complex organisms. Proponents of strong emergence do not explain all newness as a reorganisation of the matter that previously existed, but are open to the emergence of the new as having causal powers that transcend yet include that which went before.

While Thomas Berry pointed to the need for choosing between what he was terming the Technozoic and the Ecozoic eras into the future, there are recent studies about the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch. Brian Swimme’s references to humans becoming a planetary power are echoed in the scientific identification of humans as a global geophysical force, and it is not an uncritical identification! Scientists indicate that “we need to fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit.”<sup>6</sup> Earth Link’s vision and mission receive greater urgency from these contextual developments.

### **As Ecospirituality**

Earth Link was established as a faith-based response to the ecological crisis, with a focus on education and ecospirituality. Our gaze was turned outwards, but it was always a faith gaze. Thomas Berry was an influential figure in the setting up of Earth Link, and generally its vision and mission reflect that. While developments within the Earth Link project took us beyond using the Genesis Farm framework with its Earth literacy programmes in cosmology, bioregionalism and the Wisdom traditions, Berry’s messages were influential in the development of Earth Link’s approach to ecospirituality.

With Thomas Berry, Earth Link fits within Taylor’s documentation of what can be classified as Green Religion and Nature Spirituality. Its approach is definitely about spirituality

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<sup>5</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 43-44  
The term “anthropocosmic” refers to “a view of the human as having arisen from cosmological and ecological processes which orient humans in the universe and ground them in nature.”

<sup>6</sup> Will Steffen et, “The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship” in *AMBIO* 40 (2011):739–761

understood as “a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one’s lifestyle and vocational choices.”<sup>7</sup> Its early emphasis was on inclusivity, and on a welcoming attitude to those who were concerned about the state of the environment and who were searching for something deeper in their commitment to its wellbeing. Its core group in those days reflected a variety of backgrounds including those whose interest was environmental education, Goddess proponents, post-Christians, Buddhists, those who had been profoundly influenced by indigenous spirituality, and those who were steeped in Celtic spirituality and Christianity. All of this while being publicly a Catholic Christian facility. It was this eclectic group who formulated Earth Link’s ecospirituality principles:

- 1 Listen to the wisdom of Earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude;
- 2 Deepen your relationship with cosmos/Earth, beginning with your own particular place;
- 3 Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life;
- 4 Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living;
- 5 Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life.<sup>8</sup>

Although it was not a conscious choice at the time, those principles cover the dimensions of religion as identified by Ninian Smart who was a pioneer in the field of religious studies. His seven dimensions were ritual, narrative and myth, experience and emotion, social and institutional, ethical and legal, doctrinal and philosophical, and material or symbolic objects or places.<sup>9</sup> In the light of the dialogues in this thesis, I think that the time is right to stay with the scope of the principles, but with a greater integration of ecotheology, a review of some of the language, and development of some of the concepts.

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<sup>7</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion, Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3

<sup>8</sup> *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, a series of essays on the above principles developed in 2007 for Earth Link by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney

<sup>9</sup> See Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989) for one of his many influential volumes which approach religion from a secular standpoint. His work was very influential in shaping the study of religion from an academic rather than a denominational perspective.



Initially Earth Link had a target group which covered almost the entire spectrum of ecospiritual approaches presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis—with the Gaians at one end with their sense of animate Earth, through those with a sense of Sacred Earth in a pantheist understanding and experience of the Sacred as identical with Earth, to a panentheistic position where Earth embodies the Sacred but does not contain it. Earth Link has a special commitment to Christian ecospirituality, and its theological underpinnings were articulated in its reflection on “Ecology and Christian Faith.” Earth Link accepts that there is an ontological distinction between the finite Earth and cosmos and the infinite God. It has always sought to be steeped in contemporary Christian theology that is cognisant of recent scientific theories and engages seriously with their findings. This thesis has provided the opportunity to dialogue with ecotheology which is now more fully developed than when Earth Link came into existence in 2000.

Earth Link is affirmed by Schneider’s approach to spirituality as “not only a complexification of the holistic approach to the human subject of religious experience, but a heightened awareness of the dimensions and influence of “place” and “space” (both inner and outer), globalization, ecological crises, the validity of religious experience outside one's own tradition, scientific developments, and cultural currents.”<sup>10</sup> Earth Link’s approach is both affirmed and challenged by the need to be aware of its own tradition as it is developing, and also to be cognisant of other spiritual traditions with which it enters into partnership for the well-being of planet Earth and the cosmos. Earth Link is also mindful of Schneider’s warning:

The challenge for those who approach the study of spirituality from the more anthropological perspective is to keep the specifically Christian character of the discipline in focus and to resist the postmodern lure of universal relativism, nihilistic deconstructionism, rejection of all tradition and authority, and suspicion of personal commitment.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Sandra Schneiders, “Christian Spirituality” in the ed Arthur Holder, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Blackwell References Online), accessed 22 April, 2014  
[https://login.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/login?url=http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=2294/tocnode?id=g9781405102476\\_chunk\\_g97814051024763](https://login.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/login?url=http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=2294/tocnode?id=g9781405102476_chunk_g97814051024763), 10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 11/14

It is timely now to rewrite the ecospirituality framework of Earth Link as overtly Christian, rather than as generic, especially as its sphere of influence is now more aligned with those formed within that tradition.

### **As Influenced by Thomas Berry**

Thomas Berry was the dominant influence on the formation of Earth Link. As indicated earlier, my induction to Earth Literacy was through the programmes offered at Genesis Farm in New Jersey, USA, which was established by Sister Miriam MacGillis who apprenticed herself to Berry while she was getting established. Thomas Berry visited Genesis Farm during the period that I was there, so he was more than an abstract figure. I listened as he drew attention to the state of the environment. I listened as Berry described the North American continent as “toxic in its air, its water, and its land and gravely diminished in the variety and abundance of its living forms.”<sup>12</sup> I listened as I also had identified environmental degradation as one of my passionate concerns. By this time, 1999, Berry had announced the agenda:

The Great Work, now, as we move into a new millennium, is to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.<sup>13</sup>

Earth Link has always been influenced by Berry’s analysis that the root of the problem was, and still is, human alienation from the natural world. In terms of this thesis, that insight is probably Berry’s major contribution, but it is not a new one for Earth Link. His was a message about humans being part of the Universe and planet Earth. He called for a new story with potential to act as a new mythic creation story which would remind humans of their place in the Universe, their interdependence with all that has preceded them, as well as their responsibility for what is unfolding. This anthropological insight into human origins, development and destiny recognises them as part of nature, or as Rasmussen puts it, part of the Earth community. This has been the position of Earth Link from the outset, a position embraced first by ecophilosophy and now by contemporary ecotheology, and most recently by official Catholic thought as expressed by Pope Francis.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 157

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work, Our Way into the Future*, (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1999), 3

Berry realised that systems of thought, including legal, educational and economic systems need to embrace this understanding. Earth Link was one such educational response, albeit with a faith perspective. One tool which Berry adopted with the help of the mathematical cosmologist, Brian Swimme, was telling the story of the universe: how it came into existence, how it unfolded, and the place of humans within it. They told it in ways that highlighted the principles of interiority, differentiation and communion which allowed for the innermost distinctiveness of the parts while stressing their interconnectedness and kinship within the story of evolutionary emergence. This interconnectedness does not reduce all of nature to some common material denominator. It allows for the noble vocation of the human without removing them from their evolutionary origins, a position that the Catholic tradition struggles to integrate with its recognition of human uniqueness and dignity. In Berry's words:

By definition we are that reality in whom the entire Earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific.<sup>14</sup>

This vision of the place of humans within the Earth community is the basis of a new identity, one which addresses Berry's diagnosis of our autism or disconnection from, and our illiteracy about natural systems. Earth Link was and still is well situated to promote that story of Earth-human connectedness within the cosmos.

For Berry this is not just a story about matter. The human participation in the dream of the Earth is "an experience wherein human consciousness awakens to the grandeur and sacred quality of the Earth process."<sup>15</sup> He was rightly critical of religions, while admitting that we cannot do without them. At no time did he reject his Catholic and priestly identity, although his criticisms took him into a lonely place. He said that "the presence of the divine in the cosmological order was diminished in favour of the divine as experienced in the historical order."<sup>16</sup> For him, this was part of Catholicity's over emphasis on God's transcendence, its focus on the need for redemption from our Earthly reality, and the demands on time and

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 165

<sup>16</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 166

energy that go into the relief of human injustice and suffering.<sup>17</sup> His vision of the emergence of a new human consciousness where “notions of a global society, one world, a planetary civilisation, or one Earth community are dawning”<sup>18</sup> was not shared by most religious groups and he doubted their capacity to grasp such a vision. As a cultural anthropologist, Berry did not make a profound contribution to theological thought to back up his vision, but his contribution to spirituality is widely recognised. The dialogue with ecotheology in this thesis is a needed extension of the legacy of Thomas Berry with the potential to influence future developments of Earth Link.

Earth Link did not engage in any extended diatribe against the capacities of the Catholic Church to grasp the seriousness of the ecological crisis and to develop an adequate religious response. It took its lead from the approach advocated by Tucker and Grimm which admitted that there were problems and possibilities within the tradition. The very establishment of Earth Link in 2000 was a recognition of a newer global concern, and a concerted effort to develop a faith response. Fortunately people like Thomas Berry were pioneers in the field, and theologians like Elizabeth Johnson were issuing the call for theology to “turn to the heavens and the earth”<sup>19</sup> and to identify nature as one of the pillars of theology. It takes time for a comprehensive system of thought to develop, and this thesis allows for an enhancement of Earth Link’s tentative insights.

Berry’s recognition of the sacred dimension of cosmos and Earth marked out his place within the field of nature spirituality, a position duly recognised by surveys such as that done by Taylor in his study of green religion. His was a spirituality which was deeply immersed in the unfolding story of the Universe, and which recognised the sacred inner dimension of nature. His spirituality was based in his own experience from early childhood, and was also the basis for his call for respect for the sacredness of nature and its importance as reflecting God’s beauty and goodness. For him, degraded nature meant a degraded reflection of God.

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<sup>17</sup> Berry, *Christian Future*, 40-41

<sup>18</sup> Heather Eaton, “Metamorphosis, A Cosmology of Religions in an Ecological Age,” *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining the Earth Community*, ed Heather Eaton, (Boston: Lexington Books, 2014), 161

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, CTSA Proceedings, 51 (1996), 15

Berry's approach to spirituality is encapsulated in the approach adopted by Earth Link with its themes of listening, place, interdependence, acknowledging and honouring the Sacred in the web of life, and living in right relationships. While Earth Link is affirmed by revisiting the work of Thomas Berry and by having access to his previously unpublished material, I believe that it is timely now to revisit its principles of ecospirituality and cast them in a more overtly Christian framework. This, I believe, will keep his vision alive, as regrettably it is still not the dominant paradigm in society or in religious circles.

As noted in Chapter 5, ecospirituality in the tradition of Berry is cosmic in scope, attentive to the Sacred, open to transformative, mystical encounters with nature, and provides a driving force for action for justice for the whole Earth community. Earth Link is affirmed by many of these developments even as it marks out its own particular domain.

Ecospirituality is cosmic in scope and connects Spirit with all of life. The spirituality of Earth Link genuinely attempts to link Spirit, self, ecology and cosmology. We state in introducing our principles: "Reflection has led us to believe that this is an experience of the Sacred, and that Earth and cosmos constitute for us a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery." This is a cosmotheandric consciousness as developed by Raimon Panikkar. Earth Link calls for an "open, attentive and listening stance."<sup>20</sup> Earth Link encourages immersion in nature with a receptive attitude. A little further on, I will indicate that Earth Link is challenged to expand its understanding of revelation to embrace a Trinitarian theological perspective. At this stage it is sufficient to rest assured that the grounding of Earth Link in a Spirit-filled cosmological, evolutionary perspective is adequate.

Ecospirituality is attentive to the sacred inner dimension of nature. Earth Link facilitates a place-based spirituality with particular emphasis on immersion in and knowledge about one's environment, whether that be local, regional, national or global. The more widely I read about other approaches to ecospirituality the more I can recognise this as a distinguishing feature of the approach of Earth Link. It is faithful to the tradition of Thomas Berry, and influenced by the emphasis at Genesis Farm on studying bioregionalism in order to become more familiar with one's place. This emphasis locates Earth Link within the field

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<sup>20</sup> Earth Link, Principle 1

of nature religion which Taylor marks out as having these ecological values—"a sense of nature as sacred, having intrinsic value, and due reverent care."<sup>21</sup> Earth Link is affirmed by research linking immersion in nature with environmental responsibility, and continues to learn from the indigenous sense of sacred Earth without presuming to appropriate it.

Ecospirituality is open to transformative, mystical encounters with nature. Earth Link is conscious that there are moments when "my body, the body of Earth and cosmos, and the body of God may meet."<sup>22</sup> This is about openness to experiences that are beyond our control, but for which we can prepare ourselves through immersion in place, and entering into ritual spaces, activities facilitated by Earth Link. Earth Link is extended by the work of Lane and his appeal to cultivate "binary vision"--a vision that can hold the ambivalence of seeing and valuing the ordinary while recognising that "the ordinary is no longer at all what it appears."<sup>23</sup> Nature reveals, even as it conceals. Fuller's research into religious emotions of awe and wonder provides helpful and new insights about attitudes which open us up to the unexpected. Earth Link has been influenced by ritual and spiritual practices from many sources, and encourages heightened sensitivity to places, spaces, daily, seasonal and liturgical cycles, and the unfolding story of the Universe. It has not been so influenced by eastern contemplative practices which are a distinguishing feature of conscious evolutionaries.<sup>24</sup> Similarly Earth Link has not been influenced to any great extent by study of developmental, psychological aspects of spirituality such as in the work of Ken Wilber.

The ecospirituality of Earth Link provides a driving force for action for justice for the whole Earth community. Our criteria for living in right relations with self, others, Earth, cosmos and the Sacred include subject-subject relations with all, an ecocentric world view, relations that are partnerships rather than domination, and engagement as a participant in any action "with" Earth, not "for" Earth. Earth Link endorses the conclusion of Gottlieb that "a spiritually oriented relation to nature may be our best response to the collective maladies

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<sup>21</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion, Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 10

<sup>22</sup> Earth Link, *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, Principle 2

<sup>23</sup> Belden C Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 38

<sup>24</sup> Carter Phipps, *Evolutionaries* (New York, Harper Perennial, 2012), 289. Phipps refers to conscious evolutionaries as those who are aware that they must "wake up and choose to lend (our) conscious support to the most important endeavour there is--the conscious evolution of our species."

of pollution and climate change.”<sup>25</sup> Spirituality, theology and ethics are vitally connected in the work of Rasmussen, and Earth Link draws strength from his development of an Earth ethic based on entering into the pathos of the Earth community and acting from that position of empathy. This is what Earth Link understands as “deep bonding with the Earth community” which is at the heart of its mission. For Rasmussen and for Earth Link the finite contains the infinite,<sup>26</sup> and Earth-honouring faith becomes a basis for respect, reverence and care. He extends the scope of moral responsibility beyond social justice to ecojustice, valuing even the elements of earth, wind, fire and water, a position that is endorsed by Earth Link.

### As Ecotheology

It is in the area of ecotheology that Earth Link is most challenged by this exercise in practical theology. It is challenged towards the development of a comprehensive Trinitarian ecotheology which is cognisant of findings in contemporary science. Within that, Earth Link is especially moved to a new understanding of the pathos of God, a God who, in the biblical tradition, is moved by the plight of Earth and her people. God entered into solidarity with all created reality in the person of Jesus whose life, death and resurrection point towards the possibility of fullness of life and love in God forever. Earth Link is also challenged to take forward its notion of the “Earth community” into the theological notion of the “community of creation.”

Johnson’s personal and professional journey shows that entering into theological reflection on the lived experience of women, of those who are oppressed, and on shattered Earth, is fraught with misunderstanding from sectors of the civic and ecclesial society. Earth Link has had its share of that, but refused to hand over power to certain sectors of the faith community who sought to belittle its reputation and challenge its orthodoxy. Johnson continues to agitate for justice for people such as herself who are not given the benefit of due process and a legitimate hearing in ecclesial circles. On the positive side, she is proof

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<sup>25</sup> Roger Gottlieb, *Spirituality, What it is and Why it Matters*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012), Chapter 9, 3/24

<sup>26</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Honoring Faith, Religious Ethics In A New Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195

that the Church in some quarters is seeking to bring its rich tradition into dialogue with contemporary concerns, such that it is experienced as relevant, and the potential for faith encounters is enhanced. From the outset Johnson sought “speech about God in which the fullness of female humanity as well as of male humanity and cosmic reality may serve as divine symbols in equivalent ways.”<sup>27</sup> This is an ongoing concern of Earth Link, and justifies its establishment and its continuance for as long as feasible.

Johnson’s methodology follows the pattern of liberation and contextual theology which is also the methodology of this thesis. Its stages are (1) critical analysis of inherited oppression; (2) the search for alternative wisdom and suppressed history; (3) the work of constructive new interpretation of tradition in tandem with the experience of women’s lives.<sup>28</sup> She models the importance of beginning with experience, and addressing the questions that are current for people and the environment. This approach is not only important for the task of practical theology, but it is also important for the facilitation of the ecospiritual journey as a contribution to spiritual and environmental wellbeing. This inductive approach will continue to shape the approach of Earth Link.

### Critical Analysis

Earth Link is extended by Johnson’s early diagnosis of Earth’s ecocide. For her, the Blue Planet is under threat because of irresponsible human behaviour, and the root cause of this is the world view of hierarchical dualism.<sup>29</sup> This has been recognised by Earth Link from the beginning. Its reflection on “Ecology and Christian Faith” acknowledges that hierarchical ranking and valuing give licence to those higher up the ladder to exploit those down the ladder, and that dualistic distinctions between spirit and matter and between soul and body lead to the devaluing of the latter in each case. As Johnson listens to the experience of the natural world, she espouses a new model of kinship to replace the worldview of hierarchical dualism. She reclaims biblical language and images of God derived from the natural world which support this view. Johnson realised the need for theologians “to reclaim the cosmos as a theme in theology so that access to the fullness of theological revelation might be

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 47

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 14

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993)



restored.”<sup>30</sup> She also realised that this was not a minor addition, but required a reframing of key theological concepts. In 1999, I read an address by Johnson to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the USA<sup>31</sup> in which she noted that ecological sensitivity called for a rethinking of one’s theological framework. That became part of my agenda from then on, up to and including this thesis.

Johnson took the task of listening to new levels when she followed the injunction in Job to “Ask the Beasts.” Through her study of Darwin, the “beasts” revealed to her first and foremost that they were evolving. Earth Link is well grounded in the evolutionary story as interpreted by Berry and Swimme in *The Universe Story* (1992). It is a foundational story of Earth Link, and it has theological significance. In 2009, I wrote of apathy about environmental responsibility within the Christian community, and traced it to a lack of awareness that our relationship with Earth/universe/cosmos is a dimension of Christian life, and to an outmoded view of the cosmos “as having been launched in a finished form by the hand of the Creator, rather than as a dynamic, unfolding Universe in which Earth, humans and the Sacred are integral and connected parts of the process.”<sup>32</sup> A dynamic worldview is one of the key insights arising from immersion in the Universe story. Such a worldview is a stepping stone in the journey to recognising that care for the environment is not only a responsibility for humans as they take their place within evolutionary emergence, but also integral to Christian life.

### Reclaiming and Reconstructing

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson asked this focal question: “What is the theological meaning of the natural world of life?”<sup>33</sup> Earth Link continues to address this question even unto my writing this thesis. Initially we began exploring the implications of the movement from a “static to a dynamic, unfolding world view” by examining Earth-human-Sacred connections. We began by establishing the nature of Earth and humans as “connected, distinct, limited, finite and valuable rather than incidental on the journey to an otherworldly destination.”<sup>34</sup> What

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, CTSA Proceedings 51(1996), 5

<sup>31</sup> I am no longer able to locate this address.

<sup>32</sup> Mary Tinney *Ecology and Christian Faith*, self-published, (2009)

<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), xiv

<sup>34</sup> Tinney, *Ecology and Christian Faith*

followed then was a rudimentary Trinitarian theology in a panentheistic framework informed by Keller's notion of "radical incarnationism"<sup>35</sup> which does not blur the distinction between Earth and divine mystery, but allows for intense and open-ended interaction between them.

Earth Link is extended by immersion in a comprehensive Trinitarian ecotheology. Johnson transitions from the world of science to the world of faith when she enters the world of Job. She recalls the words of God to the beleaguered Job:

Ask the beasts and they will teach you...  
the hand of the Lord has done this.  
In his hand is the life of every living thing. (Job 12, 7, 9-10)

She searches scripture and tradition for insights that have been overlooked, and constructs new interpretations where tradition is not adequate in the light of scientific developments. She considers the persons of the Trinity beginning with Spirit, then the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus, before looking beyond time to the Creator God whose love and care for created reality are the basis of faith in its movement forward in hope unto fullness of life and love. Johnson's reconstruction of the paradigm of the community of creation enables theology and science to meet in a way that has the potential to promote "respect, reverence and care" for the natural world, including human persons, held as they are within God's embrace.

Johnson fleshes out how the intuition of Earth as sacred can be understood in Christian terms by beginning with the presence and action of the Spirit in "continuous creation." This is traditional material, presented out of the conviction that neglect of the Spirit underlies both "exploitation of the earth and the sexist definition and treatment of women."<sup>36</sup> This perspective is also vitally important for an ecospirituality that is open to, attentive to and aware of sacred presence in all that is, such as that espoused by Earth Link. Johnson draws on Scripture and philosophy to establish nature as revealing God's intimate presence, a reality poetically described by Pope Francis when he says, "The entire material universe

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<sup>35</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 53

<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 10

speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains, everything, as it were, a caress of God."<sup>37</sup> This is important material for an enhanced articulation of the ecospirituality of Earth Link.

Any ecospirituality needs a solid theological underpinning which is cognisant of evolutionary emergence. The universe is unfolding according to principles inherent within it. This requires an exploration of God's action, as well as of God's presence. The interpretation that Johnson offers is that "God's creative activity brings into being a universe endowed with the innate capacity to evolve by the operating of its own natural powers, making it a free partner in its own creation."<sup>38</sup> Considerable effort needs to go into seeking "an understanding of faith that renders fair account of the intense creative activity of both Creator and creation."<sup>39</sup> In this embrace of Heaven and Earth, there is an encounter between the God of love and created reality with its own intrinsic worth and value, a value that is enhanced by the encounter rather than diminished. These are not new understandings for Earth Link, but they have to date been articulated more as statements of fact rather than embedded in a coherent framework.

Similarly with Earth Link's Christology. While we acknowledged that "Jesus is the embodiment of the connection, communion, unity of all created reality with the Sacred, an embodiment of God's nearness," and that Jesus is the "norm for the human-Earth-Sacred connection," we were struggling to articulate that connection except to assert that Jesus was "an ethical human being who embodied the divine."<sup>40</sup> We did not come to terms with the materiality of Jesus Christ in his deep incarnation, and his solidarity with groaning nature.

We were cognisant of the tensions in interpretations of differing Creation accounts, and tried to make meaning of the "God who destroys" by referencing the covenant with Noah. We accepted the unfinished nature of the evolutionary process and of our finite nature as givens, and were willing to recognise that "accepting our life means letting ourselves fall into

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<sup>37</sup> LS 84

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 155

<sup>39</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 178

<sup>40</sup> Tinney, *Ecology and Christian Faith*

this unfathomable mystery at the heart of our existence in an act of loving self-surrender.”<sup>41</sup> We were drawn with Catherine Keller to an exploration of the future as “whirlwind, and exploration of the creative edges of chaos which brim with potential.”<sup>42</sup> We did this without the benefits of Johnson’s pointers to ways in which to approach beginnings and endings which are at best speculative, and can never be empirical. As I noted in Chapter 9, science postulates about how things began, and where they are going, and is continually making advances, while theology engages with the how and the why and where to, based on “the living tradition’s knowledge of God’s graciousness given through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> These are faith assertions emerging from the lived experience of grace in the present, extended to beginnings and endings.”

Johnson’s development of the community of creation is a response that offers a corrective to the dominion paradigm that permeated society through interpretations of the mandate in the first creation story in Genesis 1, 28. With Pope Francis, Johnson recognises the need for an ecological conversion to a view which understands the embrace of Heaven and Earth as one where each component “stand(s) in its own difference, but encompassed by a wider whole that affects their interrelatedness.”<sup>44</sup> Earth Link was undiluted in its recognition of the human contribution to the environmental crisis, and fully recognised the need for the reconnection of Earth, human and the Sacred as a core component of an ecospirituality which would go some of the way toward redressing attitudes which gave rise to our use and abuse of natural systems. Earth Link can be taken further into this new paradigm in order to be more effective in its mission.

## Learning from the Experience of this Thesis

In this chapter I have indicated in broad brush strokes the affirmations and the challenges that emerge from juxtaposing the existing theoretical and practical framework of Earth Link with the insights emerging from an extended look at ecospirituality as developed by Thomas

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Quest*, 45

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Keller, “No More Sea” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 193

<sup>43</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 212

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 269

Berry and others in that tradition and the ecotheology of Elizabeth Johnson. In the following chapters I develop a framework that integrates the existing and the new into an articulation of enhanced principles for the Earth Link community. These principles will then inform the practice of Earth Link into the future.



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## Chapter 12 Vision, Mission and Principles 1 and 2

This thesis is intended to make a contribution to environmentally responsible behaviour driven by both love and concern for our home, planet Earth, and her inhabitants, and by “respect, reverence and care”<sup>1</sup> for them. Its hoped-for outcome is ecological conversion understood as “falling in love with earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love.”<sup>2</sup> I chose the craft of practical theology because its ultimate aim “lies ...in the pursuit of an embodied Christian faith.”<sup>3</sup> For Darragh and for this thesis, practical theology is about “transformative practice.”<sup>4</sup> I intend to work towards these outcomes by modifying Earth Link’s vision and mission, and developing a new set of principles for consideration by its community. These enhanced principles which integrate context, spirituality, theology and ethics, have the potential to take the fifteen year history and experience of Earth Link into a new place. They offer an integrated Christian approach to ecospirituality which is quite rare in existing literature.<sup>5</sup> The rationale for these developments is drawn from material in this thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mission of Earth Link as stated on its website: [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 259

<sup>3</sup> Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, First Edition, ed. Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Wiley Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 5

<sup>4</sup> Neil Darragh, “The Practice of Practical Theology: Key Decisions and Abiding Hazards in Doing Practical Theology,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 9, no.1 (2007), 1.

[http://aejt.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/395736/AEJT\\_9.9\\_Darragh\\_Practice.pdf](http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/395736/AEJT_9.9_Darragh_Practice.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Paul Santmire in *Before Nature, A Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) stands out as one who has developed a Christian spirituality for those who have distanced themselves from institutional religious affiliation, but who have a strong spiritual sense.

As stated in the opening words of this thesis, we engage spiritually in an emerging universe if we have a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth<sup>6</sup> that is informed by contemporary science, if we underpin that with an ecotheology that recognises Heaven and Earth as interconnected while respecting their differences, and if we have an ecospiritual praxis that is open, attentive to and aware of divine presence in all that is. This integrated approach is a feature of the enhanced material.

## Vision and Mission

Currently Earth link's broad vision is of a world where there is "respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community," a vision which enshrines the attitudes of care and concern, plus the sense of Earth as sacred or having an inner dimension, which means that it is deserving of reverence. The vision embodies a desired outcome for planet and people, especially at a time of widespread poverty and degradation of the planet. I propose that the vision be enhanced to become a vision of a world where there is "respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community, held as it is in the embrace of the Divine." This amendment adds an appropriate theological insight about the embrace of Heaven and Earth.

Earth Link's mission needs to be modified from "facilitating deep bonding with the Earth community" to "facilitating deep bonding within the community of creation." Thus modified the bonding is with the Earth community and with God which together form the community of creation. Earth Link continues to believe that deep bonding is at the heart of any encounter with Holy Mystery and can lead us to ethical behaviour and practices. The rewording of the mission is a further acknowledgement of the embrace of Heaven and Earth, an embrace which allows each component "to stand in its own difference, but encompassed by a wider whole that affects their interrelatedness."<sup>7</sup>

Earth Link continues to "resource, reflect and act"<sup>8</sup> towards the achievement of its vision and mission, with particular focus on engaging spiritually in an emerging Universe. There is

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<sup>6</sup> References to Heaven and planet Earth including the Earth community are capitalised in this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 269

<sup>8</sup> These strategies feature on the website: [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)

an assumption based on experience that spirituality<sup>9</sup> is a key component in nurturing the embrace of Heaven and Earth, and in moving people to respectful, careful and reverent attitudes and action within the Earth community.

The existing ecospirituality principles of Earth Link have proved invaluable as a vehicle for education and reflection about the nature and practice of ecospirituality. The document “Ecology and Christian Faith” further develops the theological underpinnings by drawing on the Christian tradition. I now propose five new principles integrating ecospirituality, ecotheology and environmental ethics, which could be shared within and beyond Christian groups. They build on the earlier principles but go beyond them. The principles are traditionally expressed as an invitation, this time to

- 1 Embrace a vision of a dynamic universe, within which all is interconnected yet distinct;
- 2 Cultivate an open, attentive and receptive attitude in order to enter into transformative, mystical encounters;
- 3 Acknowledge the indwelling presence of the Spirit in Earth and cosmos;
- 4 Acknowledge that in Jesus Christ the God of love embraces the cosmos in healing solidarity;
- 5 Live in right relations within the community of creation.

These enhanced principles are cognisant of the planetary crisis, and of the need to adopt a worldview, spirituality, theology and ethical framework that work to redress it. Principle 1 is about the worldview which follows from insights from contemporary science that indicate that the universe is evolving according to a dynamism within it which is moving it toward the emergence of greater complexity and consciousness. The worldview situates humans within

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<sup>9</sup> Spirituality in this context is understood as “a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one’s lifestyle and vocational choices.” See Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3



their evolutionary context, a worldview dubbed anthropocosmic by Tucker and Grimm.<sup>10</sup> It also point to the necessity of ethical action to redress negative effects of human actions. Principle 2 builds on existing Earth Link principles as they relate to ecospiritual attitudes and practices. The encounter with Sacred Earth is interpreted out of a specifically Christian framework in Principles 3-5, with special reference to the continuing presence of the Spirit, and God's solidarity with and promise for the Earth community, especially as manifested in the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fifth Principle locates humans within the community of creation, and underlines the responsibility for created reality which flows from that. In these enhanced principles I draw on the work of those theorists who were the dialogue partners in this thesis, with particular reference to Thomas Berry and others who are in his tradition, and to the ecotheological work of Elizabeth Johnson, whose comprehensive Trinitarian theology is responsive to the crisis facing Earth and cosmos, and cognisant of the findings of contemporary science. Where relevant, I make reference to *Laudato Si*, the encyclical of Pope Francis which is about care of our common home. I do not bring these theorists into dialogue with each other, as they basically complement each other, and together can contribute to this new, enhanced, integrated statement of principles for Earth Link.

### **Principle 1 Recognise that the Universe is a dynamic entity within which all is interconnected yet distinct.**

Principle 1 is about the worldview which follows from insights from contemporary science that indicate that the universe is evolving according to a dynamism within it which is moving it toward the emergence of greater complexity and consciousness. This worldview situates humans within their evolutionary context.

The Universe that is deserving of our respect, reverence and care is a dynamic entity, and we need a worldview that acknowledges its evolutionary emergence. Earth Link recognises the need to transition from the classical or traditional paradigm with some of its negative

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<sup>10</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 43-44. The term "anthropocosmic" refers to "a view of the human as having arisen from cosmological and ecological processes which orient humans in the universe and ground them in nature."

consequences to embrace a contemporary, anthropocosmic worldview which addresses the interconnectedness of all in this dynamic Universe.

Earth Link recognises the need to both describe the problems and go beyond them to embrace and promote a world view which addresses them. Contemporary problems are indicated in this thesis. Elizabeth Johnson describes the current situation as ecocide.<sup>11</sup> She also points out that the “ravaging of people and ravaging of the land”<sup>12</sup> go hand in hand. Pope Francis speaks about the cries of Mother Earth as evident in pollution and climate change, issues around water, loss of biodiversity, changes in the quality of human life, the breakdown of society, and global inequality.<sup>13</sup> Earth Link agrees with Pope Francis when he says that “we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair.”<sup>14</sup> Humans have much to account for in the current state of affairs.

Earth Link can draw on both the promise and the responsibility that come from the identification by Brian Swimme of humans as a planetary power,<sup>15</sup> a role that is reinforced by a group of contemporary scientists who are quantifying the safe operating space for nine major planetary systems.<sup>16</sup> They point out that in the current Anthropocene Epoch that we are entering, “human activities now rival global geophysical processes,” and they warn that we humans “need to fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit.” The diagram from the Swedish Academy of Sciences used in Chapter 2 on Context provides an assessment of the state of those systems, and can be taken forward into the exposition of this principle.

This is a time for making choices about the future we want. Earth Link, in encouraging people to make such choices, can refer to Joanna Macy’s call for a “great turning” and Berry’s

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 8

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 6

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home* (hereafter *LS*), 20-60, accessed 8 March, 2017. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>14</sup> *LS*, 61

<sup>15</sup> Brian Swimme, *DVD Powers of the Universe*

<sup>16</sup> According to the Swedish Academy of Sciences these have already been exceeded for the rate of biodiversity loss, climate change, and human interference with the nitrogen cycle, while the boundaries for the phosphorus cycle, ocean acidification, global freshwater usage, and changes in land usage are moving towards the limit of the safe operating level.

challenge to choose between a technocratic era, dominated by technological development and fixes, and an ecozoic era, a period when “humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community.”<sup>17</sup> Berry’s vision is shared by Earth Link.

By way of analysis we can consider Pope Francis’ explication of what he calls the dominant technocratic paradigm. He acknowledges the benefits that have come from technological knowledge, but recognises that its basic premise is flawed. He says that “this paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.”<sup>18</sup> Berry has consistently diagnosed that a source of the devastation of the planet lies in our treatment of the natural world as an object to be exploited, and our subsequent disconnection from it.<sup>19</sup> Johnson points to the world views of hierarchical and Cartesian dualism underlying this mindset.<sup>20</sup> They manifest in the classical worldview where matter is subordinate to human need or want, even where that is tempered by notions of responsible stewardship.

Barbour refers to these times as the *contemporary period*, and it calls for new perspectives. Pope Francis promotes an integral vision where there is “a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it”;<sup>21</sup> and Grim and Tucker develop an anthropocosmic view which “orient(s) humans in the universe and ground(s) them in nature.”<sup>22</sup> Ilia Delio calls the emerging world view *evolutionary*. In it, a mechanistic, static world view gives way to one that is organic, relational, and conscious of the place of humans in an unfolding cosmos. This is the worldview espoused by Earth Link. It stresses that the Universe is a dynamic entity within which all is interconnected, yet distinct. This world view is open to findings from contemporary sciences.

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Great Work, Our Way into the Future*, (New York: Bell Tower/Random House, 1998)

<sup>18</sup> *LS*, 39,

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story, From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 243

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 126

<sup>21</sup> *LS*, 39

<sup>22</sup> Grim and Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 43-44

## Influences on Contemporary World Views

The twentieth century has seen some extraordinary discoveries, and notable among these are developments in cosmology, Darwin's theory of evolution and the emergence of quantum science. Debates rage as theology either denies, defends, or responds creatively to these discoveries. This is the context in which we are living into these principles, and Earth Link aligns with those who are seeking creative responses. It is open to developments from cosmology and evolutionary emergence, and recognises that valuable insights are emerging from quantum science, although this thesis does not address them in any detail.

### *Cosmological Perspectives*

Earth Link is committed to a cosmological perspective which enables us to locate planet Earth within the context of the Milky Way galaxy and the sand storm of galaxies beyond that. It is aware that this is a changing scene, and draws on the work of cosmologists such as Joel Primack whose current projects in scientific cosmology take him beyond the galaxies that are currently known. It is not cosmology per se that is of vital importance to Earth Link even though this is a source of wonder and awe at the magnificence of this Universe, and at the possibilities that there are other Universes. These discoveries continually force a re-thinking of the place of humans in the bigger picture. The effect can be profound feelings of insignificance and powerlessness in the face of such enormity. These are times of transition and it is important for Earth Link to facilitate such explorations. The work of Primack and Abrams which is outlined in the thesis can contribute to thinking cosmically, and behaving globally and locally. Earth Link can take seriously their appeal to develop "cosmic metaphors" which they understand not just as figures of speech but as *mental reframings of reality itself.*" There is a new perspective that comes from understanding that humans are at the centre of the universe, albeit a universe where planet Earth is known to be part of the Milky Way galaxy, and that galaxy is just one in a plethora of other galaxies. As they explain:

There is no geographic centre to an expanding universe, but we are central in several ways that derive directly from physics and cosmology—for example, we are in the centre of all possible sizes in the universe, we are made of the rarest material

(stardust), and we are living at the midpoint of time for both the universe and the earth.<sup>23</sup>

They go further to argue strongly for a “*social consensus*”<sup>24</sup> on how to think about the big, cosmological picture. Their understanding is that this would be built on a scientific consensus which has been shared with other sectors of society to the point where together they can reflect on its significance for themselves and society.

Earth Link can contribute to the development of a shared cosmology and facilitate people’s claiming their own power within a changing worldview.

### *Understanding Evolutionary Emergence-*

The story of the unfolding of the Universe provides the cosmological and biological underpinnings for the connectedness of all species with all that emerged before them in that story. It is a foundational story for Earth Link. Our Universe, our planet, life and humanity have a “big history.”<sup>25</sup> The twentieth century afforded scientists the technological skill to detect rays coming from the origin of the universe as we know it, which is currently dated at about 13.75 billion years ago (bya). Within the broad sweep of evolutionary history, there have been many moments when something more emerged from what was there before. As indicated in the section on context in this thesis, Tucker and Swimme use language that is a blend of science and poetry when they present the *Journey of the Universe*.<sup>26</sup> They talk about the origins and unfolding of the universe as story, a new mythic yet scientifically based story to replace literal tellings of origins as occurring in seven days, or simultaneously with the beginning of human history. Earth Link can draw on the detail in this thesis to continue to tell this story, one which Brian Swimme summarises in this way, “This is the greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: You take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Joel Primack and Nancy Ellen Abrams, *The View from the Centre of the Universe* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006), 7

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>25</sup> The term “big history” describes the history of the Universe from its origins to the present.

<sup>26</sup> Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). This is the source of the description that follows.

<sup>27</sup> Brian Thomas Swimme, “Comprehensive Compassion, Interview with Brian Swimme,” *What is Enlightenment*, accessed 2 July, 2003: <http://www.wie.org/j19/swimme.asp> (1 of 9)

From the perspective of Earth Link, two things stand out in the story of the evolutionary emergence of organisms: species have a common origin, and there is a dynamic within the process itself which enables the movement from simple to more complex organisms. With respect to the former, Darwin's work is foundational. Elizabeth Johnson drew on Darwin's treatise *On the Origin of Species*, and summarises his work thus:

*On the Origin of Species* is one long argument that species are in motion, coming into being from previous species by a process that can be explained naturally, without appeal to a supernatural cause.<sup>28</sup>

We can accept what Johnson calls his "profound ecological insight":

All organic beings, living and dead, are related to one another, historically and biologically. All take their place in a single narrative of creative struggle, divergence, thriving, death, extinction, and further breakthrough. Common descent with modification by natural selection is the explanatory principle which interprets how species originate from one another, naturally.<sup>29</sup>

Darwin concluded that "all organic beings have descended from one primordial form, into which life was first breathed."<sup>30</sup> He acknowledged the difficulty of accepting that the dynamics of natural selection could be the workings of the natural world rather than seeing them as independent acts of creation. While his work called for a serious appraisal of cultural and religious assumptions, his appreciation of the natural world was undimmed:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one: and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>31</sup>

Darwin's work on common origins along with the broader cosmological picture enables Earth Link to adopt an evolutionary perspective. While this thesis goes into greater detail about what this entails, suffice it here to recognise these key features of evolution drawn from a summary by Elizabeth Johnson: biological kinship arising from common descent; the emergence of new forms of life which differ from what went before; cumulative bodily relationships whereby simple organisms become more complex, and even morph into new species; death which allows for the emergence of the new; and development towards more

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<sup>28</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 27

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 65

<sup>30</sup> Darwin, *Origin*, 484

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 488

complex organisms.<sup>32</sup> Darwin's work influenced the transition into a worldview which is now called evolutionary, a worldview built on the above understanding, and now espoused by Earth Link as a basis for Principle 1.

The other important understanding about evolutionary emergence is that nature is unfolding according to a *dynamic within it*. Such an understanding renders obsolete any reliance on the direct and immediate intervention of a Creator God for nature's forward movement. Something new can come into existence from what preceded it.

Emergence theory basically seeks to explain the relationship between what emerges and what went before. While there is considerable divergence within this field of science, it offers valuable insights into emerging realities, such as mind emerging from matter. There is more detail in this thesis. For the purposes of Earth Link, we can see the emergence of the new either as a reassembling of what is, or we can accept that the new has causal properties which distinguish it from what gave rise to it. The former is the basis of a materialist philosophy, understood by Barbour as

Materialism is the assertion that matter is the fundamental reality in the universe. Materialism is a form of *metaphysics* (a set of claims concerning the most general characteristics and constituents of reality). It is often accompanied by a second assertion: the scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge. This is a form of epistemology (a set of claims concerning inquiry and the acquisition of knowledge).<sup>33</sup>

He makes the point that the materialist position precludes any consideration of other forms of knowing such as religious knowledge. Operating from a materialist premise rules out any possibility of a science-religion dialogue such as Earth Link is committed to. Rather we espouse a position that acknowledges the theory of evolutionary emergence is compatible with a faith perspective, and take up the challenges implicit in taking the science seriously. We seek to reconcile evolutionary theory with theism, even while it leads us to a critical appraisal of some of its forms.

The messages from the sciences are clear: there is an unfolding dynamism in the universe and in the evolutionary emergence of species; everything is interconnected and

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<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 102

<sup>33</sup> Ian Barbour, *Nature, Human Nature and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 4

interdependent, even unto what can be considered kinship relations between the species; and within the interconnectedness, entities retain their distinctive characteristics. These messages are embraced by Earth Link. They are foundational in the development of ecospiritual understandings and practices which are the subject matter of Principle 2, and their theological underpinnings which are the subject matter of Principles 3-5.

### **Principle 2 Cultivate an open, attentive and receptive attitude in order to enter into transformative, mystical encounters.**

This Principle captures Earth Link's conviction that the ecospiritual experience is about transformative, mystical encounter, and that it can be facilitated, but not guaranteed, by an open, attentive, receptive attitude. Given the influence of Thomas Berry on Earth Link from its inception, this enhanced principle is not startlingly new, but rather builds upon original material while adding further insights and building bridges into the Judaeo-Christian tradition's use of cosmic and nature images of God. Subsequent principles draw on Catholic ecotheology as a way of interpreting and deepening the ecospiritual experience.

#### **Understanding Ecospirituality**

Ecospirituality is about transformative, mystical encounter. Earth Link has always been influenced by Thomas Berry, not only in his drawing attention to the planetary crisis, and his diagnosis of the root cause as the disconnection of humans from nature, but also by his personal testimony to the spirituality that built on a transformative experience of the meadow from his childhood, a testimony which is presented more fully in Chapter 4 of this thesis. His ecospirituality builds on what he terms "magic" experience, from whence he also makes meaning about what is good and what needs to be addressed in the major systems of society, whether they be religious, social, economic, legal, political, or environmental. Earth Link subscribes to the interconnectedness of ecospirituality and action for justice for the whole Earth community.

In a similar fashion, Earth Link draws on its own experiences to call others to moments "akin to ecstasy,"<sup>34</sup> to encounters of the natural world as subject rather than as an object to be

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 132



exploited.<sup>35</sup> Berry's spirituality goes beyond the philosophical to a recognition of the numinous qualities of Earth.<sup>36</sup> It is the basis for his sense of the Divine, a sense that is diminished with the destruction of ecosystems. Berry acknowledged the book of nature as the primordial source of God's revelation, a theme that is also present in the writings of Pope Francis. This was the grounding of his ecospirituality, and it has taught Earth Link to value immersion in nature as key to the "deep bonding" that is at the heart of its mission.

Berry's spirituality, shaped as it is in an emerging universe, is not only a Gaian sense of Earth as a living system, but also "a mode of being in which not only the Divine and the human commune with each other but through which we discover ourselves in the universe and the universe discovers itself in us."<sup>37</sup> In this he was influenced by the writings of Teilhard de Chardin who had a deep sense of divine presence within the very structures of the universe. Heaven and Earth embrace in the emergent, evolutionary spirituality of Thomas Berry and in the spirituality espoused by Earth Link.

As noted earlier in this thesis, Bron Taylor, in his study of nature religion, understands spirituality as "a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions, as well as a word that consecrates otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one's lifestyle and vocational choices."<sup>38</sup> Schneiders, in her academic study of spirituality sees it as "the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence," and defines it as "the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the horizon of ultimate value one perceives."<sup>39</sup> While spirituality is of its nature a human activity, Schneiders is holistic in her attitude to persons, and recognises that life is lived within a context which influences one's beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. Contemporary anthropological spirituality is "not only a complexification of the holistic approach to the human subject of religious experience, but a heightened awareness of the dimensions and

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<sup>35</sup> Berry and Swimme, *The Universe Story*, 243

<sup>36</sup> Berry, *Sacred Universe*, 73

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>38</sup> Bron Taylor, *Dark Green Religion, Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 3

<sup>39</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Christian Spirituality" in ed Arthur Holder, *Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, (Blackwell References Online, ([https://login.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/login?url=http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=2294/tocnode?id=g9781405102476\\_chunk\\_g97814051024763](https://login.ezproxy1.acu.edu.au/login?url=http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=2294/tocnode?id=g9781405102476_chunk_g97814051024763)), 2

influence of “place” and “space” (both inner and outer), globalization, ecological crises, the validity of religious experience outside one's own tradition, scientific developments, and cultural currents.”<sup>40</sup> Eco-spirituality is an expression of this heightened awareness, and is the focus of the resourcing, reflecting and acting of the Earth Link community.

Eco-spirituality involves emotion. It is experiential. The emotions that arise in one's immersions in nature are multilayered. There can be pain in listening to the cry of Earth and her people, and rage, frustration and disillusionment at policies and decisions that jeopardise the health and wellbeing of planet Earth and her people. There can be awe and wonder when encountering beauty, when sensing the enormity of the galaxies, and when marvelling at the unfolding story of our universe. One can experience a deep sense of connectedness to place and marvel at the complexity evident in Darwin's “entangled bank”,<sup>41</sup> and at the processes of natural selection which brought it to this point in time. One can experience pain and sorrow when encountering natural disaster, tragedy or loss; and one can suffer from the limits of our finite existence and from the effects of evil. Yet in the midst of this one can be suffused by hope. One can have a deep sense of Earth as God's dwelling place, and encounter what is hidden even while it is being revealed. And one can struggle to make meaning of one's experiences if confined to an outmoded worldview, spirituality and theology which is not cognisant of developments from cosmology and from natural and behavioural sciences.

Awe and wonder are natural emotions often, but not exclusively, associated with religious experience. In the words of Fuller writing on the connection between wonder and spirituality, wonder is “an emotional response that promotes passive, receptive modes of attention in the presence of something unexpected rather than fight or flight responses.”<sup>42</sup> Wonder arises spontaneously and creates openness. Fuller continues:

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.,10/14

<sup>41</sup> See Charles Darwin, *The Annotated Origin: A Facsimile of the First Edition of On the Origin of Species*, annotated by James Costa (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 489, where he reflects on the plants, birds, insects, worms and damp earth, and their “elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other and dependent on each other in so complex a manner.”

<sup>42</sup> Robert Fuller, “Wonder and Spirituality” in *The Journal of Religion*, 86, no. 3(2006): 370

First, wonder is an emotion linked with approach and affiliation rather than avoidance. Wonder motivates attention and motivates a quest for increased connection and belongingness with the putative source of unexpected displays of life, beauty, or truth. Wonder is thus somewhat rare among the emotions in its functional capacity to motivate persons to venture outward into increased rapport with the environment. Second, wonder awakens our mental capacity for abstract, higher-order thought. Indeed, wonder seems to direct our cognitive activities to identify causality, agency, and purpose in ways that are not directly connected with our biological survival.

Swimme and Tucker says that wonder will guide us. For them, and hopefully for us, “wonder is a gateway through which the universe floods in and takes up residence within us.”<sup>43</sup>

Contemporary ecospirituality needs to be cosmic in scope and grounded in awareness of the dynamic unfolding of the universe. In the tradition of Berry, Earth Link has adopted this story as foundational. The telling and re-telling of the Universe story locate us within a much greater whole which enables us to have a cosmic identity as well as a planetary one. It reminds us to cultivate “a different kind of ‘*spirituality-of-being in-the-world*’, a *spirituality of being connected* to the ordinary life in the world with its daily relationships and responsibilities, a spirituality that makes sense of our environment without and within.”<sup>44</sup> This requires that we are familiar with the dynamics of our finite existence as we remember that “the finite bears the infinite.”<sup>45</sup> Larry Rasmussen in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* develops this motif when he says:

God is pegged to earth. So if you would experience God, you must fall in love with earth. The infinite and transcendent are dimensions of what is intensely at hand. Don’t look “up” for God, look around. The finite is all there is, because all *that* is, is *there*.<sup>46</sup>

### Facilitating Encounter

While spiritual encounters can be unmediated, Earth Link is committed to facilitating the development of an open, attentive and receptive attitude in order to enter into transformative, mystical encounters. In continuity with the research in this thesis, Earth Link

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<sup>43</sup> Swimme and Tucker, *Journey*, 113

<sup>44</sup> Ursula King, “One Planet, One Spirit: Searching for an Ecologically Balanced Spirituality,” *Ecotheology* 10, no. 1 (2005), 66-87, 72, italics hers.

<sup>45</sup> Larry Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 273

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 273

promotes practices which involve immersion in sacred place, formation of a sacramental mindset toward nature, and individual and communal ritual practices. To a lesser extent Earth Link promotes the cultivation of virtue as part of its ecospirituality, although it advocates strongly for the development of right relations with the Earth community. Earth Link agrees with Gottlieb when he says:

(Thus) nature spirituality in the modern age contains within itself the seeds not only of a personal but also of a social transformation. If the personal ego can make us sick as individuals, our collective ego of reckless industrialization and unrestrained consumption can make us ecologically sick as a society. If yoga and meditation are helpful responses to individual maladies of modernity such as high blood pressure and anxiety, so a spiritually oriented relation to nature may be our best response to the collective maladies of pollution and climate change.<sup>47</sup>

As part of the exposition of this Principle, I will elaborate on some of these ways of facilitating encounter with Sacred Mystery.

### *Immersion in Sacred Place*

Falling in love with Earth as valuable in itself, and as a medium of divine revelation requires the knowledge and intimacy that comes from immersion. Familiarity with place, indeed developing a physical relationship with it, is foundational to being open to transformative, mystical encounters. As acknowledged above, such encounters can be unmediated, yet immediacy of contact with Earth and cosmos is an important aspect of ecospirituality. In the preface to *Landscapes of the Sacred*, Schneiders says, “In our experience of the sacred the ‘where’ is as determinative as the ‘how’.”<sup>48</sup> Earth Link captured this insight in the first edition of the Principles by noting that “Earth Link spirituality is real, immediate and tangible; a spirituality in which the human body is called to be in dynamic contact with the Earth, ‘profoundly grounded in the realities of the earth and the body’.”<sup>49</sup>

This “where” is cosmic as well as planetary. Berry strongly advocated developing a cosmic identity. For him, there was a mutual relation between physical bodies and the Universe. In an oft quoted verse he says:

The child awakens to a universe.  
The mind of the child to a world of wonder.  
Imagination to a world of beauty.  
Emotions to a world of intimacy.  
It takes a universe to make a child

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<sup>47</sup> Roger Gottlieb, *Spirituality, What it is and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See Chapter 9, Spirituality and Nature, 3

<sup>48</sup> Belden C Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), iv

<sup>49</sup> Quote within the quote is from David Tacey, “Spirit Place” in *Changing Places: Reimagining Australia*, ed John Cameron (Double Bay: Longueville, 2003), 245

both in outer form and inner spirit.  
It takes a universe to educate a child.  
A universe to fulfil a child.  
Each generation presides over the meeting of these two  
In the succeeding generation  
So that the universe is fulfilled in the child,  
And the child is fulfilled in the Universe.  
While the stars ring out in the heavens!<sup>50</sup>

As noted in the thesis, Belden Lane cogently makes the point that “religious experience is invariably ‘placed’ experience and that those places are frequently the most ordinary ones entered anew with awe.”<sup>51</sup> Lane posits four axioms to assist us in our understanding of place as sacred which are, in summary:

- Sacred place is not chosen, it chooses.
- Sacred place is an ordinary place, ritually made extraordinary.
- Sacred place can be tread upon without being entered.
- The impulse of sacred place is both centripetal and centrifugal, local and universal—at times the quest is for centredness, and at other times it is driven out from that locale.<sup>52</sup>

Immersion in place is of particular importance to indigenous peoples, and Earth Link has much to learn from this. In Australia, the first peoples have a continuing sense of Earth as sacred. Indigenous poet Denis Kevans rebukes those for whom the land is just a quarry to be mined, and he reminds us that

Sacred means that, sacred, that's a place where spirits rise,  
With the rainbow wings of sunset, on the edge of paradise,  
Sacred, that's my father, that's my daughter, that's my son,  
Sacred,... where the dreaming whispers hope for everyone.<sup>53</sup>

A sense of the sacredness of Earth has been documented as a motivating force in environmentally responsible behaviour. To draw on some references in this thesis: Hedlund-

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<sup>50</sup> [http://www.thomasberry.org/Biography/It\\_Takes\\_a\\_Universe.html](http://www.thomasberry.org/Biography/It_Takes_a_Universe.html)

<sup>51</sup> Lane, *Landscapes*, 28

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>53</sup> Denis Kevans from the book "*Ah, White Man, Have You Any Sacred Sites?*," 1985 [ISBN 0 9593 073]

de Witt<sup>54</sup> interviewed nature-lovers/environmentalists and spiritual practitioners in Victoria, Canada. who were already demonstrating environmentally responsible behaviour. She identified three distinct pathways to environmental responsibility: profound encounters with nature; contemporary spirituality; and some blend of the two. Taylor abstracted from many case studies his inclusive notion of nature religion as “an umbrella term to mean religious perceptions and practices that are characterised by a reverence for nature and that consider its destruction a desecrating act. Adherents often describe feelings of belonging and connection to the earth—of being bound to and dependent upon the earth’s living systems.”<sup>55</sup> Ecospirituality within an emerging universe does have the potential to facilitate a deeper sense of the embrace of Heaven and Earth, and to contribute to redressing environmental degradation.

### *Formation of a Sacramental Mindset*

The sense of connection that can come from an open, attentive and receptive attitude can be understood in terms of a relation with “animate earth”<sup>56</sup> in the Gaian sense of Earth’s having the qualities of a living organism. This is the case for some in the Earth Link community. For others, such as Berry and Lane, the experience of Earth’s inner numinous quality, or the experience of Earth as sacred, can be an encounter with divine Mystery. It is sacramental in the broadest sense of that word. For Lane, this is about having a binary vision which can hold the ambivalence of seeing and valuing the ordinary, while recognising that “the ordinary is no longer at all what it appears.”<sup>57</sup> There are different understandings of the nature of the encounter depending on one’s religious tradition. Johnson, in her Trinitarian theology, refers to an encounter with God’s presence, based on the understanding that God is in all things and places, but not contained by them. Contemporary theology calls this relationship panentheism, explained by Johnson as the understanding that “the world is indwelt by the presence of the Spirit while at the same time it is

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<sup>54</sup> Annick Hedlund-de Witt, “Pathways to Environmental Responsibility: A Qualitative Exploration of the Spiritual Dimension of Nature Experience,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 72, no.2 (2013): 154-186

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, 5

<sup>56</sup> Stephan Harding, *Animate Earth* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006)

<sup>57</sup> Lane, *Landscapes*, 37

encompassed by divine presence which is always and everywhere greater.”<sup>58</sup> Johnson distinguishes panentheism from pantheism which “conflates God and the world,”<sup>59</sup> and from unipersonal theism “which posits God as a transcendent cause.”<sup>60</sup> Johnson espouses this widely held position of panentheism as respecting both the immanence and transcendence of God, even as it opens up “a kind of asymmetrical mutual indwelling, not of two equal partners, but of the infinite God who dwells within all things sparking them into being and finite creatures who dwell within the embrace of divine love,”<sup>61</sup> insights which are of vital importance to the practice of ecospirituality within an emerging universe. This is when Heaven and Earth embrace without obscuring the differences, a position endorsed by Earth Link.

Ritual, both personal and communal, is very important in creating an intentional space for entering into transformative, mystical encounters. Earth Link has always engaged in ritual along with holistic processes in order to awaken people to spiritual insights and encounters. Tucker and Grim recognise that religions at their best have “woven humans into nature with rituals, symbols and ethical practices.”<sup>62</sup> Hopefully religious and spiritual practices also weave humans into the presence of the Spirit embedded in nature yet not contained by it. Ecospiritual practices have the potential to facilitate a truly sacramental orientation to matter. There are many approaches utilised within ecospiritual practice. Some have the potential to awaken people to the richness of existing ecclesial practices, many of which had their origins when people had a greater sensitivity to the rhythms and cycles of nature. Ecospiritual practices celebrate the hours of the day, cycles of sun and moon, and the seasons. Time-honoured contemplative practices such as *lectio-divina* can be broadened to include listening to the book of nature as well as the book of scripture. Earth Link espouses many of these practices, and adapts them to the circumstance of the particular ritual and group.

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 147

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

<sup>62</sup> John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, (Washington, Island Press, 2014), 11

Ritual practice has been built since early times on a sense that “the finite bears the infinite” even while acknowledging that the infinite is not contained by the finite. The elements of water, wind, fire and earth form the basis of the sacramental system, yet the sacramental mindset referred to above is broader than just the seven sacraments traditionally recognised in the Christian churches. While later principles elaborate on the doctrine of continuous creation and of God’s indwelling presence, this second principle is enriched by Johnson’s retrieval of cosmic and planetary biblical images of God, and their potential for enhancing our understanding of the Judaeo-Christian understanding of the Sacred. This biblical material contributes to our naming who is revealed in our encounters with cosmos and planet and in our ritual practices.

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson unpacks a range of cosmic images which expand “the notion of divine presence beyond analogy with a human person.”<sup>63</sup> She retrieves the cosmic, biblical images of blowing wind, flowing water, and blazing fire, along with that of the bird, before tapping into the Wisdom tradition. These references can open our eyes to a long tradition of using analogies drawn from nature to capture a sense of God’s presence, and conversely, the sacramental encounter with natural forces can be interpreted with reference to the presence of Holy Mystery. It is worth highlighting the mutuality of these processes such that the encounter with the Sacred can be enhanced by accessing a very long tradition, and the tradition reclaimed in a way that is much needed in these times.

Images of God as the male, authoritarian figure in the sky or in heaven do not serve us well as we seek to deepen our appreciation of God’s continuous presence in the community of life. The biblical tradition is rich with cosmic images such as blowing wind, flowing water, and blazing fire that have been ignored while humans were at the centre of our world view and theology. For Johnson these images expand “the notion of divine presence beyond analogy with a human person.”<sup>64</sup> The other advantage is the dynamism inherent in these images of powerful natural forces. In her words, “they can surround and pervade other things without losing their own character; their presence is known by the changes they bring about.”<sup>65</sup> The animal metaphor that Johnson uses, the bird, long associated with the

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<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 134

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 134



sacred in primal religions, is an image which conjures up the experience of brooding and flying free. Her image of Holy Wisdom is an extension of her earlier Trinitarian work, this time with attention to Wisdom's cosmic reach. For Johnson and for us, these images open up new avenues for thinking about God's presence in the natural world, and for providing language for articulating such insights. This opening up of ways of imaging God is of particular relevance for ecospirituality. The biblical references can open our eyes to a long tradition of using analogies drawn from nature to capture a sense of God's presence, and conversely, the encounter with natural forces can be interpreted with reference to the presence of Holy Mystery.

Johnson is quite lavish in her exploration of these images. She piles them up one on top of the other, and accumulates them into a rich picture of the dynamic presence of God in what she refers to as the community of life, which can also be referred to as the Earth community. I refer to her material here in some detail in order to capture its richness. She begins with "Ruach," understood as wind or breath. When Earth Link was located on an escarpment of the D'Aguilar Range, we called the cottage by that name. It had the biblical connotation, but also reflected the weather at that site! One of the things you notice about wind is that you cannot see it unless it is carrying particles, yet you can definitely feel it. Breath is a vital sign of life. In the biblical world of Genesis 1, 1-2, the ruach of God breathed the world into existence. It breathed life into dry bones, and reminded the people that the same could happen to them (Ezek 37, 1-4). The wind filled the room where the frightened disciples were gathered in the wake of the death of Jesus, and filled them with courage in the midst of their confusion (Acts, 2, 2, 4).

Johnson moves from the dynamism of wind to various forms of water, whether trickling or rushing, fresh or salt. Water makes up the biggest part of living organisms. To the people in exile wandering in the desert, Isaiah spoke of God's faithful presence in terms that they would understand: "I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry land" (Is 44, 3), and he assured them that God would bless their descendants. Again when the disciples were crowded together in fear, Peter reminded them of Joel's promise that God would pour out his Spirit on them (Acts 2, 18). Augustine made his own contribution to the understanding of God's presence permeating all of creation by likening it to a sponge

saturated in water.<sup>66</sup> God's presence is not stinted but superabundant. Earth Link has had a long tradition of facilitating encounter with the water courses in its local region, whether these be the south arm of the Caboolture River, the North and South Pine Rivers, and more recently, Cabbage Tree Creek.

The picture builds up with the image of fire as a symbol of God's fiery and enlightening presence. Like wind and water, fire can also be destructive, and symbolic of God's wrath. The book of Exodus tells us that it was in the context of a burning bush that Moses received the revelation of who God is, and of his enduring presence with them on their journeys. God's flaming presence in the tongues of Pentecost fire set their hearts ablaze (Acts, 2, 3-4). Even Stephen Hawking whose atheism is well known, and whose knowledge of and marvel at the wonders of the universe are also well known, asks the question, "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?"<sup>67</sup> For those with a faith orientation, that fire is an analogy for the spark of the life-giving presence of the Spirit. Fire and light continue to be acknowledged by Earth Link with outdoor sunrise rituals for both Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

In the Mediterranean region, the bird is an ancient symbol of the feminine deity, and, in contemporary times, it is the widely used symbol of the peace dove. Crossing over to the Hebrew religious tradition, the protective aspect of the bird's wings features in passages such as Psalm 17, 8: "Guard me as the apple of the eye; hide me in the shadow of your wings." Early Syriac Christian imagery uses the brooding, motherly bird to describe the actions of the Spirit towards her children, and the same image is present in the conception, birth and death of Jesus. Augustine comments on the Genesis creation text which says that "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen, 1,2), likening that image to one where "the warmth of the mother's body in some way also supports the forming of chicks through a kind of influence of her own kind of love."<sup>68</sup> This animal image draws attention to the creative, nurturing role of the Spirit, and enhances our understanding of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>67</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 174

<sup>68</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, I.36

the relational presence of the Spirit. This sensitivity also links us to eco-feminists of all persuasions.

In her final image Johnson revisits the Wisdom tradition, which featured prominently in her feminist imaging of Mother-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia and Spirit-Sophia. She again quotes Augustine who speaks of how the Wisdom of God “took our weakness upon herself and came to gather the children of Jerusalem under her wings as a hen gathers her chicks.”<sup>69</sup> This is multilayered Wisdom Christology. Johnson points to the way in which the biblical figure of holy Wisdom has cosmic scope. She is present with God at creation (Ps 8 22.-31), is a teacher of “what is secret and what is manifest” (Wis 7, 22), is present, “pervading and penetrating all things” (Wis 7, 24), and defeats all evil (Wis, 7, 29-30). This image of Wisdom points to the all-pervading presence who “reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and (she) orders all things well” (Wis, 8, 1). Wisdom is identified with God’s spirit in her attributes (Wis 7, 22), and, even more importantly, linked to the mystery of God’s being as a “breath of the power of God” and an “image of his goodness” (Wis 7, 25-26). Johnson points out that while there is no direct identification of God and Wisdom, the way in which Wisdom moves and functions helps our understandings of the Spirit.

Johnson concludes by reminding us that “these symbols provide guidance for how to think about the hidden presence and activity of the Spirit of God in the natural world,”<sup>70</sup> a presence which loves, pervades and vivifies, while remaining transcendent, incomprehensible Mystery.

The hidden presence and activity of the Spirit can be encountered through the ecospiritual experience. The felt embrace of Heaven and Earth can be not only a transformative, mystical encounter as encouraged in this Principle, but also a recognition of the interconnectedness of the dynamic Universe as developed in Principle 1. These principles contribute to making real Earth Link’s enhanced vision of “a world where there is respect, reverence and care for the Earth community, held in the embrace of Divine Mystery.” This belief in the Divine embrace is fleshed out in the remaining Principles.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 143



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## Chapter 13 Principles 3-4

The first of the enhanced principles promotes a worldview which is cognisant of scientific and cultural changes. People are invited to “recognise that the Universe is a dynamic entity, within which all is interconnected yet distinct.” The second relates to ecospiritual understandings and practices, and invites people to “cultivate an open, attentive and receptive attitude in order to enter into transformative, mystical encounters.” In that principle we draw on Johnson’s retrieval of cosmic and planetary biblical images of God which expand the notion of the Divine in a way that is meaningful for ecospirituality. Principles 3, 4 and 5 develop Christian religious perspectives more overtly. They are strongly influenced by Johnson’s Trinitarian theology as it pertains to the beliefs that give depth to the ecospiritual encounter. These beliefs are developed more fully in these enhanced principles than in the earlier Earth Link material.

Principles 3 and 4 are

- Acknowledge the indwelling presence of the Spirit in Earth and cosmos
- Acknowledge that in Jesus Christ the God of love embraces the cosmos in healing solidarity.

### **Principle 3 Acknowledge the indwelling presence of the Spirit in Earth and cosmos**

Earth Link has a mission to facilitate deep bonding within the community of creation. In our earlier statement of Principles we expressed the conviction that such bonding was an acknowledgment of the presence of the Sacred in the interdependent web of life.<sup>1</sup> We believe that this is “an experience of the Sacred, and that Earth and cosmos constitute for

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<sup>1</sup> Original Principle 3

us a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery.”<sup>2</sup> Berry goes so far as to declare this the primordial revelation in the sense that it is antecedent to revelation from scripture or from tradition. Pope Francis and others speak of revelation through the book of nature as well as the book of scripture.<sup>3</sup> It is imperative to note that revelation is from God, omnipresent in the universe, and, while we can facilitate receptivity, we are ultimately in the hands of Divine Mystery. That Earth and cosmos are revelatory is a key concept in ecospirituality understood as transformative, mystical encounter. Such is the ecospirituality espoused by Earth Link.

The doctrine of revelation is a classical Christian doctrine, which Johnson revisits with a focus on the theological significance of the natural world, and with special reference to the questions raised by its evolutionary emergence. This enhanced principle of Earth Link provides a specifically Christian interpretation of the widely experienced sense of Earth as sacred. It adds the dimension of God’s indwelling which needs to be understood in ways that respect the dynamic and autonomous processes of Universe and Earth. The exposition of this principle draws extensively on Johnson where she takes as her starting point “the presence of the Spirit throughout the world in the act of continuous creation,”<sup>4</sup> and proceeds from there to theologise about God’s transcendent presence, loving action in our created reality, and the relations between divine and created agency. Other aspects of Johnson’s Trinitarian theology are pertinent for Principles 4 and 5.

In this context, the symbol of the Celtic triquetra, which is at the head of this chapter, can be used as a symbol of the interrelatedness of God’s Trinitarian life within itself, and as encountered in cosmos and planet Earth. The elements of the triquetra, God, humans and Earth, are interconnected without losing their distinctiveness. Together they form a whole which is greater than the sum of the parts.

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<sup>2</sup> *Introduction to Ecospirituality*, a series of essays on the above principles developed in 2007 for Earth Link by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney, 2

<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home*, (hereafter *LS*), 85-88, accessed 3 April, 2017, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 128

## God's Indwelling Presence in Continuous Creation

As noted in Principle 1 we are in the throes of a transition from classical understandings of the world as static, hierarchical, and marked by dualistic understandings of the relationship between spirit and matter, body and soul, and even mind and matter. These influences made their way into theologies which highlighted the supernatural over the natural, and grace, understood as God's gift,<sup>5</sup> as superior to and separate from nature. Theologically, interest in creation waned in favour of interest in redemption, and God's action in the biblical history of salvation was seen as more significant than God's action in the cycles of nature. In terms of spirituality, the journey was one of ascent from the lesser to the greater, in a way that devalued Earth in the pursuit of Heaven. Earth Link does not subscribe to this view, so, with Johnson, seeks a different starting point, that of "the presence of the Spirit throughout the world in the act of continuous creation."<sup>6</sup>

Classical creation theology encompasses "original creation in the beginning, continuous creation in the present here and now, and new creation at the redeemed end time."<sup>7</sup> In the Hebraic-Christian tradition, plants and animals have a reference point beyond themselves in the "overflowing generosity of the incomprehensible God who freely shares life with the world."<sup>8</sup> God's presence is there as origin, source and goal. It is an ongoing and dynamic presence, and Johnson borrows the metaphor of the singer keeping the song in existence at all times to give the sense of immediate and sustained presence.<sup>9</sup> God's presence is traditionally known as the Spirit who also "continues to draw the world to an unpredictable future, pervaded by a radical promise at the ultimate end of time."<sup>10</sup>

Continuous creation, as understood by Johnson, affirms that "rather than retiring after bringing the world into existence at some original instant, the Creator keeps on sustaining the world in its being and becoming at every moment."<sup>11</sup> Johnson finds this truth implied in

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 126

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 128

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 123

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 124

<sup>9</sup> Herbert McCabe, *God, Christ and Us*, ed Brian Davies (New York: Continuum, 2003), 103

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 124

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 128

the Nicene Creed with its affirmations of God as Creator in the beginning, and of Spirit as “Lord and Giver of life.” This is the vivifier, the life giver.

Johnson searches the sources of revelation for insights that have been overlooked. The biblical tradition is replete with images of a dynamic and omnipresent God, and it is there she begins her search before turning to Aquinas for insights into the relationship between God and world.

From the Hebrew scriptures, Johnson draws attention to the life-giving action of the Spirit in moving over the waters in the process of creation (Gen 1,2), renewing the face of the Earth (Ps 104,30), filling creation with God’s presence (Wis 1,7), and being intimately present everywhere. In a related verse we read:

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning or settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
Even then your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast (Ps 139, 7-10).

She also points to the balance that the biblical writers find between God’s transcendence and immanence. This is the God who is over and above all, but who is also present and engaged with all that is. God who holds all in the palm of God’s hand is loving and compassionate. God is personally engaged in this anthropocosmic reality at all times and in all places, not only in human experience, but with deep love for all the living:

For you love all things that exist...  
You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord, you who love the living  
For your imperishable spirit is in all things (Wis, 11, 24; 12, 1).

The whole of the natural world is imbued with Spirit, and not to be denigrated or demeaned for its materiality. Heaven and Earth really do embrace.

Johnson moves to the emergence in early Christian times of the Trinitarian instinct about God as both ineffable and present. In the depths of their experience, the early Christians encountered Jesus present among them personally, and had a sense of his continuing resurrected presence with them. The post-resurrection faith of the community issues forth in this blessing: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you (2 Cor, 13, 10).”

In the second century, Irenaeus was the first to attempt to capture this Trinitarian instinct more systematically. Around that time, Tertullian in Africa came up with various metaphors for the relationship between the Trinity and nature, a reference that recurs in Johnson's work. He uses nature metaphors such as sun, water, and root, shoot and fruit of a tree to capture the presence of the incomprehensible God who is "unleashed" in the world. To take just one as Johnson presents it:

If God the Father can be likened to the sun, source of light and heat, then Christ is the ray of sunlight streaming to earth (Christ the sunbeam, of the same nature as the sun), and the Spirit is the suntan or sunburn, the spot of warmth where the sun actually arrives and has an effect.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequent developments in Trinitarian theology have at times become more conceptual and abstract, while at other times, they are enriched with understandings of the relationality within God's being and beyond. As part of her reclaiming of Spirit, Johnson appeals to Aquinas' sense of Spirit as "God proceeding by love," the bond of mutual unity and love in the inner life of the Trinity and in action in the world. Earth Link acknowledges that the Spirit is indeed the "holy mystery of God's own personal being"<sup>13</sup> who is continuously present and active in the process of continuous creation, a presence that demands our conscious attention as we respond to nature with wonder, and face the consequences of our wasteful treatment of it.

### **God's transcendent presence**

In the Christian tradition, and in these principles, God's presence is not identical with natural reality, even when intimately present to it. Johnson begins her philosophical exploration of the personal presence of God to all creatures with the insights of Aquinas. In his quest to establish that "God alone is the source of everything,"<sup>14</sup> Aquinas worked with the notion of God as Being itself, while all else participates in or receives that being as gift. Kasper captures this relationship as "self-communicating love."<sup>15</sup> To be in relation is not an optional extra, but of the very essence of Godself. In a Trinitarian theology this means that God's

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 131

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 144

<sup>15</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 156



inner being can be understood as “self-giving love beyond imagining.”<sup>16</sup> Without a personal conviction about this, any Christian ecospirituality is but an academic exercise.

Johnson goes on to consider the relations between God and all that is not God, a key consideration for ecospirituality. The very act of creation sets up a relationship of dependence on the source and sustainer of all. For all things to have being, they must be in relation to Being itself, and Aquinas concludes that “God is in all things, and innermostly.”<sup>17</sup> Yet the distinction between Being itself and the recipient of being maintains the distinctiveness of each according to its own nature.

When we claim that we can encounter God present in the Earth community, we need, with Johnson, to ask if God is in all things. Our questions can be enlightened by her examination of Thomas Aquinas. She draws on his image of fire as she explains:

Just as fire ignites things and sets them on fire, the Spirit of God ignites the world into being. This obviously happens in the beginning but doesn’t stop; just as the sun brightens the air all the day long, the presence of the Spirit sustains creatures with the radiance of being as long as these exist.<sup>18</sup>

She uses this symbol as an analogy for the Spirit dwelling in the innermost regions of the whole Universe. The everywhere-ness of the Spirit, to coin a word, is not tangible. It does not occupy space. Speaking of God’s presence is faith language for the understanding that God is in all things and places, but not contained by them. Aquinas argues also that all things are in God. Contemporary theology calls this relationship panentheism and I refer to it in Principle 2. It is a widely held position seen as respecting both the immanence and transcendence of God, even as it opens up “a kind of asymmetrical mutual indwelling, not of two equal partners, but of the infinite God who dwells within all things sparking them into being and finite creatures who dwell within the embrace of divine love.”<sup>19</sup> These are insights which are of vital importance to Earth Link’s practice of ecospirituality within an emerging universe. This is when Heaven and Earth embrace, yet in a way that respects their differences.

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 145

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae*, I,8,1

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 146

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 147

Theologians use the notion of participation to further understanding the relationship between God and all that is not God. Norris Clarke explains participation as having three elements: an infinite source, finite things and a link between the two.<sup>20</sup> Johnson explains Aquinas as saying that God in creating bestows vitality “in a creaturely way to what is other than Godself.”<sup>21</sup> In accepting this gift of being, all creatures share or participate in Being itself. The gift is freely given, and the receiver relies on the gift. This participation applies to all of the natural world, “not divinely, but as created, that is, existing and acting according to its own finite nature.”<sup>22</sup> Johnson gives an example by considering “goodness.” God alone is good, but creation which is rich and exuberantly alive partakes in that goodness. The more rich and diverse that creation the more God’s goodness is reflected “for in knowing the excellence of the world we may speak analogically about the One in whose being it participates.”<sup>23</sup> Johnson goes on to establish that we cannot denigrate the merely natural, when, in faith, we understand that it exists due to its participation in the fullness of God’s life. In this way our faith tradition can strengthen our resolve to address the critical issues facing Earth and cosmos which are explored in Principle 1.

The natural world, the entangled bank, is sacred. It is imbued with a spiritual presence which holds it in existence. It is the dwelling place of God. In Johnson’s words, “Earth is a physical place of extravagant dynamism that bodies forth the gracious presence of God. In its own way it is a sacrament and a revelation.” Its materiality embodies “the active presence of the holy Giver of life,” an understanding that is acted out in the sacraments of the Church, itself “constituted as a sacrament of Christ’s presence for the world.”<sup>24</sup> Earth Link can be sure that matter does reveal, in the biblical sense of teaching us about God. It can be seen as a book that reveals in much the same way as does Scripture, an image favoured by Augustine<sup>25</sup> who exhorts people to observe Heaven and Earth and see the works of God. In similar vein,

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<sup>20</sup> W Norris Clarke, *Explorations in Metaphysics: Being-God-Person* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 265

<sup>21</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 147

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 148

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 149

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 151

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 68:6,” *Sermons III/3*, trans Edmund Hill (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 225-6

Hopkins observed and exclaimed that “the world is charged with the glory of God.”<sup>26</sup> This motif is present in *Laudato Si* where we are reminded that “God has written a precious book....a constant source of wonder and awe.”<sup>27</sup>

Awareness of nature as revelatory is not new in the Christian tradition, and it continues to be richly developed in the thought of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*. This is superb prose and rich food for ecospiritual reflection:

The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains, everything, are, as it were, a caress of God. The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning; we all remember places, and revisiting those memories does us much good. For anyone who has grown up in the hills or used to sit by the spring to drink, or played outdoors in the neighbourhood square, going back to those places is a chance to recover something of their true selves.<sup>28</sup>

And there is more. Edwards summarises the references in the encyclical to the relation between God and all that is not God:

Other creatures “speak” to us of God’s love, are a “caress” of God, a “precious book” whose letters are the multitude of created things, a “manifestation” of God, a “continuing revelation” of the divine, a “teaching” that God wishes to give us, a “message” from God, and a “divine manifestation.”<sup>29</sup>

Alongside the revelation from Scripture and tradition which Johnson richly presents, here is revelation from nature before which we need to be open, attentive and aware. Ecospirituality here has a distinctively Christian content.

The emerging universe is classified by science as natural. Faith encourages us to see it as the dwelling place of God who created it and sustains it in existence through the presence of the Spirit. It is sacred, and worthy of our respect, reverence and care. The emerging Universe is now known to be unfolding according to its own dynamics, and that raises new

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<sup>26</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins, *God’s Grandeur*, <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/gods-grandeur>, accessed 10 August, 2017

<sup>27</sup> *LS*, 85

<sup>28</sup> *LS*, 84

<sup>29</sup> Denis Edwards, “ ‘Sublime Communion’: The Theology of the Natural World in *Laudato Si*,” *Theological Studies*, 77, No2 (2016), 384

questions about the way in which God acts in the universe. Earth Link needs to address this issue if it takes evolutionary emergence seriously.

Our deep bonding with the community of creation engages us in listening to diverse voices and their searches for God at the edges of established power, a pursuit dear to Elizabeth Johnson. In listening to Darwin's tangled bank and its evolutionary story she poses a new question which takes her beyond the theology of God's presence which up to this point could equally apply as understood in a static world view. She asks, "If indeed the current design is the result of a long history that can be explained by natural laws known to us, how are we to understand not just the presence but the activity of God?"<sup>30</sup> The Universe seems to be emerging through its own innate powers, yet Job's reflection on the beasts reminds us that what is happening is due to the hand of God. How do these perspectives go together? This is a question that Earth Link also needs to address as much popular spirituality presumes a static view of the natural world.

### **The action of the God of Love**

God as monarch has been the dominant model for the God who rules directly over his subordinates and nature such that they predictably fulfil his design. Natural selection poses a significant disruption to that model because it demonstrates empirically that variations have been occurring over eons of time. As Johnson points out, "the absence of direct design, the presence of genuine chance, the enormity of suffering and extinction and the ambling character of life's emergence over billions of years are hard to reconcile with a simple monarchical idea of the Creator at work."<sup>31</sup> So she poses a new dilemma which is about "how to understand the presence of the Spirit of God acting continuously to create in the light of evolutionary discoveries about the entangled bank."<sup>32</sup>

The theological interpretation that she offers is that "God's creative activity brings into being a universe endowed with the innate capacity to evolve by the operating of its own natural powers, making it a free partner in its own creation."<sup>33</sup> This is a model based on love rather than power over. This is no deistic God who creates and then leaves the world to its own

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<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 154

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 155

devices. This is no monarchical God who manages every detail. It is rather that the Giver of life “freely and generously invests nature with the power to organise itself and emerge into ever-new, more complex forms, and to do so according to its own ways of operating.”<sup>34</sup> Nature is always being called forward to newness while being empowered from within. This is evolutionary science taken into a theological framework which is what we are doing in these Principles.

Johnson goes on to understand God’s action in the natural world as an extension of our understanding of God’s saving action throughout history. She draws on Rahner’s position that “if we see the created world emerging thanks to the self-giving love of God,”<sup>35</sup> then the most helpful framework is that of grace, or God’s graciousness. God’s action in Christ through the Spirit is currently the model of God’s action in creation. Johnson draws on various sources in the tradition which argue that God’s action in human beings enhances rather than detracts from their existence. Irenaeus’ famous saying is that “the glory of God is the human being fully alive.”<sup>36</sup> God’s glory and human vitality are directly correlated.

Johnson draws on insights about grace as experienced by humans and extends them to all species. She infers:

The belief that God is faithful and acts consistently provides a warrant for thinking that as with humans, so too, with the natural world from which we have evolved. The gracious God, Spirit proceeding as love in person, is present to bless and enhance natural powers rather than to compete with them. With such a love there can be no anxiety about control.<sup>37</sup>

This love is embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus understood as “compassionate self-giving love for the liberation of others,”<sup>38</sup> a love which flows over to all. This is about understanding God’s omnipotence as empowering rather than overpowering. It is love that enables the flourishing of the other and its autonomous development. God who dwells in the midst of creation empowers nature to work towards its own fullness. This

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 156

<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haeresis*, 4.20.7, see also 3.20.2 and 5.3

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 158

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 158

allows for the emergence from lesser to greater complexity of life forms. Johnson summarises this paradigm of love thus:

In a theological perspective, this whole process is empowered by the Creator who as love freely gifts the natural world with creative agency. Its relation to the living God is marked simultaneously by ontological dependence and operational autonomy.<sup>39</sup>

The action of the God of love enables natural processes, and the natural world enters into the enabling process with its own integrity. This is the God we encounter in those natural processes, even as they are active in their own processes.

### **The relation between divine and created agency in an evolving world**

Earth Link acknowledges that God not only dwells within Earth and cosmos, but exercises agency. God's action in evolutionary emergence is an area of considerable theological discussion, and a brief survey of such is helpful within the scope of this Principle. It is also an issue of importance to all of us who invoke God's aid in our personal and global crises. Johnson indicates that "a large cadre of theologians endorse the idea of nature's independent working as shown by evolution. They diverge mightily, however, over how to think about the relation between divine and created agency in an evolutionary world."<sup>40</sup> Earth Link needs to engage with these discussions. Johnson gives a snapshot of a range of positions: single action theory (eg Gordon Kaufman et al), top down causality (Arthur Peacocke), causal joint theory (eg Polkinghorne), organic model-of world as body of God (eg Sallie McFague), kenotic self-emptying love (eg John Haught), and process thought (eg John Cobb).<sup>41</sup> Despite their considerable differences, they are all seeking to understand how "the creating God as ground, sustaining power, and goal of the evolving world acts by empowering the process from within" while respecting "the freedom of the natural world to evolve consistently with its internal laws as discovered by contemporary science."<sup>42</sup>

Johnson herself espouses the scholastic position of primary and secondary causality whose basic principle is that "the creative activity of God is accomplished in and through the free working of secondary causes."<sup>43</sup> She argues that this position is still appropriate within a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 160

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 160

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 161-162

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 163

dynamic evolutionary world view as it protects the distinction between Creator and created while allowing for a sense of co-creation. Johnson establishes first the distinction between an ultimate cause and a proximate cause. One is the “Cause of all causes” and the other participates in “the power to act, as things that are burning participate in the power of fire.”<sup>44</sup> She draws on Aquinas’ argument for the agency of creatures according to their own nature. She summarises, “It is characteristic of the creative power of God to raise up creatures who participate in divine being to such a degree that they are also creative and sustaining in their own right.”<sup>45</sup> Just as creatures participate in God’s being and goodness, they participate in God’s agency. God’s agency in creation gives creatures their own autonomous agency. God’s exercise of ultimate causality does not fill the gaps of any secondary or creaturely action:

God’s act is not a discrete ingredient that can be isolated and identified as a finite constituent of the world. In this sense the world necessarily hides divine action from us. The living God acts by divine power in and through the acts of finite agents which have genuine causal efficacy in their own right.

Johnson then discusses divine governance of the world where primary and secondary causality are related to final causation understood as “a creature’s innate tendency toward a goal.”<sup>46</sup> This self-direction, integral as it is to creatures, is a natural inclination toward good, and ultimately toward participation in divine goodness. In scholastic terms, God’s immanence is present as final cause, or in biblical terms, it is “reaching from one end of the world to the other” (Wis, 8,1).

Johnson indicates how this understanding of God as immanent Ground of all Being is consonant with the evolutionary understanding of the autonomy of all that is. God as ultimate cause endows beings with their participation in divine being, agency, and goodness, which they then act out. God exercises power by giving causative power to others. God is not just another secondary power. Rather “the Spirit of God continuously interacts with the world to implement the divine purpose by granting creatures and created systems their full measure of efficacy.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 163

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 164

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 165

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 166

Johnson asserts that this dynamic is effective only within the context of the “overarching notion of the Creator God as the absolute Living One, pure wellspring of being, and the concomitant notion of creaturely participation.”<sup>48</sup> For her that overarching conviction allows for the world to evolve in its own way while manifesting God’s Wisdom.

Another approach with merit in the consideration of God’s action is the “whole-part” and “top-down” model of Peacocke.<sup>49</sup> In the case of emergent reality, the whole and the parts have different causal powers that are interrelated but independent. The whole transcends the parts, yet can have a downward influence. Peacocke is careful to avoid any suggestion of direct divine intervention in specific aspects of the natural evolutionary process. He suggests:

By analogy with the operation of the whole-part influence in natural systems, I have in the past suggested that, because of the ‘ontological gap/s’ between the world and God is/are located simply *everywhere* in space and time, God could affect holistically the state of the world (the whole in this context) at all levels. Understood in this way, the proposal implies that patterns of events at the physical, biological, human and even social levels could be influenced by divine intention without abrogating natural regularities at any of these levels.

This analogy is limited to the relationship between God’s intention and the whole system, which in turn influences the parts or various levels.

Peacocke also admits the limits of his approach when he says:

I hope that the model described above so far has a degree of plausibility in that it depends only on an analogy with complex natural systems in general and on the way whole-part influence operates in them. It is, however too impersonal to do justice to the *personal* character of many (but not all) of the profoundest experiences of God.

The debate goes on. However as a basis for ecospirituality, it is timely to recognise, with Peacocke, that “because of the ‘ontological gap/s’ between God and the world which must always exist in any theistic model, this is only an attempt at making intelligible that which

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 168

<sup>49</sup> Arthur Peacocke, “Emergence, Mind, and Divine Action: The Hierarchy of the Sciences in Relation to the Human Mind-Brain-Body,” in ed Philip Clayton *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergent Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 275-277



we can postulate as being the initial effect of God experienced from, as it were, our side of the ontological boundary.”

So what about the emergence of the new, of those chance occurrences which seem to be a mark of the evolutionary process? Biologically there is an interplay of law and chance. Johnson clarifies the meaning of these terms:

Law refers to an orderly suite of natural forces that govern how the universe works. These principles, read off from the regularities observed in the world, hold true in all ordinary circumstances.<sup>50</sup>

Law accounts for predictability in what could otherwise be chaos. Law is not pre-ordained, but is based on description and analysis of what is happening. Chance, on the other hand refers to “the crossing of two independent causal chains that intersect for no known reasons that can be figured out in advance.”<sup>51</sup> This is the realm of the unexpected, of open-endedness. When law and chance work together there is scope for newness with some constraint, such as when natural selection deems that variations more suited to the environment thrive while other variations do not endure.

When it comes to theological reflection on the interplay of law and chance, Johnson indicates that “theology has traditionally allied God with lawful regularity,”<sup>52</sup> with having a plan and a purpose. There are definitely laws in nature which can be understood to reflect “the faithfulness of the living God, reliable and solid as a rock.”<sup>53</sup> However the evolutionary emergence of the new, apparently by chance, can be seen as reflecting “the infinite creativity of the living God, endless source of new possibilities.”<sup>54</sup> This newer emphasis on creativity points to the way in which “the natural world participates in its own creation.”<sup>55</sup> The Creator Spirit is present in these processes. As Johnson puts it, “Divine Love empowers the structure of creation which operates with its own integrity, all the while supporting

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<sup>50</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 169

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 170

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 173

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 173

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 174

unfolding events as they weave into regular patterns toward the realization of an ever more complex whole.”<sup>56</sup>

Evolutionary emergence has opened up new understandings of matter. Evolutionary theory traces the progression from “inanimate to animate to intentional states, emerging into greater complexity from within.”<sup>57</sup> In that process a new biological form can emerge which “gathers up what has preceded it, shaping this material into a more complex unity. What emerges has distinctly different properties and functions from what went before, though still composed of the same fundamental matter.”<sup>58</sup> It transcends yet includes what went before.<sup>59</sup> Such understandings challenge the view of matter as inert and static, an attitude typical of philosophical dualism, in favour of its emergent properties. Remember that this is a foundational position of Earth Link.

Turning to theology, Johnson refers to Rahner who speaks of matter’s “capacity to transcend itself.”<sup>60</sup> Rahner considers firstly the dynamic unity of matter and spirit in the human person. Body, mind and spirit act as one. By extension, Rahner suggests that “matter develops out of its own inner being in the direction of spirit.”<sup>61</sup> This capacity for self-transcendence is innate, not something added on. He understands this as a process of becoming, whereby nature “reaches an inner increase of being proper to itself...and does this not by adding something on but from within.”<sup>62</sup> Rahner takes this insight into an understanding of divine presence as something so intrinsic to the creature that “the finite being is empowered by it to achieve a really *active* self-transcendence and does not merely receive this new reality passively effected by God.”<sup>63</sup> Matter can emerge into life and into spirit, into a relationship with Divine presence active within.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 174

<sup>59</sup> Carter Phipps in *Evolutionaries, Unlocking the Spiritual and Cultural Potential of Science's Greatest Idea*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 191. Phipps acknowledges Hegel's recognition of this pattern of "transcending and including" as a universal principle of evolution, and, I would add, of emergence.

<sup>60</sup> Karl Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World”, *Theological Studies*, 5 (1975), 164

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 165

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 175

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 162

Johnson calls to mind those theologians who are exploring artistic metaphors to capture something of the relation of the Giver of Life to the cosmos unfolding autonomously from within. The Creator Spirit is likened to the composer of a fugue who builds up a composition from a theme which is embellished in counterpoint. The Spirit can be likened to a jazz musician who improvises spontaneously on a theme, or an improviser in a dramatic performance. Similarly the Spirit is likened to a choreographer creating in collaboration with the dance troupe, or the designer of a game of cards. Gone is the controlling ruler. Rather the quest is for “an understanding of faith that renders fair account of the intense creative activity of both Creator and creation.”<sup>64</sup> For Johnson a theology of the Spirit contributes much to this quest. For her, “infinite mystery of self-giving love, the Creator Spirit, calls the world into being, gifts it with dynamism, and accompanies it through the by-ways of evolution, all the while attracting it toward a multitude of ‘endless forms most beautiful’.”<sup>65</sup> The action of the Spirit is based on loving respect for creaturely freedom and autonomy.

Johnson returns to the biblical images of the Spirit—blowing wind, flowing water, burning fire, brooding bird, holy Wisdom—who moves with the dynamic and creative community of life. Job’s faith vision when he looks at the beasts and the diversity of Darwin’s tangled bank can work together, recognising the intrinsic value of the natural world in its own right and also recognising it as the dwelling place of God. Similarly ecospirituality can foster “respect, reverence and care for the Earth community, held as it is in the embrace of the Divine.”<sup>66</sup>

Recognition of the intrinsic value of all reality is a new insight for official Catholic thought, and receives vigorous attention in *Laudato Si*. In Catholic thought up until now, we have been exhorted to care for creation because of its importance to humans, a social justice perspective with merit, but which is not inclusive of the whole of reality. Pope Francis exhorts people to respect and protect ecosystems. They are created in love.<sup>67</sup> Humans do use them, but that use is tempered by a new awareness

We take these systems into account, not only to determine how best to use them, but also because they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness. Each organism, as a creature of God, is good and admirable in itself; the same is true of

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<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 178

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 178

<sup>66</sup> See enhanced Vision of Earth Link.

<sup>67</sup> *LS*, 76

the harmonious ensemble of organisms existing in a defined space and functioning as a system.<sup>68</sup>

Ecosystems are valuable because “the Spirit of God dwells in them,”<sup>69</sup> and because they are the locus of our encounter with God. In them Heaven and Earth embrace. Earth Link in acknowledging Earth and cosmos as the dwelling place of God recognises that it is indeed God whom we encounter in sacred Earth if such is our faith perspective. God brings all into existence by creating in love. God’s spirit dwells within all, continuously creating, without denying the autonomy of what is created. God’s action as we experience it enables us to trust that the community of life is also moving forward toward fullness in God, a conviction that is consolidated as we acknowledge that the God of love embraces the cosmos in healing solidarity in Jesus Christ.

#### **Principle 4 Acknowledge that in Jesus Christ the God of love embraces the cosmos in healing solidarity**

This principle is pivotal for any ecospirituality which acknowledges the centrality of Jesus Christ in its faith tradition, and which attempts to make meaning of the evolutionary realities of pain, suffering and death. Jesus enters fully into our finite cosmos, revealing the loving heart of God. In his life, death and resurrection, Heaven and Earth embrace in a very special way and convey a message of hope, and the promise of fullness of life with God in the future. Jesus Christ endures pain, suffering and death, in solidarity not only with humans, but with the whole created reality. The evolutionary story testifies to the presence of pain, suffering and death as a necessary condition for the survival of the species and transition to new forms. In other words, the evolutionary story is marked by break down as well as creativity. Darwin’s work on common descent with modification reminds us that evolution comes at a cost. The presence of pain, suffering and death in the evolutionary story are not the result

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<sup>68</sup> LS, 140

<sup>69</sup> LS, 88

of any particular human actions, though undoubtedly human beings experience them with a heightened sensitivity. The relations between humans and the environment are the subject of Principle 5.

Jesus Christ entered into our finite habitat. Johnson's Trinitarian theology explores the deep incarnation and deep resurrection of Jesus Christ. In particular she elaborates on the consequences of his fleshiness within cosmos and planet Earth, an identification which offers a meaningful framework for our own and nature's experience of pain, suffering and death. This is an important perspective for an ecospiritual way of life.

### **Jesus as creative, revealing and saving presence of God in the world**

The post-Resurrection community had the unique experience of knowing Jesus in the flesh, witnessing his horrendous death, and experiencing his presence in a new way after his resurrection. They identified him as Emmanuel, God-with-us. In identifying Jesus with the Hebrew personification of Wisdom, they linked him with the "creative, revealing, and saving presence of God"<sup>70</sup> acting in the world. The Johannine community recognised him as the Word, as the "coming of God's personal self-expressing Word, full of loving kindness and faithfulness, into the world."<sup>71</sup> The Word was creative and life-giving in continuity with the Genesis narrative, and that Word assumed flesh in the person of Jesus. This self-utterance of God became flesh and lived among them. This was not a mere appearance, but as Johnson puts it:

Taking the ancient theme of God's dwelling among the people of Israel a step further, it affirms that in a new and saving event the Word *became* flesh, entered into the sphere of the material to shed light on all from within.<sup>72</sup>

The Danish theologian Niels Gregersen coined the phrase "deep incarnation" which Johnson explains as "this radical divine reach through human flesh all the way down into the very tissue of biological existence with its growth and decay, joined with the wide processes of evolving nature that beget and sustain life."<sup>73</sup> Creator and created are radically connected in the person of Jesus. Jesus in turn is radically connected to the stuff of the universe. As Gregersen says, Jesus bears "the signature of the supernovas and the geology and life story

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 193

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 194

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 195

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 196

of the Earth.”<sup>74</sup> Jesus is bonded, not only to humans whose form he took, but to the Universe which gave rise to his matter. In the Incarnation, Jesus assumes the universe, not just human flesh.

This understanding is a distinct contribution of Christianity, given its core belief in the divinity and humanity of Jesus. Not only is our understanding of God impacted, but so is the universe impacted by the notion that “the one transcendent God who creates and empowers the world freely chooses to join this world in the flesh, so that it becomes a part of God’s own divine story forever.”<sup>75</sup> The incarnation has implications for all created reality which is united with God in a new way. Pope John Paul II puts this very clearly:

The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense of everything that is ‘flesh’: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The ‘first-born of all creation’, becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of humanity—which is also ‘flesh’—and in this reality with all ‘flesh’, with the whole of creation.<sup>76</sup>

Jesus became incarnate in the whole of creation, “harsh, perilous, mighty, universal, impenetrable, and mortal though this material stuff be.”<sup>77</sup> Johnson reminds us that Teilhard de Chardin appreciated all of matter as a divine milieu “charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused by the Incarnate Word.”<sup>78</sup> This deep incarnation of God in matter is a vital union with many consequences for engaging spiritually in an emerging Universe.

### *Revealing the Heart of God*

In Jesus Christ we gain remarkable insight into the way in which God relates to the world. We learn that God’s creative dream for the world is indeed good news for all, especially the lost, the lowly, and also the lilies of the field. He worked for the wellbeing of all reality in a way that integrated body, mind and spirit. In the words of McFague, “liberating, healing and

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<sup>74</sup> Niels Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40 (2001), 192-207

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 197

<sup>76</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical *Lord and Giver of Life, On the Holy Spirit in the Life of the Church and the World*, 50, accessed 3 April, 2017 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_18051986\\_dominum-et-vivificantem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html)

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 198

<sup>78</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 70

inclusive love is the meaning of it all,”<sup>79</sup> and that love is inclusive of all parts of any ecosystem.

Jesus paid a very high price for this commitment. He suffered an excruciating death at the hands of his captors. As distinct from the suffering and death that is integral to the evolutionary process, the death of Jesus was “a contingent event resulting from an expedient decision by political authorities. Far from being the result of a natural process, the crucifixion was historical, unpredictable, unjust, the result of human sin.”<sup>80</sup> Here the relation between the Creator God and creation is expressed in a new way. God’s immersion in matter involved dying, a “seemingly non-godly characteristic.”<sup>81</sup> Paul in Philippians saw Jesus Christ as one who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born human, and becoming obedient, even to death on a Cross”(Phil 2.7). This is a far cry from the model of an omnipotent and distant monarch. Instead it reveals a God who is “self-emptying, self-limiting, vulnerable, self-giving, in a word, creative Love in action.”<sup>82</sup>

In the biblical tradition, there is a strong sense of God’s compassionate presence with suffering creation. As the Israelites wandered in the desert after their escape from oppression in Egypt, God assured Moses that he “knew” of their suffering (Exodus 3,7). Johnson points out that “what is new in view of the cross is divine participation in pain and death from *within* the world of the flesh. Now the incarnate God knows through personal experience, so to speak.”<sup>83</sup> She sums this up very concisely: “God suffers.”<sup>84</sup>

Classical theology has long sought to hold together an understanding of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus which they have expressed as a hypostatic union. Johnson draws on the more contemporary theology of Walter Kasper who points to the unexpected, shocking death of Jesus on the cross as “the unsurpassable self-definition of God.”<sup>85</sup> This suffering, freely chosen, is an expression of love.

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161 <sup>79</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993),

<sup>80</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 202

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 202

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 203

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 203

<sup>85</sup> Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 194

It is an important insight for Earth Link that humans in the intensity of their suffering find here a God with whom they can identify, a God who cries out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt, 27, 46, 50). Drawing on Moltman, Johnson points out that:

It is as if by inhabiting the inside of the isolating shell of death, Christ crucified brings divine life into closest contact with disaster, setting up a gleam of light for all others who suffer in that same annihilating darkness.”<sup>86</sup>

This is a personal message, and it is also a political one. Liberation theologians see in the death of Jesus an expression of solidarity with others who die by edict of political leaders. It is also an ecological message. Johnson again draws on Gregersen’s understanding of deep incarnation when she says:

The logic of deep incarnation gives a strong warrant for extending divine solidarity from the cross into the groan of suffering and the silence of death of all creation. All creatures come to an end; those with nervous systems know pain and suffering. Jesus’ anguished end places him among this company.<sup>87</sup>

In Jesus, God enters into the evolving world and the inevitability of pain and death, or in the words of *Laudato Si*, “one Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross.”<sup>88</sup>

### *In Solidarity with Groaning Creation*

Jesus Christ came with a message of liberating, healing love. He paid the ultimate price with his life. This does not make a virtue of suffering, and with Johnson, Earth Link does not justify suffering. Johnson has given serious consideration to this issue as it has been developing in the wake of the Holocaust disaster. In *SHE WHO IS*, Johnson considered the mission, suffering and death of Jesus-Sophia, indicating as they do that evil does not have the final word. She rejects any justification of suffering in favour of a theology of solidarity:

What comes clear in the event, however, is not Jesus’ necessary passive victimisation divinely decreed as a penalty for sin, but rather a dialectic of disaster and powerful

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<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 204

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 205

<sup>88</sup> *LS*, 99



human love through which the gracious God of Jesus enters into solidarity with all those who suffer and are lost.<sup>89</sup>

In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson needs to go further to make meaning of Paul's observation in his letter to the Romans: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now" (Roms 8, 22). Paul includes the whole of suffering creation in the promise of the "freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Roms 8, 21).

Johnson notes that biologically the emergence of sentience also meant the emergence of the capacity for experiencing pain as well as forms of heightened awareness which can serve to alert species to danger. The greater the sensitivity, the greater the capacity for suffering and for pleasure. Fossil records bears witness to the extinctions, not only of individuals, but sometimes whole species. Natural selection means that some less well adapted species come to an end, creating more opportunity for the better adapted. Johnson confines her observations to "extinctions that happen spontaneously in nature apart from the actions of the human species,"<sup>90</sup> a topic to which *Earth Link* will return in Principle 5. The extinctions Johnson is considering are morally neutral. Johnson notes the inevitability of such pain and death: "The laws known to us which have brought about the entangled bank, so pleasing in its beauty, have also rendered it a place of pain and death."<sup>91</sup>

Johnson goes on to frame theologically the conversation that is needed about this reality. As she did with the question of human suffering, Johnson rejects theodicy which seeks to "construct a rational defense of God's goodness and power in a world where evil occurs."<sup>92</sup> Such justification creates a situation of passive acceptance of enormous suffering and the political and economic situations that often give rise to it.<sup>93</sup> Rather she seeks "a theological inquiry that takes the evolutionary function of affliction at face value and seeks to reflect on its workings in view of the God of Love made known in revelation."<sup>94</sup> She stays with what

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<sup>89</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *SHE WHO IS, The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 156

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 185

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 186

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 187

<sup>93</sup> Delio suggests that the real theodicy question is "not why God allows bad things to happen to good people, but why we abandon God in the face of suffering." See Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being, God, Evolution, and the Power of Love* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2014), 83

<sup>94</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 187

she has learned from her study of Darwin, and seeks to address evolutionary suffering independently of human ethical responsibilities. In the process she differentiates herself from the likes of Celia Deane-Drummond and John Haught who are concerned to engender resistance to, rather than passive acceptance of the inevitability of suffering and death in creation. Johnson acknowledges that such resistance is very important, but wishes to begin her explorations by listening to the beasts, by acknowledging “the finite character of the natural world and...its role in the evolutionary process.”<sup>95</sup> She affirms this as an expression of the autonomy of natural processes.<sup>96</sup> From that starting point she indicates that “the most fundamental move theology can make...is to affirm the compassionate presence of God in the midst of the shocking enormity of pain and death.”<sup>97</sup> God in the Hebrew scriptures is a God of pathos, at times delighted and at times full of lament for the devastation of land and people. The Christian tradition is built on the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, one who entered into the beauty and the pain of an Earthly existence, to the point of dying a tortuous death. However in the experience of encountering the resurrected Christ, the tradition came to the belief that the death of Jesus was not the end, but indeed part of a new creation which forms the basis of hope. There is a vital connection between the groaning of creation and the God of Love, God who in Jesus Christ is in solidarity in the midst of suffering.

In the encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis is also very aware of the groaning of creation, but whereas Johnson is intent of “listening to the beasts,” his focus is on the Earth-human interaction, and he quickly looks at human causes even as he reminds us of our kinship with groaning Earth:

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 191

<sup>96</sup> The autonomy of created reality is also supported in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 99: “One Person of the Trinity entered into the created cosmos, throwing in his lot with it, even to the cross. From the beginning of the world, but particularly through the incarnation, the mystery of Christ is at work in a hidden manner in the natural world as a whole without thereby impinging on its autonomy.”

<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 191

sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she “groans in travail” (Rom 8,22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf.Gen 2,7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters. *Nothing in this world is indifferent to us.* <sup>98</sup>

There was and is more to the experience of Jesus in his identification with material reality. There must be, or we would not be talking about the Christ event some centuries later. Johnson does not espouse any notion that Jesus’ resurrection was a return to his former biological state, yet it conveys a message about physicality. The followers of Jesus experienced him as risen, not only in spirit but also in his body. They had a strong sense of encounter with him after his death, and recognised him as the “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1, 15). Death is not the whole of the story, either for Jesus or for our valuable Earth. The Pauline community understood this as the beginning of something new, as the promise of fullness of life.

Johnson extends Gregersen’s deep incarnation into deep resurrection which she says “extends the risen Christ’s affiliation to the whole natural world.”<sup>99</sup> The risen Christ takes corporeality in all its manifestations into the heart of God. Christ entered freely into the emerging universe, experienced its limits, gave of himself unto death, and moved beyond that into fullness of life in God. Johnson draws attention to the moment in the Easter liturgy when it is celebrated that all creation shares in the transition from darkness to light:

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendour,  
Radiant in the brightness of your King!  
Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!  
Darkness vanishes forever!

Death is the preface to life and to a new mode of relationship for Christ, for us and for all creation. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si*, “The creatures of this world no longer appear to us under merely natural guise because the risen One is mysteriously holding them to

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<sup>98</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On the Care for Our Common Home*, (hereafter *LS*), 2, accessed 3 April, 2017 [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

<sup>99</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 208

himself and directing them towards fullness as their end. The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence.”<sup>100</sup> Or in the words of Delio, “finite life is released from its limits to become part of something more than itself, a new whole of cosmotheandric life, new relatedness with God and cosmos that we name the risen Christ.”<sup>101</sup> We have a source of hope for the whole community of life in Christ’s solidarity with the emerging Universe. These are vital perspectives for Earth Link as part of its publically Catholic Christian profile.

### **In the Beginning**

In terms of exploring the theological underpinnings of ecospirituality within a Judaeo-Christian context, it might be expected that one would begin with Creation narratives. Instead in this Principle, Earth Link follows Johnson and begins with the presence of the Spirit in cosmos and Earth in the act of continuous creation, and then considers Jesus Christ as further revealing the heart of God in the process of assuming flesh and dwelling among us. These are observable phenomenon. How do we think and theologise about issues which are not open to observation? These are beyond the field of science which postulates about how things began, and where they are going, and is continually making advances. This is rather the field of theology which engages with the how and the why and where to, based on “the living tradition’s knowledge of God’s graciousness given through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.”<sup>102</sup> Faith assertions emerging from the lived experience of grace in the Christian community are extended to beginnings and endings. They are not based on empirical data, but rather “predicated backward and forward beyond time, to where no experience can go.”<sup>103</sup> The strength of such assertions comes from the sense that “as the living God is now, so God was and will be.”<sup>104</sup> The Jewish people believed that the God who liberated them in the Exodus, and who would redeem them when in exile, was the one who created all that is, and who will be faithful into a blessed future. Johnson adopts this “hermeneutic of the present experience of grace”<sup>105</sup> to link the God of the beginning with the God of the end, and make the case for the action of Holy Mystery in creating life and working towards its

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<sup>100</sup> LS, 100

<sup>101</sup> Delio, *Wholeness*, 201

<sup>102</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 212

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 212

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 212

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 213

ultimate fulfilment beyond death. This is a very helpful perspective for Earth Link in its approach to creation theology and eschatology.

In the encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis points to the biblical understanding that “the God who liberates and saves is the same God who created the universe, and these two divine ways of acting are intimately and inseparably connected.”<sup>106</sup> His context is the chapter called “The Gospel of Creation.” Johnson’s context is her Trinitarian theology which is in dialogue with the evolution of species in the light of the theories of Darwin. She began with continuing creation (*creatio continuo*) as she said that this best suited her dialogue with Darwin and the beasts. She goes on to look at creation “beyond time”<sup>107</sup>, namely in the beginning (*creatio originalis*), and in the new creation (*creatio nova*).

Johnson turns to Job’s message from the beasts that they are created. They “do not explain or ground themselves, but are brought into being by God’s creative word.”<sup>108</sup> Creation is a gift from the Giver of life. Matter itself is not divine.<sup>109</sup> Johnson reads the creation narratives of the first two chapters of Genesis with a focus on the beasts, birds, plants and fish, and identifies the religious message that “God is the Maker of heaven and earth and all that is in them.”<sup>110</sup> Later, when Christianity encountered the Greco-Roman world, it distinguished itself from pantheism and Gnosticism with the belief summed up in the phrase “*creatio ex nihilo*,” creation from absolutely nothing. Johnson considers three possible meanings of creation from nothing. Firstly that there is only one source of all that is, namely Infinite Mystery. Secondly it signals the goodness of all things, including material creatures, and thirdly it signals that the existence of the world is a free gift—not a necessity, but an act of God’s own gracious, loving will.<sup>111</sup> Reality, as created, is God’s good gift, given in love.

Contemporary evolutionary science challenges any notion that creation happened literally in a week as depicted in the mythic narratives of Genesis. Knowledge about the emergence of the Universe, currently dated around 13.7 billion years ago, does not challenge the basic premise of Genesis that “whatever the manner in which the present world came into being,

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<sup>106</sup> *LS*, 73

<sup>107</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 212

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 215

<sup>109</sup> This point is also clearly made in *LS*, 78

<sup>110</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 215

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 216

it would still be ontologically grounded in God's creative act."<sup>112</sup> This grounding is also a feature of God's continuous creation of both Universe and species. The emergence of life around four billion years ago and the subsequent flourishing of species find their ultimate ground in "the God of Love as creating Source."<sup>113</sup> In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the God who created does not use creation to wreak havoc, despite the reality of drought, floods and fires. God entered into a covenant relationship with "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (Gen 9, 16), which is an assurance of God's presence and remembering from the beginning and into the future.

### At the End

As Johnson considers *creatio nova* (the new creation) at the end of time, she faces squarely some of the scientific hypotheses about the inevitability of the Universe, the sun, and species coming to an end, and she distinguishes scientific from religious perspectives. Scientifically there is uncertainty about whether the universe is on track to an implosion or an explosion. It is agreed that the Sun is half-way through its life and its potential development into a red giant, maybe in about five billion years, will bring about the end of our planet and life as we know it.

Religious thought has had a preoccupation with the end times since the first century which has given rise to apocalyptic language and scenarios. Such a preoccupation does contain a message of hope, despite signs to the contrary. As noted above, Johnson highlights that such future scenarios are extrapolated from current knowledge and experience. She sums it up this way: "What such speech does do is affirm the core conviction that all of reality exists within the embrace of God's gracious love, and that it is going toward a fulfilment yet to come."<sup>114</sup> Just as the creation story places reality in God's hands, the end times are about a return to the fullness of the love that originated, sustained, and will draw reality into wholeness beyond its finite existence.

Johnson turns next to cosmic redemption where she considers the inclusion of all of creation in the process of redemption. The motifs of "atonement, satisfaction and sacrifice"<sup>115</sup> have

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 218

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 208

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 221

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 223

dominated theological understandings for some time. She traces the origins of this preoccupation to Anselm in the eleventh century, although she recognises that in his hands this was about recognising God's mercy in making satisfaction for the sinfulness of finite humans. This preoccupation descended into an exaltation of "Jesus' necessary passive victimisation divinely decreed as a penalty for sin."<sup>116</sup> Our primary identity became that of sinner, an identity that still dominates the language of liturgical practice. It is an identity that many who are interested in ecospirituality seek to cast off, often without knowing what to replace it with. Johnson points to developments during the last century which instead enshrine the centrality of "the mystery of grace poured out in the crucified and risen Jesus,"<sup>117</sup> and use concepts such as "liberation, reconciliation, healing, justification, victory over the powers, living in peace, fullness of life, being freed from slavery, adoption and new birth as God's children"<sup>118</sup> as ways of interpreting the centrality of the experience of redemption.

A study of cosmic redemption has been more recent. Johnson begins by revisiting scriptural texts which are inclusive of the whole of creation, for example the hymn in Colossians which celebrates Jesus in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through whom God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the Cross" (Col, 1, 20). The book of Revelation envisions the end time when all things will be made new (Rev 21, 5). Johnson acknowledges the more cosmic scope of theologies of redemption in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, before taking up Rahner's discussion of the cross. He highlights God's gift of grace in creation, and the offer of forgiveness through the Incarnation. Liberation comes from the realization of God's love and forgiveness, rather than from the sacrificial offering of Jesus on the Cross. Rahner was influenced by a school of thought coming from the Franciscan Duns Scotus (c1266-1308) who maintained that the incarnation would have taken place whether human beings had sinned or not,"<sup>119</sup> a position that distinguished him from Aquinas and others who would argue that "the world was created good; our first parents sinned, ruining their relationship with God; therefore, in mercy, the Son of God became incarnate and died in order to restore

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<sup>116</sup> Johnson, *SHE WHO IS*, 158

<sup>117</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 223

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 223

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 226

the relationship.”<sup>120</sup> Scotus’ position, in contrast, is about the dynamic of God’s unfathomable love which is always actively seeking union. The death of Jesus is still about redemption, but Johnson interprets its efficacy here, as in her earlier work, “not in satisfaction rendered to a God whose honor has been violated, but in the presence of divine love in the flesh enacting an historical solidarity with all who suffer and die.”<sup>121</sup>

The cosmic community is not capable of sinning, but it is blatantly finite. Its transfiguration is part of resurrection hope. The bodily Jesus rose into a new creation which foreshadows the future for all reality. Johnson summarises: “Christ carries the whole creation towards its destiny. His resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of all flesh. Or so Christians hope.”<sup>122</sup> This is the language of faith, the faith that “the encompassing mystery enacted in Jesus Christ through the Spirit bears creation forward with an unimaginable promise toward a final fulfilment when God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15, 28).”<sup>123</sup>

Johnson concludes her reflection on this movement in hope and faith into fullness of life in God with a consideration of animal heaven. Those with pets and those who advocate for compassionate treatment of animals and for the health of ecosystems are concerned about this issue. Traditional perspectives exclude other-than-human species from a future of wholeness and fullness of life in God. Aquinas, for example, as presented by Johnson sees plants and animals as valuable only for their usefulness to humans, and so when humans cease to need them, they will have no future. Those who see the symmetry between creation and redemption recognise the biophysical world as created and valuable in its own right, and for them this position of Johnson’s is feasible:

Affirming that the promise of new creation includes all creatures as individuals in a way appropriate to their nature is not a foolish construal. Based on the belief that the Giver of life indwells each creature to empower its life within the evolutionary process, and that the same Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ accompanies each creature in its pain and dying, this position figures it would be discordant with the fibre of creative love to allow any creature just to disappear.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 226

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 226

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 227

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 233



Hopefully there are some boundaries between fullness of life for humans and for cockroaches!

To this point, Johnsons' focus has been on the "theological meaning of the natural world of life."<sup>125</sup> She has not allowed the intensity of her gaze to veer towards an anthropocentric view where the natural world could derive its meaning only from its human connection. In this she really attempts to listen to the beasts. She summarises what she hears:

Continuously fired into being by the Giver of life, the living world is the dwelling place of God. Ontologically dependent on the Creator, it is empowered with the autonomy befitting a finite creature to operate freely in the course of its own evolution. In solidarity with the perishing of Christ who shares its flesh, it is a groaning, cruciform world, destined for resurrection. Existing in absolute dependence on its Maker, it bears the promise of new eschatological life, heading toward a final fulfilment, thanks to the *Alpha* and *Omega* whose fidelity knows no end.<sup>126</sup>

In Principles 3 and 4, Earth Link draws on Johnson's Trinitarian theology of the Spirit, and contemporary Christology, creation theology and eschatology as a basis for Christian ecospirituality. From this theology, Earth Link derives important perspectives on Earth as God's dwelling place, and on Jesus as the God of love entering into the cosmos in healing solidarity. With the eyes of faith we can say that our encounter with cosmos and planet can indeed be encounters with God present, revealing, healing, and opening up a future full of hope for the whole cosmos.

It is now time to look more specifically at humans within the Earth community, and indeed within the community of creation, and the ethical responsibilities that flow from that. That is the subject of Principle 5.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., xv

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 235



## **Chapter 14 Principle 5 Live in right relations within the community of creation**

Principle 5 invites people to “live in right relations within the community of creation.” It follows on from the preceding principles which address the contextual imperative, open, attentive and receptive attitudes that orient one to the ecospiritual experience, and the Christian contribution from a belief in God’s continuing and creative presence and promise, and in Jesus Christ’s assuming a cosmic identity.

The original Principle 5 read: “Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life.” It came from “a belief in the intrinsic value of all species, and from deep bonding with the earth.” This principle was recognised as “the culmination of the spiritual dynamic” established in the preceding principles. It went on to explore the nature of these right relationships. In these enhanced principles all of this is carried forward. Enhanced Principle 5 is “Live in right relations within the community of creation.” This principle challenges the world view of hierarchical dualism, locates humans within the evolutionary process, and locates the whole Earth community within the embrace of God, Ground of all being, who is drawing all forth to fullness of life. The explication of this principle draws on the work of Elizabeth Johnson, supplemented by other writers.

Humans are within the community of life. Our materiality is continuous with the stuff of stardust, and “we humans...share a genetic heritage with every other species of the tree of life, a biological kinship encoded in each cell of our body.”<sup>1</sup> Our distinguishing capacities of “self-reflective consciousness and freedom,”<sup>2</sup> or of “mind and will,” to use the classical

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 237

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 236

terms, were new capacities for the Universe. This is the evolutionary worldview which is espoused in these principles, and it is here explored for its theological significance.

### Humans within Evolution

As does Earth Link, Johnson locates our species, *homo sapiens*, within the story of evolution. Our story is out of Africa, with the emergence of primates, which diversified into gorilla, chimpanzee and hominid lines.<sup>3</sup> Our immediate hominin ancestors, *Australopithecus*, were bipedal, and moved increasingly to live in the open savannah rather than in the forests. The earliest expression of the genus *homo* was *homo habilis*, and according to the fossil records, it and its successors had physical capacities and cultural abilities that indicate the development of mental processes. This was not a linear development in any one geographical location. Variations on the theme are being found in various parts of Africa, Europe and Asia, and many of the lines died out to the point where *homo sapiens* is now the only survivor.

Johnson points out the distinguishing characteristics of *homo sapiens* as “self-consciousness, use of language, and tremendous fluidity in behaviour.”<sup>4</sup> Given the importance of establishing the evolutionary emergence of mind, I am also drawing on Bellah’s work where he parallels the developmental stages of children with that of the development of human culture. This is presented more fully in Chapter 10 of this thesis. Bellah identifies that children pass through stages which he names unitive, enactive, symbolic, and conceptual representation.<sup>5</sup> Similarly human culture passes through corresponding stages in its movement through mammalian attentiveness, early human capacities for mime and gesture, the later development of mythic or symbolic thought and a capacity for ritual, to archaic society round 1,000 BCE with its capacity for conceptual and theoretical thought. It

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 237 Note that “many of our extinct ancestors are now called hominins. But it’s not technically wrong to call them hominids—all members of Hominini are also members of the subfamily Homininae and the family Hominidae.” See <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/whats-in-a-name-hominid-versus-hominin-216054/#mAl3lZOzILQHW8kZ>, accessed 3 April, 2017, 99

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 239

<sup>5</sup> Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Palaeolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 117

is at that stage that he locates the emerging capacity for religion arising in association with concepts of kingship and divinity.

Johnson in her turn marvels at the “intellectual and volitional powers”<sup>6</sup> of the mind which science explains in terms of its material functions, but which can be seen as evidence of the emergence of new capacities which require new levels of explanation. She points out that the field of understanding mind-brain relationships is a very lively area of research currently.

Johnson goes on to highlight the distinctiveness of human consciousness which by now is a player in the very process of evolution. She lists some ways in which the human is described:

In view of their singular self-reflective inwardness, cognitive powers, and freedom of action, their philosophers describe them as persons composed of body and soul, rational animals, spirited selves, embodied spirits, spirit in the world. Religious teachers add that they are created in the divine image and likeness, being a complex unity whose body comes from the dust of the earth, and whose soul is breathed into them by God, each one gifted with unique dignity.<sup>7</sup>

Johnson moves on to address humans in relationship with the community of life before she retrieves a Christian anthropology which builds on her sense of human embeddedness in the evolution of life on Earth. Similarly Earth Link is concerned about their place within the Earth community and, indeed, the community of creation.

### **Negative Human Impacts on the Community of Life**

Johnson moves to ethical considerations. The human species is currently having a very mixed impact on the Earth community of which it is part. The richness of Earth’s biodiversity is threatened. Some of this has been addressed in Principle 1. Now is the moment for facing and addressing negative human impacts. Johnson draws on McKibben’s recent work *Eearth*<sup>8</sup> and other sources to paint a picture of the geophysical effect that humans are now having on this planet. She draws specific attention to population growth, resource consumption, pollution and the extinction of species which document the reality of an Earth in crisis, and concludes:

If human beings were to wake up to the grandeur of the dying world, fall in love with life, and change their behaviour to protect it, much of the current dying off could be

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 239

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>8</sup> Bill McKibben, *Eearth* (New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 2011)

slowly brought under control. But in our day the dire situation appears to be accelerating, with humanity's rapacious habits driving species to extinction faster than new species are able to evolve. The tree of life is thinning out.<sup>9</sup>

Johnson moves from the scenario of destruction to a call to conversion, in much the same way as *Laudato Si* moves from its statement of the problems according to the best knowledge available to a vision of integral ecology and a call to action at every level of society. There are good reasons for attending to the state of the planet. One is intergenerational in the sense of maintaining the planet for future generations. Another is Haught's sense of the "promissory character of the natural world...(which) is due to the inexhaustible vitality of God who created it."<sup>10</sup> We need our evolving world to manifest the potential for increasing complexity and vibrancy. It is full of promise that we cannot abort by our carelessness. Johnson adds the theological perspective which should urge us to greater responsibility:

In its continuous creation by the empowering spirit, its redeeming solidarity in the flesh of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, its origin and ultimate future in the faithful love of the creator, and its sacramental and revelatory character in all concrete beauty, suffering and surprise-from every theological angle the tree of life calls forth respect and responsible love. As its bare, natural, evolving self, it is worthy of this.<sup>11</sup>

The failure to respond in this way is being called out by ethicists as the sins of biocide, ecocide, or geocide. Such devastation of the planet has repercussions at many levels. Johnson quotes the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines who see that such treatment of nature "defaces the image of Christ which is etched in creation."<sup>12</sup> The Catholic tradition has taken the lead since Pope John Paul II's call for ecological conversion in his 1990 message for the World Day of Peace. It continues in the recent encyclical of Pope Francis who draws on the Eastern Orthodox tradition in also classifying the abuse of nature as sin, sin against Earth and against her people:

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<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 253

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 254

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 255

<sup>12</sup> Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, "What is Happening to our Beautiful Land? A Pastoral Letter on Ecology" in eds Drew Christensen and Walter Grazer, *And God Saw that It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment* (Washington, DC, USA, Catholic Conference, 1996), 316

For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson lauds the extension in Catholic thought of respect for life as embracing both human life and the rest of creation. The moral imperative extends to both. Our failing in this area requires repentance and a change of heart. Johnson spells out the intellectual, emotional and ethical dimensions of such a conversion, and says quite lyrically that

In sum, ecological conversion means falling in love with earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love.<sup>14</sup>

In similar vein, Pope Francis uses emotive language to capture the felt conversion that is needed to foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness:

First, it entails gratitude and gratuitousness, a recognition that the world is God's loving gift, and that we are called quietly to imitate his generosity in self-sacrifice and good works: "Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing... and your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (cf. Mt 6:3-4). It also entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us with all beings. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, an ecological conversion can inspire us to greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world's problems and in offering ourselves to God "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable" (Rom 12:1).<sup>15</sup>

So why is this not happening on a larger scale? Johnson's book culminates with her vision of a new paradigm to replace the current overarching paradigm of dominion which, directly or indirectly, can be seen as the root of oppression of nature. In like manner, *Laudato Si* presents a vision which is very much about communion with nature, with other humans and with God. This is the vision embraced by Earth Link with its commitment to "respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community, held as it is in the embrace of the Divine" and its mission to facilitate "deep bonding within the community of creation." But first to

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<sup>13</sup> Address in Santa Barbara, California (8 November 1997); cf. John Chryssavgis, *On Earth as in Heaven: Ecological Vision and Initiatives of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew* (Bronx, New York, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 259

<sup>15</sup> *LS*, 220

Johnson to establish her vision as viable and important in the pursuit of the Earth Link vision and mission.

### A New Paradigm-from Dominion to Communion

Something is not working if we have moved to the current state of environmental degradation. Something is not working if we even need an initiative such as Earth Link. Johnson in the course of asking the beasts has found treasures in the tradition that indicate that “loving life on earth, far from being foreign to the living tradition of Christianity, is actually supported by its core cherished beliefs about God revealed in scripture and condensed in the creed.”<sup>16</sup> There is promise in the tradition and there are problems. There is a history of inherited oppression. In her earlier works she pointed to the worldview of hierarchical dualism, embedded as it is in religion and culture, as leading to a devaluing of nature. In *Ask the Beasts* she points to the tradition of human dominion embedded in the creation narrative in Genesis 1.28. It paints “human beings at the apex of the pyramid of living creatures with rights over otherkind.”<sup>17</sup> Johnson puts a more positive spin on the problematic text. The courtly origins of the tradition that gave rise to the first Genesis narrative point to a positive interpretation which is about exercising delegated responsibility from the ruler. The mandate to preserve species is there in the story of Noah and the ark in Genesis 6,19. The creation story in the second chapter of Genesis has quite a different tone from that in the first chapter of Genesis. Adam, the Earth creature, is given the mandate to “till and to keep”(Gen 2,15) which is generally interpreted as about cultivation and care. This narrative is seen as the basis of kinship, of “the earthly solidarity women and men have with each other and the rest of creation.”<sup>18</sup> Cardinal Turkson in a speech not long before the launch of *Laudato Si* suggested that humans had been doing too much tilling and not enough keeping!<sup>19</sup> The attitude which he is critiquing would be reinforced by the problematic text of Psalm 8, 6 which speaks this way of God’s design: “You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.”

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 260

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 261

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 264

<sup>19</sup> Peter Turkson, “Integral Ecology and the Horizon of Hope: Concern for the Poor and for Creation in the Ministry of Pope Francis” (Dublin, Trocaire Lenten Lecture, Maynooth, 5 March, 2015)

*Laudato Si* is strong on its insistence that Genesis 1, 28 be interpreted more appropriately. Even if “we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.”<sup>20</sup> Instead, “we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes.”<sup>21</sup> The encyclical continues: “In our time the Church does not simply state that other creatures are completely subordinate to the good of human beings, as if they had no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish.”<sup>22</sup> Rather, “they have an intrinsic value independent of their usefulness,”<sup>23</sup> because God loves them: “Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of God’s love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enfolds it with affection.”<sup>24</sup>

But damage has been done. The hierarchical worldview so typical of the priestly and royal systems of the time has passed over into western culture. As noted in Principle 1, it underpins Western economic, social and environmental norms to the present day. As Johnson remarks, “Slipping its biblical bonds, the notion of dominion has supported rampant use and abuse of the earth.”<sup>25</sup> At its best, the call to responsible stewardship has curbed some excesses, and its core tenets are laudable. She continues “A steward is a person who manages another’s property or financial affairs, one who administers material wealth as the agent of another. The core of theological stewardship is the belief that the earth and all of its resources belong ultimately to God. With overwhelming generosity, God entrusts these good things to human beings, gifting us with their use.”<sup>26</sup>

Increasingly, problems are being identified with the notion of stewardship within a Universe that is emerging. Johnson points to a few of these. One is that “it envisions humans being independent from the rest of creation and external to its functioning. Lacking a deep ecological sensibility, it establishes a vertical top-down relationship, giving human beings responsible mastery over other creatures but not alongside them or open to their giving.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *LS*, 67

<sup>21</sup> *LS*, 69

<sup>22</sup> *LS*, 69

<sup>23</sup> *LS*, 140

<sup>24</sup> *LS*, 77

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 265

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 265

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 266



Such a model is not adequate to underpin the conversion to responsible use of resources, especially for those who have developed a world view based on evolutionary emergence. Johnson suggests that there needs to be “a different conceptuality of the human place in the world, religiously speaking. Such an alternative presents itself in the biblical view of the community of creation.”<sup>28</sup>

Pope Francis goes some of the way towards this conclusion when he acknowledges the problematic issue of a culture based on human mastery over nature, which he refers to as “excessive anthropocentrism”:

Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism which today, under another guise, continues to stand in the way of shared understanding and of any effort to strengthen social bonds. The time has come to pay renewed attention to reality and the limits it imposes; these in turn are the condition for a more sound and fruitful development of individuals and society. An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world. Often, what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something only the faint-hearted cared about. Instead, our “dominion” over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.<sup>29</sup>

He does not reject outright the notion of anthropocentrism, but critiques its excesses. He warns against replacing it with biocentrism with its potential for denying that human beings possess “a particular dignity above other creatures,”<sup>30</sup> and insists that “a correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, and much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the ‘Thou’ of God.”<sup>31</sup> I would argue that the dignity of human persons can be respected by acknowledging their distinctive place based on their unique capacities, without resorting to hierarchical language. There is an intermediate position between anthropocentrism and biocentrism which locates humans in relationship with nature and the Divine, without any claim to equality, and with full recognition of their uniqueness. Johnson’s paradigm of the community of life and the community of creation contributes much to this understanding.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 267

<sup>29</sup> LS 116

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 119

Johnson develops the biblical vision of the *community of creation*. Evolutionary biology establishes the existence of a community of life, also referred to as the Earth community:

Historically, all life results from the same biological process; genetically, living beings share elements of the same basic code; functionally species interact without ceasing. Human beings belong to this community and need other species profoundly, in ways more than other species need them.<sup>32</sup>

Rather than being over and apart from the community of life and the cosmos, humans are within them, a world view previously referred to in Principle 1 as anthropocosmic. Enter a theocentric worldview, which orients such an interdependent world to God. As established earlier in exploring the religious significance of this interdependence, the whole world with all its members “in its origin, history and goal...is ultimately grounded in the creative, redeeming God of love.” The theological construct of the community of creation is founded on the belief that “all beings are in fact creatures, sustained in life by the Creator of all that is.” This applies to humankind and other species, and this commonality before God is stronger than their differences. In their kinship all are “grounded in absolute, universal reliance on the living God for the breath of life.”<sup>33</sup> This pattern of relationship, which locates us humans alongside other creatures, and stresses interconnectedness without blurring differences, gives a new impetus for ethical behaviour based in relationality with one another and the wider whole, a perspective which can supercede notions of dominion. This is the worldview espoused by Earth Link.

Biblically this notion is rich. In *Ask the Beasts*, Johnson looked at the community of life through the eyes of Job. She now embarks on an extended study of Chapters 38-41, and her findings are very relevant for this Principle, so I synthesise them in some detail. Job has come upon hard times, and his friends argue that he must have sinned. Job maintains his innocence, but his suffering is very real. Eventually God speaks to him out of the whirlwind, and asks “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the Earth?”(Job 38, 4). The questions go on and on as God draws attention to the scope of the physical world and the qualities of the wild yet free animals and the fearsome beasts. These creations are a far cry

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<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Beast*, 267

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 268 is the source of the above quotes.

from anything which has been subject to human dominion, yet they are revelatory of their Creator.

Johnson draws out several points from commentaries on the book of Job. It is preoccupied with the meaning of suffering, and in this case the suffering of a good person. Its conclusion on that subject is that ultimately it is a mystery to be respected. God rebukes Job's friends who want to insist that Job's suffering is sent from God as punishment for sin. These chapters, however, are brimming with wonder and power, and Job shifts his position: "I had heard you by the ear but now my eye sees you" (Job 42,5). Johnson sees this passage as modelling a relationship of humans with God and the rest of creation. Far from seeing human dominion, "Job is led to see divine activity in the awesome, independent working of the natural world over which he has no mastery, not only technologically but also theologically."<sup>34</sup> The creatures have their own value, and in observing them, Job finds Wisdom, and a recognition of his own place within what Johnson calls the community of creation. Our assumptions of human superiority are seriously challenged by this narrative. There can be a very positive outcome if "humbled and delighted by the other life around us, we can grow to know ourselves as members of the community of creation and step up to protect our kin."<sup>35</sup> In fact this is at the heart of ecological conversion.

Johnson continues to make a case for the community of creation and for the place of humans within that community by referring to that great creation song of praise, Psalm 104, to which I have referred earlier in this thesis. Once again it is by observing the whole community of life, the sky, the earth, the sea, the vegetation, the animals, the people and the rhythms of the day, that we discern God's presence and give praise.

In a theocentric worldview, people take their place "within the wider world which enjoys its own direct relation to the Creator."<sup>36</sup> In Psalm 148, old and young people take their place along with angels, sun, moon, mountains, hills, trees, princes and rulers in actively giving praise to the Creator who gave them life. Johnson makes a point about the order in which

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 272

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 273

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 275

God's creation is named in this psalm. While the humans may come at the end, the angels come first, and she notes:

Rather than the pattern of dominion which climaxes the appearance of humans in Genesis 1, and different from the hierarchical chain of being found in medieval thought, here is an interwoven assembly of everything from sky, sea, and land, each one part of a grateful community of creation praising God.<sup>37</sup>

Together they praise God without consideration of who is the most valuable. Johnson then addresses whether all creatures are capable of giving such praise. She makes an important point when she notes that such a metaphor is an extension of the human capacity to give praise, but one which contains a valuable insight. She puts this way: "By virtue of their being created, of being held in existence by the loving power of the Creator Spirit, all beings give glory to God simply by being themselves."<sup>38</sup> By their very existence they are oriented to God, as are we. Our challenge is to be attentive to this and join in the song that they are already singing. This can remind us of our place in the community of creation:

At this time of ecological catastrophe, praying with a sense of participation in creation's praise of God allows people to recover a healthy sense of their own human place in the world as created beings alongside our fellow creatures.<sup>39</sup>

Moving from the Psalms to the Prophets, Johnson listens to Creation mourning and lamenting, often as a result of human action. The fate of the people and of Earth are interconnected. Hosea laments:

There is no faithfulness or loyalty and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish;  
together with the wild animals and the birds of the air,  
even the fish of the sea are perishing (Hos 4, 1-3).

As with the experience of land praising, we have the image of land mourning. This is devastation caused by human action, which ought to be a familiar theme to us. Negative actions by one part of the community of life have implications for the rest of the community. All is not lost, however, and just as Paul in Romans 8, 18-23 hears creation groaning in the

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 276

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 276

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 278

hope of being set free, so the prophets proclaim “that the mercy and steadfast love of God will establish justice in a disordered world, and this hope is announced with a vigor equal to their denunciation of human wrong-doing.”<sup>40</sup>

Johnson sums up this vision of the community of creation and extols its potential in words that locate humans in relation to God and to the rest of the community of creation. It is appropriate to quote this fully as this is a key insight for the work of Earth Link’s commitment to facilitate moving to a new paradigm:

The biblical vision of the community of creation opens a life enhancing avenue of relationship. Departing from a long history of interpretation, it scoops up the Genesis notion of dominion and places it within the mutual interactions of all beings as creatures in relation to the living God who creates and redeems. The community model brings forward at the most fundamental level our theological human identity as created, our biological embeddedness in the natural world, and our reciprocal interdependence with the other species and the life-giving systems that support us all.<sup>41</sup>

This is the context in which we live out what she calls the ecological vocation. Our call to love extends to the whole community of creation. Pope Francis calls this the call to care for our common home. Johnson acknowledges the adoption of various religious practices such as contemplation, asceticism, and prophetic action for justice, reframed in ecological terms. She admits that “the prophetic dimension of the ecological vocation still beckons the churches for the most part.”<sup>42</sup> It is not yet a reality.

For the Catholic Church and beyond, *Laudato Si* is a very important response, and its favourable reception from so many quarters has demonstrated that the Churches have a role to play which can be welcomed by the broader society. It presents a vision in which communion is paramount. The word features at least a dozen times in the encyclical. At other times, there is a refrain that “everything is connected.”<sup>43</sup> At times interconnectedness is the vision, at times the diagnosis, and always part of the solution.

This encyclical acknowledges in a way that is new to formal documents of the Church that “because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 280

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 280

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 284

<sup>43</sup> *LS*, 91

living creatures are dependent on one another.”<sup>44</sup> Humans are located within this community:

Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.<sup>45</sup>

And the interconnectedness is stressed again here:

This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. Here I would reiterate that God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement.<sup>46</sup>

Our creation draws us into communion. Christ who “incorporated into in his person part of the material world”<sup>47</sup> draws us into God’s fullness. Through our immersion in this web of relationships, we are reminded that “everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity”<sup>48</sup>.

The challenges are great, but so are the sources of hope:

In the heart of this world, the Lord of life, who loves us so much, is always present. He does not abandon us, he does not leave us alone, for he has united himself definitively to our earth, and his love constantly impels us to find new ways forward. Praise be to him! <sup>49</sup>

In 2016 after the publication of *Ask the Beasts* and after the encyclical was promulgated Johnson identified “one theme that runs like a silver thread through all of the encyclical’s multifaceted teaching. This is the sacred value of living plants and animals in and of themselves in a community to which human beings also belong.”<sup>50</sup> She clearly identifies the consonance between *Ask the Beasts*, and *Laudato Si*.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 42

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 89

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 235

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 240

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 245 The use of masculine pronouns is unfortunately in the official English translation.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “From Pyramid to Circle: The Community of Creation” in *Theological Studies* 77, no.2 (2016), 486

In an exhortatory style similar to the final paragraph of the encyclical quoted above, Johnson concludes *Ask the Beasts* by recapping her movement from asking the beasts what they could teach us, to listening to their scientific, theological and ecological messages. She reminds us of the urgency of taking up a commitment to ecological wholeness if we are to move towards the vision that must guide us at this critical time, namely that of “a flourishing humanity on a thriving planet, rich in species in an evolving universe, all together filled with the glory of God.”<sup>51</sup> Earth Link fully embraces this vision.

## In conclusion

The enhanced Principles of Earth Link have the potential to facilitate movement toward implementation of its Vision and Mission. They also have the potential to show how “loving the Earth arises as an intrinsic part of faith in God, rather than just an add-on.”<sup>52</sup> They have looked outward to the context which is necessitating the call to ecological conversion in order to address the reality of environmental degradation. With Thomas Berry, they have considered what is at the heart of the ecospiritual experience: an openness and receptivity to the presence of the Spirit in created reality. With Elizabeth Johnson and Pope Francis, they have examined theological understandings that enable us to name the ecospiritual encounter as one with God dwelling in cosmos and Earth in a way that does not deny its dynamism in the process of evolutionary emergence, nor contain God within our finite reality. These principles locate Earth Link firmly within the Judaeo-Christian tradition by acknowledging Jesus Christ as the God of Love who entered the cosmos in healing solidarity, and they call us humans into right relations with God, self, others and all of creation. These Principles can nourish us even as they challenge us to a future that has to be different. They call us to love Earth, to listen to it, to “respect, reverence and care for the whole Earth community,”<sup>53</sup> and in so doing to encounter the God of love who is present now, and holding out a promise of wholeness and fullness of life.

The enhancement of the Principles of Earth Link features a worldview of a dynamic and unfolding cosmos, an amplified approach to ecospirituality, and the inclusion of a more specifically Christian theological framework. It was intended that the original Principles be

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<sup>51</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 286

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, “From Pyramid to Circle,” 479

<sup>53</sup> From the vision statement of Earth Link

taken into dialogue with various faith traditions. Earth Link is a Catholic Christian organisation, and is grounded in that tradition and that of the Sisters of Mercy, so that is our field of belonging and influence. For those for whom this tradition is meaningful, the ecospiritual encounter needs to be able to be articulated in a way that is more specific than simply an encounter with the Sacred. Based on their historical experiences, traditions name the Sacred in various ways. These enhanced principles offer a framework and language that emerge from the Christian tradition, recognise some of its problems and explore its potential to contribute to urgent ecological concerns.

Through its enhanced Principles, Earth Link and its community are the immediate beneficiaries of this exercise of practical theology on the theme of the embrace of Heaven and Earth, and the way in which ecospirituality in an emerging Universe can contribute to living out such a vision. The benefits can ripple out from there. As indicated in the Introduction to this thesis, this research is necessary to enrich the integration of faith and life for those who want a better world for themselves and their children. It is a vital underpinning for their individual and collective ways of living sustainability, as an approach to work and ministry, and action for ecojustice. For those who are committed, it can show what living out of a new paradigm can look like. For those who are dubious, it has the potential to underline the vital connection between faith and ecological responsibility. For those who are critical, these principles demonstrate the deeply theological basis of ecospiritual practice and concern for the environment.

This research can make a practical contribution by linking understanding and action. Its hoped-for outcome for the Earth Link community and beyond is ecological conversion understood as “falling in love with earth as an inherently valuable, living community in which we participate, and bending every effort to be creatively faithful to its well-being, in tune with the living God who brought it into being and cherishes it with unconditional love.”<sup>54</sup>

This thesis has established that the way people of faith envision the embrace of Heaven and Earth determines how they relate to the Earth community and, indeed, to the whole community of creation. For the most part, one does not abuse what one holds in a loving embrace. This thesis and these principles celebrate not only the embrace of Heaven and

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<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Beasts*, 259



Earth, but the mystery proclaimed in the *Exultet*, that song of joy used during the Easter vigil. It speaks of the “truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to human.” The embrace becomes a wedding. We are part of one of the greatest love stories that can ever be told, and that behoves us to live in right relations with God and with all that is.

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# Appendices

Appendix 1 2004 Earth Link Review, Rose

Appendix 2 Walking the Earth

Appendix 3 Introduction to Ecospirituality

Appendix 4 Social Alternatives

Appendix 5 Ecology and Christian Faith

Appendix 6 2009 Earth Link Review, McDonald



## **EARTH LINK**

### **Project Review 2004**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Earth Link* community, Core Group, Education Planning Team and the two Coordinators have achieved an enormous amount in a relatively short period of time. In particular, the huge contribution and commitment of Mary Tinney needs to be acknowledged. The aims of *Earth Link* are clearly articulated; administrative systems are in place; structures have been established to maximise community ownership of *Earth Link*; strategic connections and networks have been established; the education program has been developed and delivered; significant improvements have been made to the property; an earth-centred spirituality is being articulated and explored; focussed actions have been undertaken towards justice for the earth.

The work of *Earth Link* is not confined to Four Winds: activities and events have been held or sponsored at venues other than Four Winds and, in many instances, *Earth Link* has served as an organisational or information centre, facilitating access to workshops and excursions organised by other groups. Indeed, it is the work of *Earth Link* itself, not necessarily of *Earth Link* at Four Winds, that has had the most impact on the lives of participants and interested people, raising their consciousness of the interconnectedness between Earth and humans. However, Four Winds: greatly enhances this understanding; is both an identifiable home for *Earth Link* and a symbol of commitment to Earth; provides insights into 'living as if earth matters'; and has the potential to become an educational and inspirational model of sustainable living.

The most frequently cited impact of *Earth Link* on people is increased awareness of:

- environmental issues and causes, and their spiritual dimension
- the fragility of the earth and the need to assume responsibility for its future
- the relationship between earth and human life.

The most frequently cited responses evoked by *Earth Link* are:

- a sense of care and gratitude
- awe and wonder at the enduring mystery of the universe.

The most frequently cited practical outcomes of involvement with *Earth Link* are:

- recycling, energy conservation; use of environmentally friendly products
- becoming proactive.

With key structures and programs in place, *Earth Link* is poised to move into the next phase of its development. However, additional market research needs to be undertaken to identify clearly the 'niche market' for its services and programs; targeted promotion and marketing will be crucial to the growth and sustainability of *Earth Link* at Four Winds. The next three years will be critical in determining its long term viability. Comprehensive plans need to be developed to address promotion and marketing of the Education Program and of *Earth Link*, property management and development, staffing and succession planning.

Finally, there needs to be additional input of resources, both finances and personnel, to consolidate the achievements to date, and position *Earth Link* at Four Winds to move into this next stage. This will: ensure that the commitment and momentum that has brought *Earth Link* at Four Winds to this point does not fade; provide further incentives to attract new members to the *Earth Link* community; enable additional improvements to the property that will support and showcase the multiple aspects of sustainable living; allow the development of sustained promotional strategies for all aspects of *Earth Link*, and particularly of the Education Program.

*Earth Link* at Four Winds may not be financially self-sustaining in the immediate future, but it has progressed towards sustainability in other areas: living in a way that recognises that Earth's resources are finite; situating *Earth Link* within other communities of environmental concern; engaging with the local and wider communities; promoting both place and programmes.

## **BACKGROUND**

*Earth Link* came into existence in 2000, and moved its operations to the 17 hectare property, Four Winds, owned by the Sisters of Mercy at Ocean View, in November 2001. This review will focus on the period from November 2001 to August 2004. *Earth Link* is an initiative of the Brisbane Sisters of Mercy, spearheaded by Mary Tinney, and is one expression of the commitment by the Sisters of Mercy to the creation of a more just and merciful world.

It is collaborative. The overall direction of *Earth Link* at Four Winds is determined by a wide group of interested persons known as the *Earth Link* community; the Core (Management Advisory) Group oversees the operations of *Earth Link*; and the Education Planning Team has responsibility for the development and delivery of the education program. *Earth Link* at Four Winds was coordinated by Mary Tinney alone until January 2003, when she was joined by Marilyn Cuttler in a part-time capacity. Mary now coordinates programmes, finance and communication, and Marilyn coordinates hospitality and property.

*Earth Link* encourages connectedness between people and Earth in five priority areas: education, earth-sensitive spirituality, biodiversity, sustainability, and action for justice for the earth. The core activities of *Earth Link* since 2001 have focussed on these five priorities.

The Four Winds property was made available to *Earth Link* for a period of three years, until November 2004. As this date approaches, the Core Group has commissioned a review of the activities of *Earth Link* at Four Winds to provide information which will assist them to make projections about the sustainability of the project from 2005-2007, and to take appropriate action in the light of these projections.

## **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

‘The Core Group will act as the reference Group for this review. Its members recognise that, on order to **assess the effectiveness of *Earth Link* in influencing contemporary understandings and practice regarding environmental concerns**, it would be important to identify and evaluate internal and external factors which are affecting the capacity and potential of *Earth Link* to carry out its vision and mission.

The Core Group expects that the review will include an evaluation of performance in the five priority areas: Education, Earth-Sensitive Spirituality, Biodiversity, Sustainability, and Action for Justice for the Earth. The Core Group requires feedback on issues such as:

**Education:** goals, scope, content, outcomes, planning and response to both formal and informal educational approaches.

**Earth-Sensitive Spirituality:** resources, development and expression, responses, conduciveness of the place.

**Biodiversity:** how it is modelled, integrated, and supported, the effectiveness of past and present strategies, capacity for planning into the future.

**Sustainability:** effectiveness of practices for the conservation of energy and water, progress towards financial viability, effectiveness of communication and promotion strategies, effectiveness of management and personnel, ownership by the wider community/ies.

**Action for Justice for the Earth:** involvement in campaigns, links, networks.

Expectations of the Core Group regarding the process of the review include the following:

- that it be qualitative, rather than quantitative

- that there be involvement of the various sectors of the network, such involvement to include information sharing, evaluation, and brainstorming of future possibilities. The *Earth Link* community would be integrated into this
- that there be interviews with Mary Tinney, Marilyn Cuttler, Education Planning Team and the Core Group
- that the consultant liaise with one member of the Core Group, and consult with them all at least once during the process.’

## **METHODOLOGY**

A number of strategies were employed to gather a comprehensive picture of the past and present status of *Earth Link* at Four Winds, and to explore future options. These included a review of core documents, emailed questionnaires, group meetings, individual face-to-face and telephone interviews, group teleconference, and time spent at Four Winds. Copies of all questionnaires are included as Attachments.

The Core Group required the review to be qualitative, rather than quantitative. Accordingly, the focus of all processes was on eliciting information relating to individual and collective attitudinal and behavioural change. However, in order to provide a comprehensive record of the achievements of *Earth Link*, this qualitative information has been supplemented by quantitative data in a number of key areas.

### **Review Of *Earth Link* Documents**

The following sources were used to provide information for this review:

- *Earth Link* files
- *Earth Link* informative emails
- Minutes of meetings for the years 2001-2004
- Financial records for the years 2001-2004
- Education Program outline
- Course Notes for Unit 1 of the Education Program
- Feedback from participants in Units 1-4 of the Education Program
- *Earth Link* DVD
- *Earth Link* Web Site.

### **Email Questionnaires**

A letter and questionnaire was sent to all 90 people on the *Earth Link* email list. 18 completed questionnaires were returned (20%). 5 of these were from members of the Core Group or Education Planning Team.

### **Group Meetings**

#### ***Core Group:***

Mary Tinney, Marilyn Cuttler, Madeleine Buckley, Darryl Nelson, Anne McLay, Mary Pirrotta Jackson

#### ***Education Planning Team:***

Mary Tinney, Andrew Nicholson. Apologies: Marilyn Cuttler, Sue Smith

### **Individual Interviews**

Mary Tinney, Coordinator of Programmes, Finance and Communication  
 Marilyn Cuttler, Coordinator of Property and Hospitality  
 Lauren Appleby and John Bowden, Pine Rivers Shire Council

Sue Smith, Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team  
Elizabeth O'Keefe, Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team (telephone interview)  
Annette Arnold, Social Action Office (telephone interview)  
Kerry Drinkwater, Trainer for Community Jobs Programs, Ithaca TAFE (telephone interview)

### **Teleconference**

After the draft review report was presented to the Core Group, a teleconference was held so the Core Group could provide feedback and comments to the Reviewer. These comments were discussed and, where appropriate, incorporated into the final review report. Apology: Anne McLay.

## **PROJECT REVIEW REPORT**

The findings of the review are presented in two forms:

1. this detailed printed document (Word)
2. a visual presentation of key points (Power Point).

## **STORIES OF CHANGE**

The influence of *Earth Link* on people's lives can be heard in their stories. This section provides some examples of the way in which *Earth Link* has been the catalyst for behavioural and/or attitudinal changes. They are presented in the first person, using the respondents' own words.

'I am much more aware of the fragility of the earth and of my part, ever so small, in helping preserve it myself and in passing on the message to make others aware.'

'It has inspired me in my work as a teacher.'

'It has widened my sense of the sacred.'

'I no longer use plastic bags, and only use non-phosphate washing powders.'

'This was truly a time of oneness with Earth and the Divine Presence within.'

'The Council of All Beings was a life changing experience.'

'*Earth Link* has not answered all my questions about spirituality, religion and the earth, but it has provided me with links to good resources.'

'I am conscious of my responsibility for the use or misuse of water.'

'My eyes have been opened to the grandeur of life. It is evolving, changing, sustaining, and this is mind-boggling.'

'I have a greater understanding of my role as a citizen and a change agent.'

'My prayers are being in nature, prayers of praise and thanks; I no longer ask for things, because everything we need has been given as gift.'

'It has stimulated me to become involved in email campaigns.'

'I'm more interested and articulate about environmental matters.'

'This experience has deepened my understanding of the land in the marrow of my soul.'

'I now try to listen to the trees at home in the same way I listened to them at Four Winds.'

'Beyond

Beyond any dreams, any hopes, any expectations

I stand

And am stilled in wonder.

How could I have known?'

## **PRIORITY AREAS**

The five priorities of *Earth Link* are education, earth-centred spirituality, biodiversity, sustainability and action for justice for the earth. These are not discrete areas: goals, achievements and suggested future actions overlap. For example, education and spirituality are very closely linked; the formal educational program is complemented by informal educational opportunities provided by actions undertaken towards biodiversity, sustainability and justice for the earth; it is difficult to separate strategies aimed at enhancing biodiversity from those directed at sustainability, and so on. In the discussion that follows each priority is dealt with separately, but it is acknowledged that this is an artificial structure, and does not reflect the holistic nature of the priorities and operations of *Earth Link* at Four Winds.

### **EDUCATION**

#### ***Achievements***

##### ***Formal education achievements:***

Establishment of Education Planning Team

Development of Education Program

Development of *Earth Link* DVD

Plans to commence piloting Unit 1 of the Distance Education Program with 3 participants (and their networks)

Delivery of all Units of Education Program as per table below:

| <b>Unit Number</b> | <b>Title</b>  | <b>Date</b> | <b>Number of participants</b> |
|--------------------|---|-------------|-------------------------------|
| 1                  | The Universe is My Body; My Body is the Universe            | 2003        | 11                            |
| 2                  | Developing a Love of Place and an Ethic of Care             | 2003        | 6                             |
| 1                  | The Universe is My Body; My Body is the Universe            | 2004        | 4                             |
| 2                  | Developing a Love of Place and an Ethic of Care             | 2004        | 3                             |
| 3                  | Working Towards a Sustainable World                         | 2004        | 3                             |
| 4                  | Queensland: the Land, The Spirit (Trip to North Queensland) | 2004        | 14                            |

##### ***Informal education achievements:***

- sustainable living workshop at Four Winds
- vegetation identification workshop at Four Winds
- Land for Wildlife workshop at Four Winds
- Council of All Beings
- residential weekends for a variety of groups, including Soroptimists, Teams of Our Lady, groups of Sisters and Brothers, parish groups, small groups of women, men and couples
- Mary has provided off-site educational opportunities as follows:
  - o addressed Gaia Educational Services
  - o addressed Commonwealth for the Common Good
  - o conducted a workshop for women at Womenspace
  - o addressed groups of teachers and parish groups



- o run workshops and reflection sessions for groups of Sisters and Brothers, and parish groups
- *Earth Link* has also promoted and encouraged participation in other workshops and activities, including those run by Starhawk, John Seed, Ruth Rosenhek, Land for Wildlife, River Symposium, Ideas at the Powerhouse, Downfall Creek Bushland Centre and Boondall Wetlands Centre

## ***Discussion***

The aim of *Earth Link* in its focus on education is to:

- offer formal and informal educational opportunities for adults, which provide them with a framework for seeing their role and their responsibilities as members of the Earth community.

Participants in the formal Education Program were very satisfied with the content and delivery of the units. Learning methods were flexible, hands-on and interactive, incorporating a variety of approaches (input, group and individual processes, rituals, walks and videos); the relationship between the four units was clearly defined and worked well. The opportunities for sharing over meals, and as part of the residential weekends, enhanced the educational experience. The Education Program stimulated and challenged participants to action and reflection in their own lives and spheres of influence. Highlights of the program were: the group project 'Exploring Kedron Brook', which provided participants in Unit 3 with a sense of identification with the Brook and a heightened awareness of issues relating to its health and well-being, and the bus trip through Queensland for Unit 4, which had a profound and lasting impact on participants, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

While there were rituals incorporated into the program, and these were warmly welcomed, many participants were disappointed that there was not greater emphasis on an eco-spiritual perspective, and recommended further development of this aspect of the program.

A number of other suggestions were made which could be incorporated into the delivery of the Education Program in the future. Chief among these were the need to: provide the questions for reflection at the commencement of each unit, enabling participants to focus on these more clearly and, importantly, to allow more time for sharing and reflection on both content and experiences.

The major challenge facing the Education Program is how to package and market the product to attract a sufficient number of participants. The low number of participants in the Education Program to date is a cause for concern, and threatens its viability. The majority of participants have been white, middle aged females; in future it may be possible to promote the program directly to men's groups or organisations. Other possible markets are schools, including both staff and students; young people active in the environmental sector; people in their mid-thirties who are seeking a spirituality outside mainstream religions; and the alternative health/ complementary therapies sector. There may also be potential for delivery of a customised program on organisational sustainability, but it would be important to ensure that the focus of the program is not lost in the drive for a market, for the unique marketing 'edge' of the *Earth Link* program is its underpinning, and overtly spiritual, ideology.

Delivery methods could be expanded to include CD and DVD, as well as on-line delivery (user pays system, with PIN) enabling people to study at their leisure. In this mode the units

could be extended to a more academic approach; it may also be possible to establish links and partnerships with providers of already existing accredited courses.

The Education Program is being delivered by paid and unpaid trainers and tutors, who have the requisite content knowledge and delivery skills. Trainers and tutors are not required to hold formal qualifications in these areas. Potential trainers are identified and approached directly by the Education Planning Team; the majority participate in the Education Program before delivering any training. There is no professional development plan in place for the Education Planning Team, the trainers or the tutors.

Participants provide feedback at the end of each session, and on completion of each unit. There is no formal mechanism for measuring course outcomes, apart from anecdotal accounts, and the actual number of people completing each unit. A follow-up survey of past participants could provide information on the longer term outcomes of the course, especially in relation to ongoing attitudinal and behavioural changes.

In the Education Program, as in all activities of *Earth Link* at Four Winds, the distance from Brisbane is a deterrent for many people.

### **Summary**

The formal Education Program is unique in Australia. Its content and processes match current holistic models of environmental concern, educational delivery, and personal and communal growth. With only minor changes, and the benefit of an effective promotional and marketing strategy, this program has the potential to deliver lasting personal, spiritual, social and environmental benefits to a wide audience. It may be possible to customise the Education Program so that it can be used by schools. Approaches could be made to appropriate officers of Catholic Education to discuss this possibility.

*Earth Link* has provided numerous opportunities for informal education, both at Four Winds and other locations, and has developed networks and contacts that extend the range of educational opportunities available to *Earth Link* clients and community. There is potential to develop further the connection between *Earth Link* and the Social Action Office, with the two groups undertaking joint planning: *Earth Link* could provide targeted education on issues which are the focus of SAO campaigns.

Opportunities also exist to use Four Winds as a centre for informal education on sustainable living. These are discussed under the Sustainability priority.

### **Recommendations**

- 1.1 Undertake market research to identify possible markets and client needs in relation to both formal and informal education.
- 1.2 Develop a promotional/marketing plan for the Education Program.
- 1.3 Identify and train additional trainers for the Education Program.
- 1.4 Identify, and budget for, professional development opportunities for members of the Education Planning Team and trainers in the Education Program.
- 1.5 Integrate more time for reflection into each unit of the Education Program.
- 1.6 Clarify/develop the theological framework which underpins the Education Program and enhance the eco-spiritual dimension of the program.
- 1.7 Consider delivering the Education Program in Brisbane, as well as at Four Winds.
- 1.8 Undertake follow-up surveys of past participants in the Education Program to measure long term outcomes from the course.

## EARTH-SENSITIVE SPIRITUALITY

### *Achievements*

- Establishment of a library of print and audio-visual resources (\$1,662 in 2003; \$2,382 in 2003; \$1,695 in first quarter 2004)
- Cosmic Walk developed
- Way of the Cross (including social/environmental concerns), 150-160 participants annually
- Holy Thursday meal
- Easter Sunday morning ritual
- Storytelling workshop
- Mary has provided off-site eco-spirituality opportunities as follows:
  - o Freshwater ritual for the Social Action Office
  - o Earth, Winter, Darkness ritual for the Social Action Office
  - o As part of Maryfest workshop at Womenspace
  - o 'Rituals by the River'
  - o Australian Spirituality workshop
  - o Facilitated gatherings of groups of teachers and parish groups

### *Discussion*

The aims of *Earth Link* in its focus on spirituality are to:

- promote spirituality that is inclusive of Earth as a meeting point with the divine;
- provide a place where people can connect with Earth.

The spirituality expressed by *Earth Link* is not aligned with any one religious tradition, although the majority of participants in *Earth Link* activities have been from a Catholic Christian background. For one participant the 'sense of community and connectedness to the wider Catholic community' has been the most important aspect of involvement with *Earth Link*.

The spiritual dimension of *Earth Link* is highly valued; many people named *Earth Link* as the catalyst for their growing awareness of the sacredness and mystery of Earth and of all life. While people saw Four Winds primarily as an earth-centred education centre, one third of respondents (including both those who have done formal Education Units and those who have not) indicated that they are seeking a more overt expression of earth-sensitive spirituality than is currently offered by *Earth Link*, and would like its role as an earth-centred spirituality/retreat centre to be developed and expanded.

There is as yet no clear statement of the theological framework to which the spirituality priority gives expression; it will be important to clarify and articulate this for the future.

Four Winds is very welcoming and hospitable, the developed rest areas peaceful and reflective, the simplicity and quiet of the cottage conducive to reflection, and the practicalities of living in close connection with Earth evident. People who have used Four Winds for personal retreat, reflection or rest often come back for another period of quiet, or hope to return in the near future.

Both the Cosmic Walk and the Way of the Cross are readily available for personal or group use. The Cosmic Walk is used by participants in the Education Program. A portable CD player and disk are available for people to use for interpretive walks of the Cosmic Walk, thanks to a grant of \$1,500 from the Presentation Sisters Mission Fund. This could become

a model for other interpretive walks on the property. The Way of the Cross attracts a large gathering (150-160) each year on Good Friday, but is not used very much outside of this structured time. The role of the annual public Way of the Cross ritual as a focus of religious expression for the local community cannot be underestimated, and provides a model that could be extended to key religious celebrations at other times in the year. In particular, Christmas provides an opportunity for a public celebration of the sacred dimension of all life, which could attract members of the local community. Celebrations of the seasons and cycles of nature (solstices, equinoxes, spring festival, first rains etc) could also be opportunities for further ritual engagement with the Ocean View community.

*Earth Link* has already established a strong link with the Social Action Office, which has a shared understanding of the relationship between spirituality and action for justice for the earth. Plans are in place to explore links with other centres for eco-spirituality in the area, including the Mt. Archer Community, Najara Centre for Spirituality and Ecology, and Wildwood. It may be possible for some of these centres to cooperate in joint activities, promotions, sharing of resources and funding applications.

### **Summary**

Spirituality is a priority both for the Core Group and for the wider *Earth Link* community, and has been one of the main attractors of people to Four Winds. The opportunities for spiritual development and expression provided by *Earth Link* are meeting a need for many people.

The focus on spirituality could be developed and articulated even more clearly in the future, both in response to client feedback and as an obvious 'marketing edge' for *Earth Link*.

### **Recommendations**

- 2.1 Establish a Spirituality Group with responsibility for clarifying and defining the theological framework which underpins the work and spirituality of *Earth Link*.
- 2.2 Explore with the *Earth Link* community ways in which spirituality can be more overt both as part of, and separate from, the Education Program.
- 2.3 Promote Four Winds more clearly as a centre for eco-spirituality.
- 2.4 Explore opportunities for additional communal rituals.

## BIODIVERSITY

Some of the achievements and some sections of the discussion below relate to both biodiversity and sustainability. They should be read in that light.

### *Achievements*

- Land for Wildlife status
- Controlled burning of property
- Hosted two training programs for Bridgeworks Personnel under the Community Jobs Program with 30 participants doing work on fences, existing tracks, vegetable garden, Cosmic Walk, composting toilet, weed management, shelter shed, bridge and seats
- Hosted Land for Wildlife Workshop

### *Discussion*

The aim of *Earth Link* in its focus on biodiversity is to:

- engage in practices that enable a variety of life forms to flourish.

Four Winds, particularly the vegetated block (Lot 2), is a core habitat for the neighbourhood. A very diverse range of native plants, and a number of tree species important for native wildlife, grow on the property, including the Forest She Oak and the Black She Oak which are the only food source for the rare glossy black cockatoo. Three of these birds were sighted at Four Winds recently.

In recognition of what has been achieved on the property, and the commitment of *Earth Link* to responsible management into the future, the vegetated block at Four Winds has been granted Land for Wildlife status, and this sign is displayed near the front gate. One Land for Wildlife workshop has been held at Four Winds, educating and informing local residents about the biodiversity of the area. It is hoped that more of these gatherings will occur in the future.

Lantana and other weeds continue to pose a challenge. Significant progress towards removing lantana was made by the participants in the Community Jobs Plans, but ongoing control and/or eradication of lantana on a property of this size is beyond the capacity of current personnel.

There are some areas on the property boundary that pose a risk of erosion after rain. Steep walking tracks also present a potential erosion problem; ideally the walking tracks would be cut across the slopes, rather than down, to minimise water run off which causes soil erosion and exposes tree roots.

The area where the orchard and vegetable garden have been established was excavated by former owners for levelling, and all the top soil removed. It would require enormous effort to turn the remaining clay subsoil into fertile garden soil. The orchard will not flourish in its current location. The new vegetable garden was established as a no-dig garden, thus avoiding the subsoil, and Marilyn has worked very hard to create a productive garden. However, in the longer term it may be better to relocate both the orchard and vegetable garden to an area where the top soil remains relatively intact, such as below the rose garden. A lush, fruitful garden and orchard may attract volunteer workers, and could demonstrate a more sustainable model of gardening than is currently possible. It could also provide an opportunity to educate visitors about the problems that follow the removal of topsoil.

Links have been established with key people who could assist with planning for the future of the property, including Lauren Appleby and John Bowden of the Pine Rivers Shire Council and Kerry Drinkwater of Ithaca TAFE and Pine Rivers Catchment Association.

### ***Summary***

Four Winds is an important local habitat, with a very diverse range of native plants, in the care of a group committed to biodiversity and good management practices. Significant improvements have been made to the property in the three years of *Earth Link's* tenancy.

While recognising the importance of Four Winds for the neighbourhood, and acknowledging that it would be ideal if the property could be retained intact into the future, it may be that *Earth Link* does not need the full seventeen hectares to achieve its objectives. Should it prove necessary to subdivide the property, professional advice should be sought to establish what areas should be retained untouched, and the minimum size of subdivided blocks necessary to minimise the impact of such subdivision on habitat.

### ***Recommendations***

- 3.1 Develop a comprehensive Property Plan, to include strategies for habitat management, fire management, weed control, erosion control, and future developments.
- 3.2 Examine the location and gradient of all walking tracks to ensure:
  - they are comfortable for walking
  - they pose no safety risks to walkers
  - soil erosion from water runoff is minimised.
- 3.3 Identify and plant more tree species that provide food for scarce birds which are native to the area.
- 3.4 Relocate the orchard and vegetable garden to an area where the topsoil is intact.

## SUSTAINABILITY

### *Achievements*

#### **Sustainable living**

- Opportunities for education re sustainability:
  - o 5 workshops on World Summit on Sustainable Development
  - o talk by Wendy Millar on better use of energy
  - o visit to a sustainable house in Samford
- Actions towards sustainable living:
  - o Waterless composting toilet
  - o Laying hens
  - o Worm farm
  - o Vegetable garden
- Mary has attended the following:
  - o Sustainable Housing Seminar
  - o Climate Change Workshop
  - o Community Capital Conference
  - o Contemplative Composting
  - o Water Testing Workshop
  - o Sustainable Living Fair
  - o Environmental Educators Conference
  - o World Summit on Sustainable Development
  - o Workshop with Ruth Rosenhek
  - o Ideas at the Powerhouse
  - o River Symposium
  - o Diploma in Environmental Management
  - o Audited a unit on Environmental Advocacy

#### **Financial viability**

- Establishment of fee schedules for accommodation and Education Program
- Development of booking forms and administrative systems
- Increase in the value of Four Winds, from the labour and materials of the CJP
- Income generated from accommodation, workshops and donations, as tabled below:

| <b>Income</b>              | <b>2002</b>       | <b>2003</b>     | <b>First quarter<br/>2004</b> |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| Sisters of Mercy           | \$37,000          | \$40,000        | \$10,000                      |
| Accommodation/workshops ** | \$20,795          | \$13,591        | \$5,056                       |
| Donations                  | \$1,469           | \$3,981         | \$193                         |
| Interest                   | \$1,003           | \$1,395         | 0                             |
| Sundry                     | \$24              | \$724           | \$612                         |
| <b>Totals</b>              | <b>* \$60,291</b> | <b>\$59,691</b> | <b>\$15,861</b>               |

\* For ease of comparison, this does not include the \$20,276 grant received from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund in 2002.

\*\* It is not possible to separate these two income sources.

| <b>Expenditure</b> | <b>2002</b> | <b>2003</b> | <b>First quarter<br/>2004</b> |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Administration     | \$13,818    | \$11,847    | \$2,048                       |
| Domestic Operating | \$6,640     | \$7,637     | \$3,072                       |



|                        |                   |                 |                 |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Property and Equipment | \$16,104          | \$15,013        | \$9,955         |
| Personnel              | \$11,300          | \$14,000        | \$5,000         |
| <b>Totals</b>          | <b>* \$47,862</b> | <b>\$48,497</b> | <b>\$20,075</b> |

\* For ease of comparison, this does not include expenditure against the grant received from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund in 2002.

### **Communication and promotion**

- Occasional informative emails to email group (90 names)
- Web Site developed
- Flyers developed
- Information in Womenspace emails
- Information in *Dayboro Grapevine*
- Information in *Mercy Links*, Sisters of Mercy newsletter
- Articles in occasional publications
- Information provided to a range of groups for dissemination to their networks

### **Management and personnel**

- Recruitment of Marilyn Cuttler to Four Winds in a part time voluntary capacity
- Establishment of two positions, Coordinator of Programmes, Finance and Communication (Mary Tinney) and Coordinator of Hospitality and Property (Marilyn Cuttler)
- IT assistance is sourced from Xavier Grafix, Presentation Sisters Queensland and Fraynetwork Multimedia
- Two gardeners are employed for half a day per week
- Lawn mower employed half a day per week when required
- Handyman/groundsman employed half a day per week
- Volunteer worker (Marjorie Ahern) for six weeks in 2004

### **Ownership by wider community/ies**

- Establishment of a structure that provides for community input:
  - o *Earth Link* Community, the overall direction setting body, meets twice yearly
  - o Core Group, acts on behalf of Community, meets or teleconferences quarterly
  - o Education Planning Team, develops and delivers training program, trains facilitators, meets as required
- Links have been made with the local community

### **Discussion**

The aims of *Earth Link* in its focus on sustainability are to:

- live in a way that recognises that Earth's resources are finite;
- work towards financial viability;
- situate *Earth Link* within other communities of concern about the environment;
- promote the place and its programs.

### **Sustainable living**

Four Winds, as the home of *Earth Link*, could be enhanced so it is a showcase for sustainable living (in a conventional house that was not specifically designed for sustainability). Practical strategies that could be implemented include:

- attaching brief informative/educational texts to: hen house, composting toilet, permaculture garden, rain water tanks, worm farm, mulch, non-phosphate washing powders etc. This information could also be put on the *Earth Link* web site. (This links to the Education priority.)



- exploring possibilities for solar power and solar hot water
- seeking expert advice re the accommodation to ensure it models best practice in efficient resource use
- using grey water on gardens. Grey water currently discharges onto the grass below the rose garden. If the gardens were relocated to this area, below the sump, grey water could be used for irrigation (with use of appropriate soaps and detergents), as is the case with Ruah.

Plant and equipment at Four Winds is aging, and is subject to frequent breakdowns. It may be necessary to invest in the infrastructure of the property, to minimise time and money spent on repairs. Planning for this would form part of the property plan (Recommendation 3.1).

### **Financial viability**

*Earth Link* has received funding from the Sisters of Mercy each year for three years: \$37,000 in 2002, \$40,000 in 2003 and \$37,000 budgeted for 2004. Major insurance for *Earth Link* is included in the comprehensive cover of the Sisters of Mercy, and is then charged to *Earth Link*. Marilyn receives accommodation, food and some petrol and professional development costs from the Sisters of Mercy. Income from other sources in 2002 was \$22,239, and \$19,691 in 2003.

It is not easy to identify the various sources of this income from the print outs provided by the Sisters of Mercy financial system. Actual income from accommodation, Education Program and other workshops cannot be separated. It would be more useful for budgeting if the codes were customised to match the income streams of *Earth Link*.

If the current income and expenditure trends continue, it is highly unlikely that *Earth Link* will generate sufficient income to become financially independent in the foreseeable future. *Earth Link* at Four Winds is a new ministry by the Sisters of Mercy. In this context, there needs to be further clarification of what is expected of *Earth Link* in terms of financial viability.

*Earth Link* needs to establish additional ways of generating income; some possibilities include:

- a retail arm, with appropriate environmental and/or eco-spiritual products
- focussed, professional fundraising
- implementation of *Sustainability LETS*
- grants.

It is acknowledged that there are limitations associated with all of these strategies: time, work and energy load; establishment costs; commissioning suitable retail products; interesting sufficient people in *Sustainability LETS*; identifying grants that match the needs and priorities of *Earth Link*, but these limitations are not of such magnitude that they would prevent *Earth Link* from investigating these possibilities.

The labour and training component of the two Community Jobs Plans undertaken at Four Winds was approximately \$300,000. A grant of \$20,276 was received from the Gambling Community Benefit Fund for materials for the Community Jobs Plan project. These have combined to greatly enhance Four Winds, and increase its value.

### **Communication and promotion**

The primary tools used for promoting *Earth Link*, and for communicating information about its programs and activities have been:

- Word of mouth. Most people learned about *Earth Link* directly from Mary Tinney.
- Regular emails to 90 people.
- Web Site. This is not utilised extensively by those surveyed: two respondents have visited the Web Site 8-12 times, 11 have used it 1-3 times, and the remaining 5 have never visited it.
- Networking, both in person and via the email lists of other groups.
- Earth Care Group for Australian Mercy Members.
- Newsletters and articles.

The future viability of *Earth Link* depends on its ability to identify its target audience/s and tailor its promotional strategies to that/those audience/s. Promotion is a field requiring specialised skills; the recruitment of someone with these skills to *Earth Link* is a priority for the immediate future. In the meantime, some enhancements could be made to existing promotion and communication strategies:

- Separate the *Earth Link* Web Site from the Mercy Web Site
- Monitor number of 'hits' to the Web Site and the source of such 'hits'
- Include short articles and links to new relevant information on the Web Site
- Include information about social action campaigns, with appropriate links, on the Web Site
- Explore the possibility of establishing an electronic discussion group.

*Earth Link* is not registered as a business name, but it is being used publicly on flyers, letterheads, business cards and so on, which is not permitted in Queensland. The business name *Earth Link* is not available, as it is registered to another business. Before embarking on a widespread promotional campaign, consideration should be given to the implications of using an unregistered business name and/or to selecting and registering another name for the venture.

### **Management and personnel**

*Earth Link* has grown to a point where it is neither reasonable, nor good human resource practice, to expect Mary and Marilyn to carry the work load necessary to move it into the next stage of its development. Furthermore, the range of skills required in the future will necessitate the involvement of additional personnel and skills. There is an urgent need for regular administrative assistance, possibly a half day per week. There is also a need for people to assume responsibility for promotion and marketing, management of *Sustainability LETS*, and property management (oversight of planning repairs and maintenance).

The current model of coordination relies on Marilyn's generosity in volunteering at Four Winds. In the long term this is not sustainable. Strategies need to be developed (as part of the overall planning process) to address future staffing needs and succession planning.

Mary carries the responsibility for the day-to-day running of *Earth Link* at Four Winds, assisted by Marilyn in a part time capacity. Marilyn is at Four Winds from Thursday till Sunday each week. Mary has a supervisor, paid by *Earth Link*, who provides professional support, but has no consistent day-to-day support. A Support Group was established in the first year of Mary's time at Four Winds, but this group no longer exists. The role of the Core Group is not to support the coordinators *per se*, but to manage the functions of *Earth Link*. The current model of coordination needs to be re-examined, with a view to providing

more support for Mary on a day-to-day basis, and examining the work loads and responsibilities of the two coordinators.

The Core Group meets quarterly, usually face-to-face, and sometimes via teleconference. This frequency of meetings does not: encourage the development of strong links and support systems; allow time to explore and express the earth-sensitive spirituality that is central to *Earth Link*; incorporate time for the Core Group to be educated/ educate themselves about key issues central to *Earth Link*, including financial management, biodiversity and sustainability; or provide opportunities for them to engage intimately with the Four Winds property through earth-centred rituals and walks.

### **Ownership by wider community/ies**

Numbers attending community meetings (the *Earth Link* community) have gradually declined from 40 at the meetings in June and August 2001 to 15 in 2003. The majority of respondents to the email questionnaire described themselves as Very Interested (9) or Interested (6), and as Slightly Involved (10) or Very Involved (5).

People clearly support the *Earth Link* venture, and want it to continue, but many are unable, or unwilling, to become actively involved in its management. Many people do not see themselves as part of an *Earth Link* community, but simply as interested in its development, and as potential clients of *Earth Link* and/or Four Winds.

With these limitations expressed by the wider community, and given the location of *Four Winds* at Ocean View, it may be equally, if not more, important to involve the local community in the management of *Earth Link*.

### **Summary**

*Earth Link* at Four Winds has made significant progress towards practising sustainable living. It is well positioned to demonstrate appropriate strategies, and to deliver formal and informal education about sustainability.

In 2002, 54.1% of the income of *Earth Link* was generated from sources other than the Sisters of Mercy. (38.63% exclusive of the Gambling Community Benefit Fund grant). In 2003 it was 33%. For a new venture, with only one and a half staff, to have achieved this level of independent income in only two years is impressive. With the engagement of personnel skilled in promotions and marketing, this ratio of funding to self-generated income could be increased significantly.

Mary's leadership and passion for Earth have brought *Earth Link* to this point, but this model of management is unsustainable. Additional personnel and skills are needed to address the variety of tasks necessary to move *Earth Link* into the next stage of its development.

### **Recommendations**

- 4.1 Develop a sustainability plan for 2005-2009 (links to Recommendations 1.2 and 3.1)
- 4.2 Use signs to provide information about sustainable living practices and facilities such as hen house, composting toilet, permaculture garden, rain water tanks, grey water disposal, worm farm, lantana clearing strategies etc.
- 4.3 Amend the codes used by the Sisters of Mercy financial system to reflect *Earth Link's* income sources.

- 4.4 Hold further discussions re managing *Sustainability LETS* (Local Energy Trading System).
- 4.5 Identify the skills required to move *Earth Link* into the future and recruit people with these skills
- 4.6 Re-examine the position descriptions for the two coordinators
- 4.7 Schedule more frequent meetings of Core Group with time for physical and ritual engagement with Four Winds and opportunities for ongoing education of group members about *Earth Link* at Four Winds
- 4.8 Consider registering a business name for the entity currently known as *Earth Link*.

## ACTION FOR JUSTICE FOR THE EARTH

### *Achievements*

Involvement in and support for

- o Stop Food Irradiation campaign
- o Activities of Social Action Office, especially the water salinity campaign for Murray-Darling Basin
- o Land Clearing Campaign of Wilderness Society

Mary chaired the SAO Water Circle

Formal and informal links established with a variety of individuals and organisations with similar or complementary interests, including:

- Social Action Office
- Rainforest Information Centre
- Land for Wildlife
- Womenspace
- Global Institute for Learning and Development
- Catholic Earth Care
- Friends of Earth
- Qld Conservation Council
- Wilderness Society
- City Farms
- Murri Ministry
- Earth Charter

### *Discussion*

The aim of *Earth Link* in its focus on justice for the earth is to:

- be actively involved in initiatives that work for justice for Earth.

The *Earth Link* community made a decision to limit the number of campaigns supported. *Earth Link* disseminates information about, and encourages participation in, those campaigns it supports. For a number of people this is their main connection with *Earth Link*, and is the stimulus for their own involvement in action for justice for the earth (both electronically and in person), or simply raises their awareness of current environmental issues. Some respondents would like to be kept informed about upcoming *Earth Link* activities, but do not want to receive large numbers of emails forwarded from other sources, such as the recent food irradiation campaign.

As discussed in the Education priority, there is potential for joint planning of future campaigns – actions and education – between *Earth Link* and the Social Action Office, with *Earth Link* acting as the educational arm of SAO's action for justice for the earth.

As discussed in the Sustainability priority, information about campaigns, and appropriate links, could be placed on the *Earth Link* web site. Active hyperlinks to campaign web sites could also be included in the regular *Earth Link* email updates.

### *Summary*

*Earth Link* is well positioned to achieve this priority without extensive time and labour. The networks and links established are effective and well chosen for best strategic advantage.

**REVIEWER**

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<http://www.spirituality.wildwoodconsultants.com/>

**ATTACHMENTS**

- A Email Questionnaire
- B Interview Questions: Core Group
- C Interview Questions: Education Planning Team
- D Interview Questions: Mary Tinney, Coordinator of Programmes, Finance, Communication
- E Interview Questions: Marilyn Cuttler, Coordinator of Hospitality, Property
- F Interview Questions: Lauren Appleby and John Bowden, Pine Rivers Shire Council
- G Interview Questions: Annette Arnold, Social Action Office
- H Interview Questions: Sue Smith and Elizabeth O'Keefe, Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team
- I Interview Questions: Kerry Drinkwater, Ithaca TAFE

Attachment A

22nd June 2004



Dear Friends of *Earth Link*

I have been asked to conduct a review of the operations of *Earth Link* at Four Winds. The Core Group sees this as an opportunity to

- determine the effectiveness of *Earth Link* in influencing contemporary understandings and practice regarding environmental concerns;
- make projections about the sustainability of the project from 2005 to 2007; and then
- take appropriate action in the light of those projections.

The review will focus on performance in the five Priority Areas: Education; Earth-Sensitive Spirituality; Biodiversity; Sustainability; Action for Justice for the Earth.

I will be trying to contact all who have been involved with *Earth Link* over the last three years, so they can have input into the review. I would be most grateful if you would take time to complete the attached questionnaire, **and return it before Friday 16th July**.

You can return your completed questionnaire, either

- to me at the postal or email addresses below, or
- to Mary Tinney, Four Winds, 104 Robinson Rd South, Ocean View, 4521; email [earthlink@mercy.org.au](mailto:earthlink@mercy.org.au)

All questionnaires will remain confidential; individuals will not be identified in my report; your responses will not be passed on to the Core Group or to the Coordinators unless you specifically request this.

Thank you for assisting with this review. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require more information, or would like to talk to me about any aspect of the review.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Rose

EMAIL QUESTIONNAIRE FOR *EARTH LINK* COMMUNITY

1. When was your first contact with *Earth Link*? (Circle or **bold** one)

2001    2002    2003    2004

2. How did you first hear about *Earth Link*? \_\_\_\_\_

3. How many Community Meetings of *Earth Link* have you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is the most important aspect of the Community Meetings for you?

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5. Were there any aspects of Community Meetings that did not work for you?

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6. What Units of the Education Program have you taken? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What was the most important thing you gained from the Education Program?

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8. Are there other things you would like included in the Education Program?

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**9. What Workshops have you participated in** e.g. Council of All Beings, ‘When Women Flourish, Earth Flourishes’ etc

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**10. What was the most important thing you gained from each of these workshops?**

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**11. Were there any drawbacks, or limitations, for you, in these workshops?**

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**12. What other activities have you participated in** e.g. Cosmic Walk, Way of the Cross, rituals etc?

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**13. What was the most important thing you gained from each of these activities?**

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**14. Were there any drawbacks, or limitations, for you, in these activities?**

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15. Have you used the Residential Facilities in the Main House? \_\_\_\_\_

16. Have you used the Residential Facilities at *Ruah* Cottage? \_\_\_\_\_

17. What was your main purpose in using these Residential Facilities?

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18. Are there ways in which the accommodation could be integrated even more closely into the *Earth Link* vision?

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19. What other interaction have you had with *Earth Link*, not mentioned already?

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20. What is the most significant aspect of receiving occasional email updates about *Earth Link*?

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21. Is there anything that could be done to make these emails even more significant?

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**22. How often have you visited the *Earth Link* Web Site? \_\_\_\_\_**

**23. What do you find most useful about the *Earth Link* Web Site?**

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**24. What could be done to encourage you to access the *Earth Link* Web Site more frequently?**

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**25. What has been one practical result, in your own life, of your involvement with *Earth Link*?**

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**26. What has been the most significant way in which *Earth Link* has influenced your attitude to the earth?**

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**27. What has been the most significant influence of *Earth Link* on your spirituality?**

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**28. How would you like to see *Earth Link* develop over the next three years?**

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**29. Are any changes needed to make *Earth Link* more relevant/ more accessible/ more interesting/ etc?**

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**30. Other comments:**

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**31. Please rate your interest in the *Earth Link* venture.**

*Very Interested      Interested      Mildly Interested      Not Interested*

**32. Please rate your involvement in / commitment to the *Earth Link* venture.**

*Very Involved      Slightly Involved      Not Involved*

*Please add extra pages if needed.*

**OPTIONAL**

**Name** 

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**Address** 

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**Telephone** 

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**Email** 

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Thank you very much for your assistance.

***Patricia Rose***

## **Attachment B**

### **INTERVIEW WITH CORE GROUP**

Mary Tinney, Marilyn Cuttler, Anne McLay, Madeleine Buckley, Mary Jackson, Darryl Nelson

1. What have been the **highlights** for you in your involvement as a member of the Core Group?
2. What have been the **lowlights** for you in your involvement as a member of the Core Group?

### **Education**

3. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Education?
4. What contributed to this achievement?
5. What are two things you wanted *Earth Link* to achieve, but that it didn't, in relation to Education?
6. Why was this not achieved?
7. What is the most important thing you want to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Education?

### **Earth-Sensitive Spirituality**

8. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Earth-Sensitive Spirituality?
9. What contributed to this achievement?
10. What are two things you wanted *Earth Link* to achieve but that it didn't, in relation to Earth-Sensitive Spirituality?
11. Why was this not achieved?
12. What is the most important thing you want to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Earth-Sensitive Spirituality?

### **Biodiversity**

13. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Biodiversity?
14. What contributed to this achievement?
15. What are two things you wanted *Earth Link* to achieve but that it didn't, in relation to Biodiversity?
16. Why was this not achieved?
17. What is the most important thing you want to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Biodiversity?

### **Sustainability**

18. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Sustainability?
19. What contributed to this achievement?
20. What are two things you wanted *Earth Link* to achieve but that it didn't, in relation to Sustainability?
21. Why was this not achieved?
22. What is the most important thing you want to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Sustainability?

**Action for Justice for the Earth**

23. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Action for Justice for the Earth?
24. What contributed to this achievement?
25. What are two things you wanted *Earth Link* to achieve but that it didn't, in relation to Action for Justice for the Earth?
26. Why was this not achieved?
  
27. What is the most important thing you want to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Action for Justice for the Earth?
  
28. Are these still the priorities for the next 3 years ie have new priorities emerged, or are any of these no longer relevant?
  
29. How successful has the model of management and community involvement been? ie relationship of Earth Link Community and Core Group, frequency of meetings, sharing of responsibility etc.
  
30. How would you like to see *Earth Link* develop over the next three years?
  
31. What resources would be needed to achieve this vision?
  
32. Any other comments ???

## **Attachment C**

### **INTERVIEW WITH EDUCATION PLANNING TEAM**

Mary Tinney, Andrew Nicholson

1. What have been three highlights for you (in terms of the Education Program)?
2. What have been two lowlights for you (in terms of the Education Program)?
3. What have been your three greatest achievements?
4. What are two things you would like to have achieved, but didn't?
5. How did/do you identify the needs and interests of the clients? ie the content of the program?
6. How is the program developed? By whom?
7. How do you identify appropriate presenters?
8. How do you ensure quality control in delivery of the program? ie different presenters
9. What induction and/or training do you provide for presenters?
10. Numbers who have participated in each unit?
11. Adequacy of current fee structure?
12. Payment to facilitators?
13. How do you measure outcomes? Attitudinal changes? Behavioural change? Other??
14. Do you see the need to change the current model in any way?
15. If so, what additional resources might be needed?
16. Where do you want the Education program to be in five years' time?
17. Any other comments?

## **Attachment D**

### **INTERVIEW WITH MARY TINNEY**

**Coordinator**, Programmes, Finance, Communication

1. What have been three highlights for you?
2. What have been two lowlights for you?
3. What have been your three greatest achievements?
4. What are two things you would like to have achieved, but didn't?
5. How has your time been allocated in terms of the five priorities?
6. Do you feel that any of the priority areas have been neglected, for any reason?
7. Do you think that any different time and resource allocation (in terms of the five priorities) might be needed in the future?
8. Do you have the necessary skills to spearhead the implementation of these five priorities into the future?
9. How has the structure worked ie:
  - Is the current model of shared coordination working?
  - Does the Core Group provide the level of support and shared responsibility needed?
  - Relationship with the Education planning Team?
10. Do you have the energy to drive Earth Link for the next three years?
11. Do you see the need for any changes to be made into the future: structural, priorities, resources etc?
12. Are you satisfied with the level of community involvement in Earth Link? Do you see the need for any changes in this area into the future?
13. Do you feel that the Sisters of Mercy – the leadership team, and the congregation as a whole – support what you are doing?
14. Has the funding provided by the Sisters of Mercy been adequate to allow you to undertake your responsibilities without ongoing stress?
15. Earth Link is not a Registered Business Name – indeed, there is an Earth Link business registered in Qld. Can you comment on the decision not to register, and your decision to use the unregistered name on correspondence etc.
16. Any other comments?



## **Attachment E**

### **INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN CUTTLER**

**Coordinator, Hospitality, Property**

1. Could you just clarify for me what are your areas of responsibility?
2. How has the structure worked ie:
  - Is the current model of shared coordination working?
  - Does the Core Group provide the level of support and shared responsibility needed?
3. Do you see the need for any changes to be made into the future: structural, priorities, resources etc?
4. Do you see yourself continuing in your present role for the next three years?
5. Are you satisfied with the level of community involvement in Earth Link? Do you see the need for any changes in this area into the future?
6. What have been three highlights for you?
7. What have been two lowlights for you?
8. What have been your three greatest achievements?
9. What are two things you would like to have achieved, but didn't?
10. How has your time been allocated in terms of the five priorities (education, earth-sensitive spirituality, biodiversity, sustainability, action for justice for the earth)?
11. Do you feel that any of the priority areas have been neglected, for any reason?
12. Do you think that any different time and resource allocation (in terms of the five priorities) might be needed in the future?
13. Any other comments?

## **Attachment F**

### **INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN APPLEBY AND JOHN BOWDEN** **Pine Rivers Shire Council**

1. What has been your involvement with *Earth Link* at Four Winds?

#### **Land for Wildlife**

2. What criteria did *Earth Link* have to meet to qualify for *Land for Wildlife* status?
3. I understand that Four Winds is a core ecosystem for the neighbourhood. Could this function be served if there was less land ie does it require the full 17 hectares to act as a core ecosystem?

#### **Biodiversity**

4. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Biodiversity?
5. What contributed to this achievement?
6. What are two things *Earth Link* could have achieved but didn't, in relation to Biodiversity?
7. Why was this not achieved?
8. What would be the most important thing you'd like to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Biodiversity?

#### **Sustainability**

9. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* in relation to Sustainability?
10. What contributed to this achievement?
11. What are two things *Earth Link* could have achieved but didn't, in relation to Sustainability?
12. Why was this not achieved?
13. What would be the most important thing you'd like to see achieved in the next three years in relation to Sustainability?

#### **Education**

14. Have you seen any of the material from the Education program? If so, can you comment on it, in terms of content, quality, relevance etc, from an environmental perspective.
15. Any other comments?

## **Attachment G**

### **INTERVIEW WITH ANNETTE ARNOLD** **Social Action Office**

1. What is the relationship of Earth Link to SAO?
2. Are there overlaps in the work of Earth Link and SAO?
3. Can you talk briefly about Mary's involvement in SAO (as Chair of the *Water Circle* and other).
4. Please comment briefly on the role of Earth Link in promoting the work of SAO.
5. What is your understanding of where Earth Link fits in the environmental sector?
6. What is your understanding of where Earth Link fits in the spiritual/religious sector?
7. Can you comment on the achievements of Earth Link to date.
8. Can you identify any issues that may impact, positively or negatively, on Earth Link in the next three years?
9. Do you have any thoughts or insights into possible future directions or emerging priorities for Earth Link in the next three years?
10. Will any of these impact, positively or negatively, on SAO?
11. Any other comments?

## **Attachment H**

### **INTERVIEWS WITH SUE SMITH AND ELIZABETH O'KEEFE** **Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team**

1. Where does *Earth Link* fit within the vision and mission of the Sisters of Mercy?
2. Does *Earth Link* at Four Winds have the support of the current Leadership Team?
3. Does it have the support of the broader congregation?
4. What outcomes do the Sisters of Mercy want from *Earth Link*?
5. Are the Sisters of Mercy satisfied with the current reporting arrangements? Does it provide the information they require?
6. How would the Sisters of Mercy order/prioritise the five priorities of *Earth Link* (Education, Earth-Sensitive Spirituality, Biodiversity, Sustainability, Action for Justice for the Earth)?
7. Do you feel that any of the priority areas have been neglected, for any reason?
8. What have been the three greatest achievements of *Earth Link* to date?
9. What are two things you would like to have seen achieved, but weren't?
10. Do you see the need for any changes to be made into the future: structural, priorities, resources etc?
11. *Earth Link* could not function without the financial support of the Sisters of Mercy. Is it likely that this financial support will continue, at least for the next three years?
12. Will the property at Four Winds continue to be available to *Earth Link* for the next three years?
13. Any other comments?

## **Attachment I**

### **INTERVIEW WITH KERRY DRINKWATER** **Ithaca TAFE**

1. Please tell me briefly about your involvement with *Earth Link* at Four Winds.
2. Did you know anything about *Earth Link* at Four Winds before the commencement of the training?
3. What work/training did you do there?
4. How did the participants feel about their time at Four Winds?
5. Did they feel welcomed? Valued ? etc?
6. When they first went there, did they understand what *Earth Link* at Four Winds is trying to do?
7. By the end of their time there, did they understand what *Earth Link* at Four Winds is trying to do?
8. How did they respond to the Cosmic Walk?
9. Do you think that any of the participants are likely to want to get more involved in what is happening at Four Winds in the future?
10. Are you likely to want to get more involved in what is happening at Four Winds in the future?
11. Do you have any suggestions for further development of the property?
12. Any other comments?



***Earth Link***

**Facilitating Deep Bonding with Earth**

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## **Introduction to Ecospirituality**



## The Spirituality of *Earth Link*

In our times, there are ongoing shifts in our knowledge about the unfolding story of the universe, the nature of matter, the interconnectedness of the web of life, the importance of the ancient earth traditions, and the list goes on ... Many people are seeking to make meaning of these changes, to deepen their own connections with nature and the cosmos, to explore their implications for their own religious and spiritual traditions, and to name their experience of the Sacred. As we enter into this journey, we are articulating the spirituality of *Earth Link*.

We understand that the *Earth Link* spirituality comes from the transformative experience of deep bonding with earth. Reflection has led us to believe that this is an experience of the Sacred, and that earth and cosmos constitute for us a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery. This belief guides what we do and what we offer at *Earth Link*.

## *Earth Link* invites you to:

Listen to the wisdom of earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude;

Deepen your relationship with cosmos/earth, beginning with your own particular place;

Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life;

Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living;

Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life.

These essays were developed for *Earth Link* by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney during 2007.

You are invited to use them in order to deepen your ecospirituality.

Photo: Looking East from Four Winds



## Principle 1: Listen to the wisdom of earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude

Principle one is a key statement for, in the actual practice of the spirituality proposed, the other principles flow from it. In this sense also it 'is of first importance'. It is from the stance of openness, from being receptive to the wisdom of the earth, that one is lead to grasp the deep meaning of one's relationship with the earth community and one's interdependence within the web of life, as stated in principles two and three. The acceptance of these stances, in turn, leads to the celebration of all that is, as stated in principle four, and to right action for the earth, as stated in principle five.

Principle one asks a person to 'listen to the wisdom of the earth' and to have 'an open attitude ... to the proactive revelation of the Sacred in the cosmos/earth'. Both statements reflect a positive initiative of the earth. If the earth is active in this way, it presupposes a living earth which has the capacity to act and reveal itself in its own right.

The understanding that the earth exhibits the qualities of a living, proactive entity capable of revealing and speaking for itself has been the source of much speculation recently. The Gaia hypothesis postulates that the planet earth is itself alive: 'a unified, living organism with an amazing capacity to grow, develop and regulate from its own innate resources.'<sup>i</sup>

Humans are challenged to engage with the earth as a life form in its own right. Though this theory has undergone severe criticism from the reductionist scientists, others believe that its approach is valid, depending on the problem one is trying to address.<sup>ii</sup>

Thomas Berry supports the Gaian approach in his "Twelve Principles of a Functional Cosmology", where he states in principle six: 'The Earth, within the solar system, is a self-emergent, self-propagating, self-nourishing, self-educating, self-governing, self-healing, self-fulfilling community.'<sup>iii</sup> In the Eco-justice Principles of the Earth Bible Project, principle three, the Principle of Voice, states: 'Earth is a living entity capable of raising its voice in celebration and against justice.' Principle six, the Principle of Resistance, further states: 'Earth and its components not only suffer from human injustices but actively resist them

in the struggle for justice.' These principles do not imply that the earth speaks in human language or resists in a human way. They do however claim that the Earth, as a living organism, through its own unique form of self-expression, can be proactive, giving 'voice' to either its own intrinsic worth or to outrage at injustices done to that earth.<sup>iv</sup>

The indigenous culture of Australia recognizes both the sacredness of the land as well as the proactive nature of this sacred land. David Tacey says that if we are open to the land, it will transform us. Both black and white are 'aboriginalised', for they are fed from the same geo-spiritual source.<sup>v</sup> The sacred is below them – in the earth, in the rocks. The land itself is active and can break through to them. Spirituality enters from below, from the feet rooted in the land.<sup>vi</sup> It is an 'indigenising' process. It is colonialism in reverse; the land slowly conquers us.<sup>vii</sup>

Tacey's thesis is that white Australians, if they are open to it, can become 'indigenised', 'aboriginalised' by the very Australian land itself and, since this land on which they walk is sacred, it in turn has the capacity to make them sacred.



*King Parrot*

Principle one also asks a person to 'listen to the wisdom of the earth' and to have 'an open attitude ... to the proactive revelation of the Sacred in the cosmos/earth'. What is this wisdom? Where does this revelation stand in relation to other revelations of the Sacred? Some eco-theologians such as Thomas Berry



and Eugene Bianchi would go so far as to state that this revelation of the Sacred in the cosmos/earth is the prime revelation to humans. In his Twelve Principles, Berry affirms in principle one: 'The Universe, the solar system, and the planet earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.'<sup>viii</sup> In a similar way, Bianchi, in "The Ten Commandments of Ecological Spirituality", states in proposition one: 'The universe, our solar system and the earth, as well as our human evolutionary emergence from animal ancestors on this planet constitute the primary sources of revelation of the ultimate mystery.' This proposition for him 'drives the beginnings of religion far back into prehistory, implicitly claiming that our primordial religiousness is very earthbound, intimately connected with the sun and the seasons, with the spirits of mountains and rivers.'<sup>ix</sup> *Earth Link* spirituality does not claim that this cosmos/earth revelation of the Sacred is prime but constitutes 'a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery'. This allows other revelations to be considered also as primary.

The principle speaks of the 'first importance' of adopting 'an open, attentive and receptive attitude'. Jenny Crawford believes that 'ultimately the solution to the environmental crisis can only be found by seeking soul.'<sup>x</sup> This soul is especially captured through attention/mindfulness/awareness/wonder. 'It is receptivity, it is a kind of negative, or deconstructive effort that holds us in openness, so that the object of our attention might reveal itself.'<sup>xi</sup> Later she states: 'I think that many of the approaches to nature that have given rise to environmentalism have their roots in the "wonder" and "love" that an attentive meeting with nature generates.'<sup>xii</sup> The contemplation of the cosmos/earth, which might be another term for attention/mindfulness/awareness/wonder of nature, is active passivity. It is actively opening oneself, raising one's consciousness, so as to touch

into, and hopefully connect with, the Whole of Things, the web of sacred connection that permeates the universe.

To depth this contemplative stance essential to an *Earth Link* spirituality it is useful to consider the cosmic contemplative traditions of the world's religions. Christianity will have to recapture something of the nature mysticism of its medieval contemplatives to be a viable inspiration. Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century German Christian mystic, saw the greening of the trees, the grasses and the lush earth as creative expressions of the sacred greening of the divine spirit.<sup>xiv</sup> Buddhism, with its contemplative approach to the natural world, has wide appeal for environmentalists.<sup>xv</sup> The Buddhist Joan Halifax says: 'Silence is the context where communion and communication with the world is born. This silence has a voice. From it issues [sic] the many songs of Earth.'<sup>xvi</sup>

***Ecospirituality is actively  
opening oneself, raising  
one's consciousness, so as  
to touch into, and hopefully  
connect with, the Whole of  
Things, the web of sacred  
connection that permeates  
the universe.***

Aboriginal Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr explores the concept/practice of *Dadirri*. She defines it as '[i]nner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.'<sup>xvii</sup> It places one in an attitude of receptiveness to nature. Ungunmerr gives a simple yet profound exposition of her contemplative approach to listening to and awareness of the land. She likens it to the concept of contemplation in the

West. In a similar way, Kate Rigby in *Tuning into Spirit of Place* speaks of 'attunement' to the land, an attitude that she hopes might give non-indigenous Australians a way to develop a stronger sense of place.'<sup>xviii</sup>

Paganism, as well as indigenous religion, has a strong base from which to develop an earth-consciousness. In his scholarly book, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism*, Graham Harvey states that '[p]agans are people who consider the world to be alive; they are listening to a speaking earth.'<sup>xiv</sup> Being at home on the earth, which for them is the source of the Sacred, they have a life-affirming, nature-celebrating spiritual tradition that is much needed in an ecologically threatened environment today. Each sacred earth

tradition, ranging from Wicca, shamanism, Native American and Celtic spiritualities, varies in its beliefs and practices, but the common denominator is that they follow an earth-nature-cosmos-based spirituality.<sup>xx</sup> In fact, the celebration of nature, experienced through the earth and the body, is more central to them than understanding and worshipping divinities.

Principle one calls humankind to open itself up humbly to the age-old wisdom of the earth - its elements, plants and animals, seasons and changes. If it does this there is a chance that the sacred balance of the earth can be righted before both humankind and the earth slide into a downward spiral of destruction. As Suzuki says,<sup>xxi</sup> humans must learn to play a secondary role. Firstly, they must be receptors, open to have wisdom, and insight revealed to them. They are not primarily the active agent in this process. They must adopt an attitude of active passivity in response to the earth and the Sacred.



*Nabulwinjbulwinj,*  
Kakadu National Park

## Endnotes

- (i) Diarmuid Ó Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality: A New Spiritual Framework for Today's World* (Dublin: Gill, 1997), 87.
- (ii) Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: The History and Future Impact of Climate Change* (Melbourne: The Text, 2005) 11-18.
- (iii) Thomas Berry, "Twelve Principles of a Functional Cosmology." Manuscript.
- (iv) Norman C. Habel, "The Challenge of Ecojustice Readings for Christian Theology," *Pacifica* 13, no. 2 (2000), 133-135.
- (v) David J. Tacey, *Reenchantment: The New Australian Spirituality* (Pymble: HarperCollins, 2000), 137.
- (vi) Ibid. 94, 97.
- (vii) Ibid. 135.
- (viii) Berry, "Twelve Principles."
- (ix) Eugene C. Bianchi, "The Ten Commandments of Ecological Spirituality." Unpublished manuscript, 2.
- (x) Jenny Crawford, "Seeking Soul: Exploring Ground for an Ecofeminist Dialogue with Spirituality" (paper presented at the Sense of Place Colloquium I: Depth Perspectives on Australian Landscapes and Environmental Values, Blue Mountains, 1996), 211.
- (xi) Ibid. 216.
- (xii) Ibid. 217.
- (xiii) Diarmuid Ó Murchu, *Evolutionary Faith: Rediscovering God in Our Great Story* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 180.
- (xiv) Matthew Fox, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe: Bear, 1985), 30-33. See also Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God* (Wheaton: Quest, 2001), 221-245, for the application of this concept to the female divine principle.
- (xv) See articles by Buddhists: Joanna Macy, "The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action," in *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Crawford, "Seeking Soul"; and Joan Halifax, "The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism, and Deep Ecology," in *Gaia's Hidden Life: The Unseen Intelligence of Nature*, ed. Shirley Nicholson and Brenda Rosen (Wheaton: Quest, 1992). However, Tom Hayden, *The Lost Gospel of the Earth: A Call for Renewing Nature, Spirit and Politics* (San Francisco: Sierra, 1996), 158-183, argues that formalised Buddhism, like the West, has lost its tradition of nature mysticism.
- (xvi) Halifax, "Third Body," 153.
- (xvii) Eugene Stockton, *The Aboriginal Gift: Spirituality for a Nation* (Alexandria: Millennium, 1995), 179.
- (xviii) Kate Rigby, "Myth, Memory, Attunement: Reflections on the Meaning of the Spirit of Place" (paper presented at the Sense of Place Colloquium I: Depth Perspectives on Australian Landscapes and Environmental Values, Blue Mountains, 1996), 113.
- (xix) Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (Kent Town: Wakefield, 1997), viii.
- (xx) Vivianne Crowley, *A Woman's Guide to the Earth Traditions* (London: Thorsons, 2001), 1.
- (xxi) David T. Suzuki and Amanda McConnell, *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997).

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*Koala*

## Principle 2: Deepen your relationship with cosmos/earth, understanding that a close bond with your own particular place is central

Principle one speaks of listening openly, attentively and receptively to the wisdom of the earth as it reveals the Sacred. Principle two expands from listening, no matter how attentively, to a more holistic physical, emotional and sensory experience as one enters into an intimate relationship with the earth. It suggests that this is a relationship that will develop and deepen in a very personal way as human bonds with earth; as one specific human bonds with one particular part of the earth, with one's own special place.

*Earth Link* spirituality is real, immediate and tangible; a spirituality in which the human body is called to be in dynamic contact with the earth, 'profoundly grounded in the realities of the earth and the body'.<sup>i</sup> It is a spirituality which invites us to emulate John Seed for whom the 'closest thing to meditation for me now is to lie down in the forest when it's dry, cover myself in leaves, and imagine an umbilical cord reaching down into the earth'.<sup>ii</sup> This is not an abstract spirituality that that can be practised from afar in a universal, esoteric, transcendent way; it is a very specific physical spirituality, an interaction between body and earth. It is this type of encounter to which Principle two calls us: to be open, not only to the wisdom of the earth, but to the revelation of the Sacred in and through our bodies, in and through the earth.

This is not to neglect the role of the mind and the intellect in the developing relationship between earth and human. In a challenge to the dualism of Cartesianism, which saw a distinction between mind and body, Maurice Merleau-Ponty claimed that the human person has access to bodily knowledge only through lived experience. For Merleau-Ponty, a 'perceiving mind is an incarnated body'<sup>iii</sup> Belief in this interconnectedness of mind and

body is central to Kate Rigby's work on sacred places, sacred landscapes, of which she writes that they are 'cocreated by the mind but also, importantly, felt in the flesh'.<sup>iv</sup> Rigby suggests the possibility of a new *spiritus loci*, 'something that arises ... neither in the rock, objectively, nor in the head, subjectively, nor in language, discursively, but in the coupling of physical manifestation and sensuous perception'.<sup>v</sup> This reflects the approach taken by *Earth Link* to its ecospirituality, which is an engagement between the whole of the human person and the whole of the earth place. It is a process of shared experience, and of reflection upon that experience; an interaction between earth body and human body, between human consciousness and earth consciousness.

Carol Christ writes: 'Because the experience of nature is never abstract, but always shaped by the geography and climate of a particular place, an authentic American or Australian spirituality must be rooted in the lands where we live, just as an authentic Greek spirituality must be rooted in the Greek land'.<sup>vi</sup> This raises some interesting questions about the nature of 'place'. What is 'place': is it where I live now? somewhere I lived previously? somewhere I go sometimes? somewhere I go rarely? somewhere I once went, but now go only in my

memory? somewhere I visit only in imagination, dream or trance? What type of 'place' is referred to: a natural place? a built environment? These are far from frivolous questions; each of these is an authentic experience of place; each reflects a valid understanding of place, and warrants consideration in the context of Principle two. In the ecospirituality of *Earth Link* 'our particular place' is, of necessity, an actual geographical location where we can interact, in a physical way, on a regular basis, with the natural environment. Other notions



Earth from Space

[http://www.omegaenvironmental.com.au/energy\\_files/](http://www.omegaenvironmental.com.au/energy_files/)



of place, such as memories of special places, or imaginary, dream and trance experiences of significant places, may contribute to our understanding of place, but do not provide the physical, sensory encounter so necessary for a tangible interaction with earth.

In recent years there has been renewed interest by academics in exploring a sense of place in Australia,<sup>vii</sup> through a series of colloquia at different locations around Australia, where scholars from different disciplines met to discuss and experience a sense of place.<sup>viii</sup> John Cameron, a key facilitator of the colloquia, describes a sense of place in a number of ways:

'as a site for intellectual discourse ... a concept that could help bring various elements of society into dialogue ... having to do with the relationship between people and the local setting for their experience and activity.'<sup>ix</sup>

Dialogue is a significant component of the *Earth Link* project, which creates a space for a common dream, a site for intellectual discourse and education, but it is not the whole, nor even the most important part, of the project. Cameron goes on to note that an 'affective or feeling response is central to the concept' as, too, it is central to the ecospirituality espoused by *Earth Link*. Our 'own particular place' is a specific geographic location, a locus for relationship, a place where the human body can touch the earth body, grow more familiar with it, enter into an ever deepening relationship, come to know the body and the spirit of this particular place and respond to it both physically and emotionally.

Learn to recognize the way this place looks at sunrise, the shadows it casts at sunset, the way the flora and fauna change as the yearly cycle proceeds, the unique characteristics that distinguish this place from all others. Listen to the songs of the particular bird species that live here, to the sound of the wind in the

trees that grow here; learn where and when the winds blow; watch how the rain settles and how it drains away; observe the plants that grow here: are they native to Australia or are they introduced species? Touch, taste, smell. Watch, wait, wonder. Look and learn. Listen to what Starhawk calls 'the language of nature', which 'is always speaking'.<sup>x</sup> As in any relationship, be patient, gentle and respectful. Like any relationship, this is a reciprocal process, whereby earth opens to human, and human opens to earth. As we come to know our particular place more closely, so does our place come to know us more intimately.

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This reciprocal relationship is not poetry, metaphor or myth. It is a tangible reality. Freya Mathews writes: 'A reorientation to the living world will be possible only in the context of a reorientation to materiality per se and a new appreciation of the possibilities inherent in our relation to world, and its local modality, place.' Mathews understands this relation to place to include both allegiance and faithfulness 'to place, as sovereign,

solace, beloved, its ends our own, its will our command.'<sup>xi</sup> This loyalty on our part, this commitment to our particular place, will create, and indicate, a receptive environment for the revelation of the Sacred.

Principle one speaks of the proactive revelation of the Sacred in the cosmos/earth. Principle two localizes and personalizes this revelation. The relationship of mutuality which is developed with a particular place creates the ideal ground for this revelation. It is a fertile ground, a place of gestation, a nurturing space, where the Sacred may reveal itself through Starhawk's 'language of nature'.

In the broader *Earth Link* mandate, place is, as Cameron suggests, a concept that unites people, and links them to a common vision.

Central to the *Earth Link* vision and lived experience is a rural property north of Brisbane, a 'particular place' where the communal vision of connecting people and earth is enacted through active listening, through seasonal rituals, and through deep bonding with earth in the forest, the gullies, the bush tracks, the vegetable garden, the compost heap, the worm farm, the dam, the rain water tanks, the beauty and the challenge of living in intimate connection with earth.

## Endnotes

- (i) David Tacey, 'Spirit Place' in *Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia*, ed. John Cameron, Double Bay: Longueville, 2003, 245.
- (ii) John Seed, 'The Rainforest as Teacher,' in *Gaia's Hidden Life: The Unseen Intelligence of Nature*, ed. Shirley Nicholson and Brenda Rosen, Wheaton: Quest, 1992, 279.
- (iii) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963, 3.
- (iv) Kate Rigby, *Topographies of the Sacred: The Poetics of Place in European Romanticism*, London: University of Virginia Press, 2004, 53.
- (v) Kate Rigby, 'Tuning in to Spirit of Place' in *Changing Places: Re-imagining Australia*, ed. John Cameron, Double Bay: Longueville, 2003, 113-114.
- (vi) Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 44-45.
- (vii) These colloquia have been facilitated by the School of Social Ecology, University of Western Sydney, and have been held in the Blue Mountains, Alice Springs and Eastern Tasmania.
- (viii) See papers presented at the Sense of Place Colloquium I, Blue Mountains, 1996, and Colloquium II: The Interaction between Aboriginal and Western Senses of Place, Alice Springs, 1997. Many of these papers have appeared in John Cameron, ed., *Changing Places: Re-Imagining Australia*, Sydney: Longueville, 2003. See also Mark Tredinnick, ed., *A Place on Earth: An Anthology of Nature Writing for Australia and North America*, Kensington: University of New South Wales Press, 2003.
- (ix) John Cameron, 'Avoiding Onesidedness: Sense of Place as Meeting Ground of Culture and Nature' (Colloquium I, 1996), 18.
- (x) Starhawk, *The Earth Path: Grounding Your Spirit in the Rhythms of Nature*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004, 14.
- (xi) Freya Mathews, *Reinhabiting Reality: Towards a Recovery of Culture*, Sydney: University of NSW Press, 2005, 8.

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*Blue Winged Kookaburra*

### Principle 3: Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life

When we are open and attentive, and grounded in our own bodies and place, we create a readiness to encounter the Sacred in the whole interdependent web of life. As we reflect on our experience, we affirm our belief that universe/cosmos and earth are meeting points for our encounter with the Sacred. The Sacred is in the interdependent web of life.

Understandings of the relationships between the Sacred, nature and humans have concerned humans since their beginning. Pannikar identifies three main chapters in this understanding: the time when they were seen almost as one; the time when they were understood to be quite separate and seen to have a hierarchy of importance; and the current time when we attempt to hold together the best of both of those understandings, without slipping into merging them all.<sup>i</sup>

Almost since the dawning of human consciousness, there have been signs of awareness of a Spirit-force. The cave art of Lascaux and the Neolithic Goddess figurines (9,000 BCE onwards)<sup>ii</sup> indicates a consciousness that Pannikar describes as 'ecumenic or non-historical', a consciousness where nature, humans and the divine are 'amorphously mixed and only vaguely differentiated'.<sup>iii</sup>

Climatic and cultural developments gave rise to a sense of the separateness of the Sacred from the web of life, and a conviction that our encounter with the Sacred is outside of space and time. This separation of the Sacred from universe and earth led to an over emphasis on the transcendent, and to a sense that our material reality is inferior and in need of control. This has been our underlying world view since the patriarchal times (*ca* 3,000 BCE) to our present time. In this dualistic and hierarchical world view, organic is seen as higher than inorganic, sacred higher than

secular, and spirit higher than matter. Not only is the separateness of the Sacred stressed, but also the separateness of humans and nature, and animate nature from inanimate nature.

This dominant world view has always been interspersed by the insights of seers, shamans, and mystics. The visions of John of the Cross present an experience of the oneness of the Sacred, nature and the human, for example:

My Beloved is the mountain  
And lovely wooded valleys,  
Strange islands,  
And resounding rivers,  
The whistling of love stirring  
breezes.<sup>iv</sup>

Hildegard of Bingen and Francis of Assisi had similar intuitions to those of aboriginal peoples, whether Australian, Native American Indian or Celtic. For them, Spirit was transparent in earth, fire, wind and water.<sup>v</sup>

In these our times, given the changes in our context, we are challenged to a new moment of consciousness and spirituality in which the Sacred, nature and humans are experienced as interconnected while retaining their distinctiveness.

Cosmos, earth and humans have been interconnected since the origins of time and space. Over the past century, the science of cosmology has given us an understanding of the unfolding story of the universe, and the place of humans

in that story. The human story is totally dependent on the transition from energy to matter, and the emergence of life in the water and later on land. These developments were pre-requisites for the emergence of our human species from chimpanzees, and the development of consciousness and imagination in the universe.<sup>vii</sup>



*Mt Beerwah-Glasshouse Mountains*

Over the last century, also, ecology has emerged as a discipline within biology. It studies the interdependence of organisms and their environment. As noted in Principle 1, the work of James Lovelock and his formulation of the Gaia hypothesis highlights the interconnectedness of Planet Earth, and its functioning as a living system, of which humans are an integral part.<sup>viii</sup>

Developments in quantum science have changed our understanding of the sub atomic world, of the building blocks of matter. At that level of reality, protons, electrons, neutrons, quarks, particles and strings relate to each other in ever-changing patterns which are far from the fixed orbits of earlier understandings.

ix

Even while this consciousness of interdependence is emerging, we are daily confronted with environmental degradation and the part that humans are playing in that. Lynne White was one of the first to place some of the blame for this on religious world views that stressed the superiority of humans over the environment, and their right to use it for their own welfare and advancement.<sup>x</sup>

Current understandings of the relationships of the Sacred, the human and the environment, are challenged by these changes in our context. Traditional world views and systems of meaning no longer fit our experience, and so we need to move from the classical, mechanistic world view that has underpinned western society since the Enlightenment, to an ecological, world view that acknowledges the interdependence of the whole earth community. Religious systems need revision and transformation in order to rearticulate the relationships between the Sacred, the earth and the human, between religion and spirituality, and between religion and science.<sup>xi</sup> Such a process involves 'the retrieval of scripture and commentaries, symbols and myths, rituals and prayers ... and the reevaluation of particular beliefs and practices'.<sup>xii</sup> The need for a new understanding of the relationships between the

Sacred, the human and the environment is also contributing to a flowering of neo-paganism, with its profound sense of the sacred earth.<sup>xiii</sup>

Foundational to this revisionary process are the critique of a human-centred or anthropocentric world view and theology, and the development of an ecocentric or life-centred world view and theology, built on the recognition of the intrinsic value of earth and cosmos, and their value because they embody the Sacred.

The nature of the Sacred and its relationship with universe and earth is the subject of much recent Christian theological writing. The scientific evidence from cosmology and evolutionary biology challenges theological

assumptions about the nature of the Sacred. If one starts from the premise that the cosmos is unfolding according to principles inherent within it (autopoiesis), then the imaging of the Sacred moves from being omniscient, omnipotent, and transcendent, to that of a presence which brought cosmos/earth into existence, and who sustains it through an intimate presence, while allowing it to be what it is. The Sacred is in all, and all is in the Sacred. They are interconnected yet differentiated.<sup>xiv</sup>

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Within the Christian tradition, there is also a revisiting of the theology of the Trinity,<sup>xv</sup> and of key Scriptural texts from the perspective of earth.<sup>xvi</sup> The human is one with cosmos and earth, while recognizing, from early times, a presence beyond itself. Spirituality, or the felt relationship between people and the Sacred, is experienced in the encounter with the Sacred in cosmos and earth, a relationship that exists at all times, but which erupts into consciousness in graced or gifted moments of insight and awareness. This is the spirituality nurtured by *Earth Link*.

As noted at the beginning of this article, the *Earth Link* spirituality recognizes that when we are open and attentive, and grounded in our own bodies and place, we create a readiness to encounter the Sacred in the whole



interdependent web of life. As we reflect on our experience, we affirm our belief that universe and earth are meeting points for our encounter with the Sacred.

This spirituality is based on a renewed appreciation of life, of nature, of earth and cosmos as embodying the Sacred. This spirituality is also based on new understandings of the Sacred, of the Divine, of Mystery, of God, present within, but also beyond cosmos and earth; and new understandings of humans as interconnected, interdependent, a species among species, a planetary power with ethical and moral responsibilities.

We can know that we are interconnected, cultivate an open, attentive and receptive attitude, and be aware of what our bodies and our place are saying. We can develop a state of readiness to recognize the Sacred, present in our time and place. However, moments of profound insight, revelation and conviction are indeed graced, faith-filled moments. These can be times of pain, suffering, joy, wonder and awe. Only when we enter fully into them, can we really say that 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God'.<sup>xvii</sup>



*Banksia Integrifolia*

## Endnotes

- (i) Raimon Pannikar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness* (New York, Orbis, 1994).
- (ii) Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess*, Chapter 3.
- (iii) Pannikar, 54.
- (iv) John of the Cross, 'Spiritual Canticle' in *The Collected Works* #14 and # 15, 412.
- (v) Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians*.
- (vi) The most recent astronomical findings put the age of the Universe as 13.6+/- 0.2 billion years (*Science News*, Vol 166, July 31, 2004, 69).
- (vii) Brian Swimme tracks these developments in his video series, *Canticle to the Cosmos, The Earth's Imagination*, and *Powers of the Universe*.
- (viii) Interview with James Lovelock on DVD, *The Sacred Balance*, produced by David Suzuki.
- (ix) The DVD series of *The Emergent Universe* looks at scientists' efforts to reconcile the principles of the quantum world with cosmological principles.
- (x) Lynne White, 'The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis' in *Science*, 155, no.3767 (10 March, 1967), 126.
- (xi) One project that addressed this across the major religious traditions was sponsored by the Centre for the Study of World Religions in the USA, which co-sponsored a series of ten conferences between 1996 and 1998. Summary articles from these presentations are found in Vol 10, No 1, Fall 1998 edition of *Earth Ethics*.
- (xii) Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder*, (Chicago: Open Court 2004) 36.
- (xiii) One text which documents the various manifestations of neopaganism is by Lynne Hume, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).
- (xiv) This understanding is known as panentheism, which allows for an intimate relationship between earth and sacred, while recognizing the distinctiveness of each.
- (xv) An Australian who is contributing significantly to this endeavour is Denis Edwards from Flinders University, Adelaide.
- (xvi) The Earth Bible Project, based at Flinders University in Adelaide, is a major contributor to this research.
- (xvii) Gerard Manly Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*.

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*Made of Stardust Ritual*

#### **Principle 4: Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living**

Humans respond to the mystery that is 'the Sacred in the web of life' in a variety of non-rational ways: with emotions such as reverence, humility, awe and wonder; and with a desire for closer physical and spiritual connection for, as Starhawk explains, '[T]he mysteries of the absolute can never be explained – only felt and intuited'.<sup>i</sup> Structured, scientific language expresses this mystery in a limited and imperfect form. The depth and profundity of the mystery of the Sacred in the web of life can only be fully expressed through myth, which seeks to capture in imagination, poetry and story this mystery that is beyond the rational mind. Myths are stories that work through the non-rational – with mystery, paradox, chaos, feeling – to express the mystery in a way that is truer than scientific or rational truth.

The interdependence and sacredness of all life is a rationally incomprehensible truth that humans articulate through the myth of the Sacred in the web of life. This web of life can be understood as the source from which all life flows, a life-generating web. It is found in the vast evolution of the cosmos, the earth and all life on it. It is involved in the cycle of life that moves from birth to maturity, to decline, to death and decay, and thence to rebirth.

Humans concretize and express their response to this myth through rituals, symbols and symbolic processes, and through holistic living, which provide platforms for honouring the Sacred. To honour is to show deep respect, to express high esteem; it is a reverential action which conveys the emotional and physical commitment of the one who honours and acknowledges the integrity of that which is honoured; in this case, the Sacred in the web of life. Ritual is a conscious, structured, formal expression of this honour. Holistic living is a less formal, but no less significant, expression. It is the living out of this belief; living life fully within the web of life; living wholly and, therefore, living a holy life.

In his study of the rituals surrounding rites of passage where initiates underwent rituals of incorporation into a particular group or tribe, the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep discerned pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages. Liminal comes from 'limen' meaning

a threshold. The first stage in the ritual was separation from the group, from ordinary space and time. Initiates crossed the 'threshold' into another dimension, a liminal or marginal state, where they experienced the numinous and gained insight and confirmation. The ritual then led them safely out of this into the ordinary human world and back into the community.<sup>ii</sup> A later cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, was fascinated by the marginal phase of these rituals where other ways of being in the world were experienced.<sup>iii</sup> Turner says: 'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. ... [L]iminality is frequently likened to death'.<sup>iv</sup> Turner's description of liminality is very similar to Starhawk's description of sacred space. In discussing the nature of this sacred ritual space, called a 'circle' in her tradition, Starhawk writes: 'The circle exists on the boundaries of ordinary space and time: it is "between the worlds" of seen and unseen, of flashlight and starlight consciousness, a space in which alternate realities meet, in which the past and the future are open to us'.<sup>v</sup>

Ritual is designed to move us into a wider realm of mystery, different but not intrinsically distinct from the mystery encountered in everyday life. Ritual happens within sacred space. However, it is important that this ritual space not be seen as more sacred than any other space on this earth. To do so would be to accept the destructive binary construction of Eliade who designated some places as sacred and others as profane.<sup>vi</sup> An earth-sensitive spirituality views all the earth as manifesting the Sacred and, therefore, the space created for ritual 'is ultimately no more intrinsically sacred than anywhere else on earth, yet for the purposes and duration of the ritual [the participants] impute the ritual space with a special quality of sacredness and treat it with meticulous care. They give it power, and are in turn empowered'.<sup>vii</sup>

Ritual aids us to stay in this designated sacred space for a time and to experience other, and sometimes deeper, aspects of the Sacred, the numinous, the mystery, that can break through in these moments 'between the worlds'. Rituals are patterned actions that



conduct us through such exchanges. They tap into the physical and the tangible as well as into the intangible and the unconscious. This may be an awesome experience, gifting us with insights, wisdom, truth and enchantment. One purpose of ritual is to place safeguards around this type of numinous experience so as to channel, or contain, the mystery that is being released. Then ritual carefully leads us out of this space back into the everyday world, where the insights and intuitions gained through this experience deepen our oneness with the web of life. The emotional energy generated by rituals can be channeled into action; in the case of rituals honouring the Sacred in the web of life, this can lead participants to act positively on behalf of the earth and all life, and to live in ways that are conscious of the mystery of the Sacred in the web of life.



*From Darkness to Dawn Ritual*

Some of the formal rituals of an earth-sensitive spirituality include those that honour the Sacred as it is manifested at summer and winter solstice; at autumn and spring equinox; in the phases of the moon; in the daily cycle of dawn, daylight, dusk and darkness; in the story of the cosmos; in the life cycle of plants and animals; in the sacredness of particular places, and so

on. Christianity has a long tradition of rituals aligned to the daily cycle; the formal prayers of Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline ritually mark the hours of the day and night.

Rituals may be celebrated in a group setting, or individually. Group rituals connect and mediate group structure and beliefs and create symbols of group membership. Individual rituals allow the individual to express and deepen beliefs, and to connect more fully to the all-encompassing web of life.

Symbols are the tools of ritual, the concrete, but non-rational objects around, and through which, rituals are structured and expressed. 'They constitute a conceptual language which is capable of translating humans and human life-events into cosmological terms.' They are the tangible elements of ritual through which the myth is expressed. In ritual, according to Starhawk, we 'suspend disbelief' so that the critical and analytical Talking Self makes way for the 'Younger Self ... [who] responds best to actions, symbols, tangibles – so this change in consciousness is acted out, using a rich array of tools and symbols.' Individuals and groups who ritualize the Sacred within the web of life use a variety of symbols, many drawn from the natural environment: water, fire, earth, feathers, seeds, leaves, salt, flowers, fruit, crystals, as well as oils, candles and incense. Coloured cloths, music and dance all contribute to the creation of an ambience of sacred space.

Other processes also lead the participant into experiences of sacred space, of connection with the web of life, and the Sacred in this web. These include: the Cosmic Walk, in which participants walk forward or backward in time, between the present moment and the time of the origin of the universe, and reflect on the oneness of humans with universe, earth, and its beings; and the Council of All Beings, where participants put aside their human identity and speak on behalf of another member of the web of life. Many of these processes come from deep ecology and the work of John Seed and Joanna Macey, and from the ecopsychology of Theodore Roszak.

Holistic living is an ever-present, ongoing way of honouring the Sacred in the web of life. We express reverence for the Sacred by living fully,

encompassing and entering into all aspects of life: loving, laughing, accepting, sharing, dreaming, grieving, growing, changing. We live wholly, celebrating our place in the web of life, rooted in the soil of the place on which we walk, breathing with the trees, changing with the rising and setting sun, cycling with the moon, living passionately, vibrantly, embracing our bodiliness, our oneness with the cosmos. We live a life of holiness, open to the Sacred in the web of life of which we are a part.

## Endnotes

- (i) Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* San Francisco: Harper, 1989, 22.
- (ii) Chris Harris, *Creating Relevant Rituals: Celebrations for Religious Education* Newtown: E.J. Dwyer, 1992, 68, n.4.
- (iii) Ibid., 68, n.2,3.
- (iv) Kathryn Rountree, "Magic Places: The Symbolic Construction of Sacred Space in Contemporary Goddess Rituals," in *Spirit of Place: Source of the Sacred?*, ed. Michael Griffith and James Tulip, Australian International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference Proceedings, Sydney: Centre for Studies in Religion, Literature and the Arts, 1998, 290.
- (v) Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 72.
- (vi) Rountree, *Magic Places*, 286.
- (vii) Ibid., 292.
- (viii) Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*, ed. Paul DiMaggio, et al., Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.
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- (x) Starhawk, *Spiral Dance*, 72.
- (xi) John Seed et al., eds., *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988. Theodore Roszak, *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology* Kimball: Phanes Press, 1995.

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Winter Ritual

## Principle 5: Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life

Principle five focuses on the ethical attitudes and behaviours that spring from a belief in the intrinsic value of all species, and from deep bonding with the earth. These attitudes and actions are the culmination of the spiritual dynamic established in the first four principles; if one has listened to the wisdom of the earth and developed a deep relationship with it, acknowledged the Sacred in the interdependent web of life and honoured it, then one must act in a certain way. A particular mythos or view of the cosmos, like that developed in the first four principles, demands a particular ethos – specific attitudes and behaviours towards the cosmos. If the new cosmology embraces the sacredness and interconnectedness of all beings in the universe, then a particular spiritual/ethical orientation towards it will follow.

The spiritual/ethical orientation posited by *Earth Link* entails living in right relationships with the interdependent web of life. These 'relationships' are the links or the bonds between the elements of the web of life. This paper will explore the nature of these relationships for them to be ethically correct or 'right'. The criteria for 'rightness' are based on a belief that each element in the web of life is dependent on every other and that, together, they form a web of interdependence.

A number of contemporary social, philosophical and religious movements have explored the parameters of right relationships with the earth, attempting to give adherents a comprehensive foundation for acting out of an ecological ethic in their spiritual, political or social action. These provide key insights on which to build.

For ecofeminists, the liberation of the earth and the liberation of women are intimately linked. From the first clarion call of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,<sup>i</sup> women have been prominent in the modern ecology movement, so much so that the commonly

used term 'ecofeminism'<sup>ii</sup> highlights the reciprocal link between the issues and concerns of the environment and those of women. Charlene Spretnak identifies three paths by which women have entered ecofeminism, and the relationships which follow from each of these paths: through the study of political theory and history where radical/cultural feminists began linking the domination of women and the domination of nature; through women's discovery of, and exposure to, nature-based religion which honours women, nature and the body; through involvement in environmentalism, both at a theoretical and a political action level.<sup>iii</sup>

Deep ecology takes interaction with nature far beyond resource management, preservation of the forests or ethical treatment of non-humans. It 'seeks to overturn the major Western categories that are apparently responsible for humanity's destruction of the biosphere: anthropocentrism, dualism, atomism, hierarchicalism, rigid autonomy, and abstract rationalism.'<sup>iv</sup> Above all, it seeks to destroy humanity's preoccupation with holding centre stage in the universe and attempts to open humanity to the belief that humankind is but one species, no more and no less, within the web of life. The deep ecologist seeks an extension of the sense of self, so much so that this transpersonal self encompasses the biosphere as a whole.

For sacred earth traditions, including Wicca, Shamanism, Native American and Celtic spiritualities, the principle underlying right relationships to the earth is that the earth is the body of the deity. Earth-belief and earth-ritual in these traditions is not far removed from earth-ethic. Some would see neo-Paganism as the spiritual arm of the ecological movement. Being at home on the earth, which is understood

as the source of the Sacred, Pagans have a life-affirming, nature-celebrating spiritual tradition that is much needed in today's ecologically





threatened environment. Indigenous and Pagan theology are part of indigenous and Pagan ecology.

Christian environmental theologians and activists are also reflecting upon the spiritual dimension of right relationships to the earth. Thomas Berry,<sup>v</sup> Diarmuid Ó Murchu,<sup>vi</sup> Sallie McFague<sup>vi</sup> and Rosemary Radford Ruether<sup>viii</sup> are all open to the challenge of envisioning a new sacred cosmology more in harmony with the dawning ecological age. Sean McDonagh contributes to the debate by strongly connecting social justice issues with ecology, and linking the misuse of the environment to the exploitation of third world peoples.<sup>ix</sup> In a similar way, Leonardo Boff links the cry of the earth to the cry of the poor.<sup>x</sup> Norman Habel, in his work on the Earth Bible project, calls for a radical reassessment of traditional scriptural texts. In exploring right relationships, his ecojustice principles centre on the earth and its intrinsic worth, interconnectedness, voice and resistance, as well as on the need for a new ecological ethic.<sup>xi</sup>

In developing its understanding of right relationships within the interdependent web of life, *Earth Link* builds upon the work of these scholars. The first indicator of relationship 'rightness' is that right

relationships are based on the belief that 'the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects'.<sup>xii</sup> These are 'subject-subjects' relationships. They require that everything we know is to be viewed not in a subject-object way, where the knower alone is alive and active, but in a subject-subject way, where both the knower and the known are interacting actively and reciprocally. This type of outlook draws on the I-Thou model of relationship explored by Martin Buber. Sallie McFague believes that 'if we understand ourselves to be in touch with others ... we will have taken an important step towards an ecological model of being, a model that says that we exist only in interrelationship with

other subjects'.<sup>xiii</sup> This model can help humans to see what relationship and reconciliation can look like between themselves and all others within the interdependent web of life.

Secondly, the relationship is a participatory one, flowing from an acute sense of oneness within the web, and a sense of respect for the whole earth community. 'The basis of ethics is the feeling of the deep connection to all people and all beings within the web of life.'<sup>xiv</sup> There is a heightened awareness of a strong yet delicate inter-relation of all people and beings, intercommunion of living and non-living components - an acute sense of being embodied in this interconnected planet earth.

Thirdly, the relationship is life-centred not human centred. It involves a shift from an anthropomorphic to an organic perspective. According to Berry, 'the ecological imperative [is not] derivative from human ethics. Rather, our human ethics are derivative from the ecological imperative'.<sup>xv</sup> Humans 'need new

ethical principles which recognise the absolute evils of biocide, the killing of life systems themselves, and geocide, the killing of the planet'.<sup>xvi</sup>

Fourthly, the relationship is one of partnership and not one

of domination. According to Habel, it is a relationship of mutual custodianship: 'Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than over, Earth to sustain its balance and a diverse Earth community'.<sup>xvii</sup>

Judged by these criteria, the rightness of many of the relationships to the earth that are prevalent in the scientific-technological, industrial-commercial complexes of today's world could be seriously questioned. Many of these relationships are core obsessions, resulting from the consumerist exploitive ideology of an inherited patriarchal culture: domination and control over the environment;



*Mud Maid in the Lost Gardens of Heligan*  
by Sue and Peter Hill

a mechanistic conception of the earth and nature; an anthropocentric, instrumental exploitation of the earth's resources; and a centralised, hierarchical attitude to earth's species.

When assessed according to these criteria of relationship 'rightness', the anthropocentric orientation of much of the Judaeo-Christian tradition becomes quite clear. In tracking the origin of the long-standing approach of Christianity to the earth, Wendy Chew writes: '[O]ur old cosmology grew out of a traditional interpretation of the Genesis story, and out of the Greek humanist worldview (the human is the measure of all things) that has been strongly welded on to the Judaeo-Christian tradition.'<sup>xviii</sup> The predominant attitude of the Hebrew Scriptures to nature is summed up by John Austin Baker in six points: the earth belongs to God; humankind has authority over nature; the earth is at the disposal of humankind; the world is beyond human comprehension; nature reflects something of the mystery of God; nature will only reach completion in the end time.<sup>xix</sup> The biblical concept of stewardship of the earth, where the human has responsibility to care for, nurture and cultivate the earth, still has the human as central.

Right relationships lead to right attitudes and behaviours. In assessing attitudes and behaviours for 'rightness', a hermeneutics of suspicion could be usefully employed, to question 'the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models, and unarticulated interests'.<sup>xx</sup> Whose voice is heard? Whose interest has priority? Whose values are dominant?

This analysis could reveal the unsuspected engrained anthropomorphism present in many of the positions in the current discourse. In exploring the concept of sustainable living, one must ask which species is, or are, being sustained. The popular Pagan imperative to

'[t]hink about the consequences of your action for seven generations'<sup>xxi</sup> appears positive, but again one must ask whose posterity is being assured a future? Furthermore, the suggestion that '[t]he human emerges within the life systems of Earth as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in a special mode of conscious self-awareness'<sup>xxii</sup> appears to imply that no other species possesses this consciousness. These are but a few obvious examples; a hermeneutics of suspicion approach could reveal many more anomalies.

**The first indicator of relationship 'rightness' is that right relationships are based on the belief that 'the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects'.<sup>xi</sup>**

What, then, are more appropriate attitudes, behaviours and ways of living in right relationships with the interdependent web of life? Eugene Bianchi's *Ten Commandments of Ecological Spirituality*<sup>xxiii</sup> give some guidance:

A main task of humans is to assist in the interconnection of living and non-living components of the earth community. This involves moving from an exclusively anthropocentric to an organic perspective, one that appreciates the intrinsic not just the instrumental value of nonhuman reality.

The richness and diversity of all life forms must be preserved in a way that upholds ecojustice; the expansion of human population and its interference in nature is excessive.

People must rethink their consumer habits and move towards styles of simpler living to preserve the earth and establish more enhancing forms of community life.

Humans need to re-learn ways of communicating with nature via dialogue and not coercion, thus recovering their true relationship with the life of earth.



Humans must learn to relate to the animal world in ways that lessen cruelty and violence, while enhancing interspecies relationships with animals that benefit the whole of the biotic community.

Living in right relationships with the interdependent web of life entails attitudinal and behavioural change, and the willingness to work towards embedding these values in public policy and practice. This is quite a challenge, given the dominant socio-economic paradigm and its emphasis on growth at any cost.

## Endnotes

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- (xiii) McFague, *Super, Natural*, 95.
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- (xv) Berry, *Great Work*, 105.
- (xvi) Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 100.
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- (xix) John Austin Baker, "Biblical Views of Nature," in *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, ed. Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. Mc Daniel, New York: Orbis, 1990, 9-26.
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## Notes

**Earth Link**  
**A collaborative project of the Sisters of Mercy**

*Earth Link envisions a future where there  
is a culture of respect, reverence and care  
for the whole earth community.*



**From the South**

Travel 12 km from Dayboro on Mt Mee Road, turn right into Robinson Road South for 1.04 km.

**From the North**

Travel 24 km from D' Aguilar on Mt Mee Road, turn left into Robinson Road South for 1.04 km.

**UBD Map 45, Ref H17**

A regular train service operates between Brisbane and Petrie. Brisbane Bus Lines (3354 3633) operates a limited bus service between Dayboro and Petrie from Monday to Friday. Guests can be met at either Dayboro or Petrie.

Four Winds  
104 Robinson Rd Sth  
Ocean View Q 4521  
Phone: 07 3425 3138  
E-mail: [earthlink@mercy.org.au](mailto:earthlink@mercy.org.au)  
Web site: [www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au)



*Blackbutt: Eucalyptus Pilularis*



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## THE ROLE OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ECO-CENTRIC CULTURE

PHILIP COSTIGAN WITH PATRICIA ROSE AND  
MARY TINNEY

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### Abstract

*A spirituality which envisions the Sacred as intimately embodied in the earth and the cosmos brings into force powerful emotions of reverence for all life and commitment to justice for the earth. A deep bonding with nature, and recognition that humankind is only one element in the whole interdependent web of life, underpins this type of spirituality. Ecospirituality can offer a solid ideological and theological base for the current environmental movement. Because it taps into deep-rooted motivations and commitments it has the power to challenge radically, and change fundamentally, the destructive culture that exploits the earth, and transform it into a culture that is life-enhancing and eco-centric. The ecospirituality put forward by Earth Link encompasses a comprehensive set of experiences, beliefs, rituals and actions, and is one attempt to formulate a spiritual framework for living in ways that are more ecologically sensitive.*

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the face of the threat of the ecological destruction of the planet, humans are challenged to undertake a major 'work' that involves the very transformation of their society. The future of the planet requires a move from an industrial age where the collective forces of science, technology, industry, economics and religion contribute to the exploitation and destruction of the environment, to an ecological age where humanity assumes a presence on earth that is affirming for both humanity and the planet. Thomas Berry (1999, 1) believes that this transition is the 'Great Work' of our age, involving a move 'from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.' Joanna Macy (1998, 58) calls this the 'Work that Reconnects' which helps people 'uncover and experience their innate connections with each other and with the systematic, self-healing powers in the web of life, so that they may be enlivened and motivated to play their part in creating a sustainable civilization'.

This work of transition requires a transformation of the accepted values of the society: a cultural change. These contemporary values, which centre on the dominance of humankind and its right to exploit all of nature, are so engrained they seem to be fundamental and unchangeable. These values, however, must change and move to ones that underpin a more meaningful universe and a more functional cosmology than the consumerist exploitative ideology of the inherited patriarchal culture.

There are many forces within a society that can bring about cultural change. Economics and politics are major ones. However, it could be argued that one of the most powerful forces for cultural and values change is spirituality. Spirituality focuses on humanity's aspirations

for the good and the true - what is of value - and can tap into strong emotions and motivations that can lead to transformation both in the individual and in the society.

A spiritual encounter often begins with an overpowering experience of ecstasy, awe, peacefulness or cosmic gratitude. For many environmentalists, similar life-changing experiences are found in their immersion in nature. Thus the environmentalist may be predisposed to be attracted to an eco-spiritual stance. The physicist Fritjof Capra (in Porritt 2005, 300) claims that '[u]ltimately, deep ecological awareness is spiritual or religious awareness' believing 'that ecological awareness is spiritual in its deepest sense'. Ecospirituality has the potential to bring together spirituality's capacity for reverence and wonder with ecology's capacity to explore and describe the reality of nature. The environmental theorist and activist John Seed (1995, 35) sees the connection in this way: 'Deep ecology is a philosophy, an ideology, a gateway to the transpersonal and an impetus to action'. The eco-theologian John Cobb (1995, 240) 'stresses the interdependent and unified character of the ecosystem as a whole. ... To this whole, a strong sense of sacredness attaches itself: to its violation, a strong sense of evil'. What is needed today is an attitude to the earth that is both ecologically sound and humble and reverential.

The deep emotions and commitment aroused by spirituality rarely remain at the theoretical, ideological level, but frequently find expression in political and ethical action which can be a catalyst for the transformation of a society's values. Roger Gottlieb (1996, 524), commenting on this outcome of an effective ecological spirituality, states: 'Spiritually, this means that basic values such as life and death, identifying with other life forms, a sense of connection to and participation in one's place,

may begin to inform not just spiritual reflection and mystical experience, but our prophetic political demands'. Further, if a new cosmology embraces the sacredness and interconnectedness of all beings in the universe, it will necessitate the adoption of a new ethic. The fundamental ethic, the ecological imperative for action on behalf of the earth that is at the heart of ecospirituality, flows from a heightened awareness of the strong yet delicate inter-relation of all people and beings: an acute sense of being embodied in this interconnected planet earth (Christ 1997, xv).

Ecospirituality can offer a positive worldview. It can present a comprehensive vision which 'is not simply about what is wrong but about what can be right, not just about 'living with less', but about living an authentic and ultimately much more satisfying form of life' (Gottlieb 2006, 13). The *Earth Link* spirituality team has developed an ecospirituality that springs from the transformative experience of deep bonding with the earth. This spirituality provides a spiritual ecological framework for living which, in turn, leads to the transformation of values and behaviours.

*Earth Link's* spirituality begins with experience - the experience of listening to the wisdom of the earth. Humankind is called to open itself humbly to the age-old wisdom of the earth - its elements, plants and animals, seasons and changes. Humans must learn to play a secondary role and consider themselves not primarily the active agents in this process. They are to be receptors, open to have wisdom and insight revealed to them.

Jenny Crawford (2003, 211) believes that 'ultimately the solution to the environmental crisis can only be found by seeking soul'. This soul is especially captured through attention/mindfulness/awareness/wonder. 'It is receptivity, it is a kind of negative, or deconstructive effort that holds us in openness, so that the object of our attention might reveal itself' (Crawford 2003, 216). Later (217) she states: 'I think that many of the approaches to nature that have given rise to environmentalism have their roots in the 'wonder' and 'love' that an attentive meeting with nature generates'. A contemplative stance is essential to an *Earth Link* spirituality and is common to the cosmic contemplative traditions of many of the world's religions. For example, Christianity has the legacy of the nature mysticism of its medieval contemplatives as an inspiration: Hildegard of Bingen, the twelfth century German Christian mystic, saw the greening of the trees, the grasses and the lush earth as creative expressions of the sacred greening of the divine spirit (Fox 1985, 30-33). Similarly, Buddhism, with its contemplative approach to the natural world, has

wide appeal for environmentalists. The Buddhist Joan Halifax says: 'Silence is the context where communion and communication with the world is born. This silence has a voice. From it issues [sic] the many songs of Earth'

(1992, 153). Aboriginal Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr, coming from the Indigenous Australian spiritual tradition, explores the concept/practice of *Dadirri*. She defines it as '[i]nner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness' (Stockton 1995, 179). It places one in an attitude of receptiveness to nature. Ungunmerr gives a simple yet profound exposition of her contemplative approach to listening to, and awareness of, the land.

Central, also, to the spirituality of

*Earth Link* is the belief that bonding with earth is best done in a particular place, or places, that are significant, or sacred, for the person. The bonding is not only an attentive listening but a holistic physical, emotional and sensory experience as one enters into an intimate relationship with a particular part of the earth. The relationship will develop and deepen in a very personal way as a person bonds with earth; as one specific human bonds with one particular part of the earth, with one's own special place.

*Earth Link's* spirituality is real, immediate and tangible; a spirituality in which the human body is called to be in dynamic contact with the earth, 'profoundly grounded in the realities of the earth and the body' (Tacey 1997, 245). It is a spirituality which invites us to emulate John Seed (1992, 279) for whom the 'closest thing to meditation for me now is to lie down in the forest when it's dry, cover myself in leaves, and imagine an umbilical cord reaching down into the earth.' This is not an abstract spirituality that can be practiced from afar in a universal, esoteric, transcendent way; it is a very specific physical spirituality, an interaction between body and earth. In the ecospirituality of *Earth Link* 'our particular place' is, of necessity, an actual geographical location where we can interact, in a physical way, on a regular basis, with the natural environment.

The spiritual experiences gained through a deep bonding with the earth are not isolated happenings devoid of any wider spiritual context. They necessarily give rise to strong beliefs about the spiritual cosmology that underpins the experiences. Reflection on the transformative experience of deep bonding with earth has led *Earth Link* to the belief that this is an experience of the Sacred, and that earth and cosmos constitute a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery. Being open and attentive to the earth, and grounded in our own bodies and place, we create a readiness to encounter the Sacred in the whole interdependent web of life. As we reflect

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on our experience, we affirm our belief that the cosmos and earth both embody, and are meeting points for this encounter with, the Sacred.

Religious systems need revision and transformation in order to rearticulate the relationships between the Sacred, the earth and the human, between religion and spirituality, and between religion and science. Such a process involves 'the retrieval of scripture and commentaries, symbols and myths, rituals and prayers ... and the reevaluation of particular beliefs and practices' (Tucker 2004, 36). Foundational to this revisionary process is the critique of a human-centred or anthropocentric world view and theology, and the development of an ecocentric or life-centred world view and theology, built on the recognition of the intrinsic value of earth and cosmos, and their value because they embody the Sacred. The nature of the Sacred and its relationship with universe and earth is the subject of much recent theological writing. The scientific evidence from cosmology and evolutionary biology challenges theological assumptions about the nature of the Sacred and its relationship to the earth. If one starts from the premise that the cosmos is unfolding according to principles inherent within it, (autopoiesis), then the imaging of the Sacred moves from being omniscient, omnipotent, and transcendent to one that envisions the Sacred as embodied in life, nature, earth and the cosmos.

Humans respond to the Mystery that is 'the Sacred in the web of life' in a variety of non-rational ways: with emotions such as reverence, humility, awe and wonder; and with a desire for closer physical and spiritual connection for, as Starhawk (1989, 26) says, '[T]he mysteries of the absolute can never be explained – only felt and intuited'. Structured, scientific language expresses this mystery in a limited and imperfect form. The depth and profundity of the mystery of the Sacred in the web of life can only be fully expressed through myth, which seeks to capture in imagination, poetry and story this mystery that is beyond the rational mind.

Humans concretise and express their response to this myth through rituals, symbols and symbolic processes, and through holistic living, which provide platforms for honouring the Sacred. To honour is to show deep respect, to express high esteem; it is a reverential action which conveys the emotional and physical commitment of the one who honours and acknowledges the integrity of that which is honoured; in this case, the Sacred in the web of life.

Ritual is a conscious, structured, formal expression of this honour. It aids us to stay in a designated sacred

space for a time and to experience other, and sometimes deeper, aspects of the Sacred, the numinous, the mystery, that can break through in these moments 'between the worlds' (Rountree 1998, 292). Some of the formal rituals of an earth-sensitive spirituality include those that honour the Sacred as it is manifested at summer and winter solstice; at autumn and spring equinox; in the phases of the moon; in the daily cycle of dawn, daylight, dusk and darkness; in the story of the cosmos; in the life cycle of plants and animals; in the sacredness of particular places, and so on.

As much as ecospirituality is concerned with experience, place, belief and ritual it is also about action. The ethical imperative that springs from the experience of, and belief in, an interdependent web of life, within which the Sacred is present, calls for right action. Humans must live in right relations with all, honour the intrinsic value of all species, and work for justice for the earth. An effective spirituality leads to the demand for change in social, economic and political values.

*Earth Link* puts forward a number of indicators by which the 'rightness' of relationships may be gauged. The first indicator is that right relationships are based on the belief that 'the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects' (Berry and Clark 1995, 96). These are 'subject-subjects' relationships. They require that everything we know is to be viewed not in a subject-object way, where the knower alone is alive and active, but in a subject-subject way, where both the knower and the known are interacting actively and reciprocally. This type of outlook draws on the I-Thou model of relationship explored by Martin Buber. Sallie McFague (1997, 95) believes that 'if we understand ourselves to be in touch with others ... we will have taken an important step towards an ecological model of being, a model that says that we exist only in interrelationship with other subjects'.

Secondly, relationships are participatory, flowing from an acute sense of oneness within the web, and a sense of respect for the whole earth community. 'The basis of ethics is the feeling of the deep connection to all people and all beings within the web of life' (Christ 1997, xv). There is a heightened awareness of a strong yet delicate inter-relation of all people and beings, intercommunion of living and non-living components - an acute sense of being embodied in this interconnected planet earth.

Thirdly, relationships are life-centred not human centred. They involve a shift from an anthropomorphic to an organic perspective. According to Berry (1995, 105), 'the ecological imperative [is not] derivative from human ethics. Rather, our human ethics are derivative

**Being open and attentive to the earth, and grounded in our own bodies and place, we create a readiness to encounter the Sacred in the whole interdependent web of life.**



from the ecological imperative'. Humans 'need new ethical principles which recognise the absolute evils of biocide, the killing of life systems themselves, and geocide, the killing of the planet' (Berry and Clark, 1995, 100).

Fourthly, relationships are focused on partnership and not on domination. According to Habel (2000, 126), they are relationships of mutual custodianship: 'Earth is a balanced and diverse domain where responsible custodians can function as partners with, rather than over, Earth to sustain its balance and a diverse Earth community'.

The spirituality of *Earth Link* is one attempt to frame a new spiritual cosmology for the hoped-for coming ecological age. This cosmology encompasses a set of experiences, beliefs, rituals and action that has as its premise the sacredness and interconnectedness of all beings in the cosmos. Commitment to this framework for spiritual ecological living is a powerful instrument that can result in personal transformation. If it, or a similar ecospirituality, is adopted by a growing number of people it has the potential to lead to an ecological transformation in contemporary culture and values and contribute significantly to halting society's slide into ecological destruction. It is a significant tool in accomplishing 'The Great Work' of transition that still needs to be done.

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Philip Costigan, Patricia Rose and Mary Tinney are members of the spirituality team of *Earth Link*, a community environment centre located at Ocean View in south east Queensland. *Earth Link* encourages deep bonding with earth, and envisions a future where there is respect, reverence and care for earth. It offers educative and reflective programs, and it models processes for sustainable living.



Earth Link – Encouraging deep bonding with earth

## **REPORT**

**2005-2007**

*Four Winds, 104 Robinson Road South, OCEAN VIEW. Q 4521*  
Ph/Fax 07 3425 3138; Email: [earthlink@mercy.org.au](mailto:earthlink@mercy.org.au)  
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*July, 2007*

This report covers the period, 2005-2007, the second three-year period of the *Earth Link* project at *Four Winds* in Ocean View. The intensification of environmental crises such as drought, climate change and peak oil are demanding more sustainable living, and a new mindset towards the environment. These same issues dominate the current political agenda. We believe that a project like *Earth Link*, with its focus on education and spirituality, has a vital role to play in facilitating “deep bonding with earth” as the basis of living with earth in ways that are mutually beneficial. This is how some involved with the project see its value:

*Earth Link* is a focus for all the values of earth connectedness

The project provides a contact point for people who want to develop the connection between spirituality and ecology

*Earth Link* provides education on the environment which launches into spirituality and gives motivation for sustainability

*Earth Link* helps people to connect up with beauty and valuing the environment, and this leads to spirituality and better practice

A key development during this period has been the articulation and promulgation of our approach to ecospirituality. This reflection has enabled us to sharpen our focus in a way that encompasses our two main activities - education and spirituality.

### **Rationale**

Many people are seeking to deepen their connections with nature and the cosmos, to name their experience of the Sacred, to explore the implications for their own religious and spiritual traditions, and to act more responsibly to redress the degraded state of the earth. *Earth Link* provides one response to this search.

### **Vision**

We envision a future where there is respect, reverence and care for earth.

### **Mission**

*Earth Link* encourages deep bonding with earth.

### ***Earth Link* invites you to:**

Listen to the wisdom of earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude.  
Deepen your relationship with the cosmos/earth, beginning with your own particular place.

Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life.

Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living.

Live in right relationships with the interdependent web of life.

In order to work towards our vision and mission, we sharpened our goals in 2007 to these three:

**Goal 1: To encourage respect and reverence for Earth**

**Goal 2: To care for earth sustainably**

**Goal 3: To manage *Earth Link* responsibly.**

These then formed the basis of our revised Strategic Plan for 2007. (See Appendix 1)

What follows are some highlights from the activities of the period under review, grouped around these three goals, followed by some description and some evaluation.

| <b>Goal 1: To encourage respect and reverence for earth</b> |   |
|---|---|
| We  | Offered a comprehensive calendar of events .  |
|   | Finalised the development of a four-unit educational program, now mostly available on CD Rom. Offered <i>Qld the Land and the Spirit - Fraser Island</i> in 2007.   |
|   | Responded to multiple invitations for workshops, retreats and rituals with teachers, psychologists, members of the community, academics, U3A, year 12 students, women at Womenspace, academics, socially disadvantaged community groups, and at Conferences such as Catholic Climate Change, Earth Charter (Toowoomba), ISMA Finance, Mercy newer members, Expressions of the Numinous. |
|   | Built up lending library.   |
|   | Published articles in journals such as <i>Earth Song</i> , <i>Queensland Conservation Council</i> , <i>Social Alternatives</i> .  |
|   | Presented lectures such as 'Gaia, Living Earth', 'Compassion for Earth', 'Earth Charter Principles'.  |
|   | Appointed a Spirituality Team (.2 FTE), initially with CLRIQ and Presentation funding.  |
|   | Produced and presented essays and an audio-visual meditation on Principles.   |
|   | Facilitated <i>Qld the Land and the Spirit</i> excursion to Fraser Island.  |
|   | Encouraged the development of a tertiary unit on Ecology and Spirituality by Broken Bay Institute, Sydney.  |
|   | Offered individualised sabbatical programmes.   |
|   | Developed resources for individual use.   |
|   | Provided accommodation in a rural, bush setting.  |

As mentioned above, the most significant development in this period of the *Earth Link* project has been in the area of ecospirituality. We began by deepening our understanding of ecospirituality through a series of community discussions, and then more intensive research around the principles developed in the community process. The appointment of a Spirituality Team of Philip Costigan, Patricia Rose and Mary Tinney has enabled this more intensive work to happen at a professional level.

The principles are communicated in a series of essays and an audio-visual meditation, are forming the basis of the workshop/retreats days currently being offered during 2007, and will form the basis of the 5 day intensive/retreat being offered in September. This approach to ecospirituality also influences the content and design of retreats/workshops/presentations that we initiate, such as *Women/Men and Earth Retreat* days, and those that are prepared in response to invitations from a wide range of groups, including pastoral care workers, teachers, psychologists, academics, and members of religious congregations. We have had articles published in a range of journals from community to refereed.

Much of the work developed in the educational programme has been carried forward into this newer framework. The units on cosmology and place from that earlier programme are available on CD Rom in Distance Education mode. We had an immediate response to the invitation to the Fraser Island excursion, and 11 of us were carefully guided by Peter and Alison Rickert and Bill Henderson.

The total number of people who have been exposed to the programmes offered by *Earth Link* is steadily increasing, as can be seen from these figures from the 5 years in which *Earth Link* has been providing a range of offerings.

| 2003       | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 to end of June. |
|------------|------|------|------|----------------------|
| 400 people | 300  | 600  | 971  | 422                  |

The response to specific retreats/workshops that we offer varies greatly. There is a key group who participated in the formal programmes earlier in the Education programme, and now in the Ecospirituality programme. There is no substitute for an extended exposure to key ideas, practices, processes and rituals if one wants to really think through the issues and engage in the conversion process, or attitude change, that we suggest is necessary if we want to move to a world where there is “respect, reverence and care for earth”. The attendance at our face-to-face sessions is often small, while others have used our education materials in small groups at a distance, eg Coff’s Harbour and Perth. The reading-reflection group continues to work through some challenging and some light-hearted material, and the screening of “Powers of the Universe” in both 2005 and 2006 was very well received. The people who avail of personalized sabbatical programmes are in an optimal position to benefit from the well-thought-out and well-presented programmes that we offer.

Invitations from existing groups to conduct workshops and presentations are regular and effective as an introduction to ecospirituality, cosmology, and the formation of an ecological identity. Our offerings around sustainable living practices have had limited response; perhaps people are reluctant to have an outsider assist them to cast a critical eye over their actual living or working spaces. There is a large amount of material about sustainable living available from government agencies at every level, but this is much more effectively utilized if a group, community or family decides together to review their sustainability. There are some teacher groups who avail of programmes designed to meet their needs, and which also have an ecological perspective. The range of invitations is broadening as groups such as psychologists, pastoral care workers, and religious life formators and newer members are including ecospirituality in their workshop/retreat style offerings.

We have reached a wider audience through journal articles in environmental, philosophical and earth-spirituality magazines. The *Earth Healing Fair* attracted a large group of people, many of whom were from the local area. The annual *Way of the Cross*, with its focus on current social and environmental issues in the context of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus continues to be well supported, both by people from the local geographical area and beyond.

We are constantly searching for a variety of approaches.

The accommodation, especially at *Ruah*, is used by a range of people and we have some resources available for their use while relaxing and enjoying the natural environment. The usage is as follows.

| 2003       | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 (to end June) |
|------------|------|------|------|--------------------|
| 200 nights | 200  | 315  | 147  | 98                 |

It is evident from these figures that there is no fixed pattern around the use of the accommodation at *Four Winds*. In 2005 and 2007 individuals have taken sabbatical time here for a month or more, and this trend looks set to continue. We don’t have a situation where the same people come multiple times for short stays. They might come a few times, but most of the people who come are here for the first time. So our existence and the availability of accommodation is known quite widely. We raffled a stay in the cottage during the Dayboro Day celebrations, so that will bring a few new couples to the site.

| Goal 2: To care for Earth Sustainably |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| We                                    | Promoted and modeled sustainable living at Four Winds e.g. composting toilet, wise use of water, recycling, permaculture.  |
|                                       | Conducted <i>Earth Healing Fair</i> and are planning <i>Earth and the Arts Workshop</i> at Four Winds to promote local environmental awareness and best practice.  |
|                                       | Offered Water Wise workshops, and Sustainability Audits  |
|                                       | Managed property to enhance biodiversity. eg circa \$300,000 grant money for rehabilitation and weed management .  |
|                                       | Are raising funds to install solar hot water system for main house   |
|                                       | Nurtured and valued <i>Four Winds</i> as a sacred space through offering seasonal reflective-identification workshops, hosting Land for Wildlife field days, leading the Cosmic Walk and the Way of the Cross rituals, upgrading of trails, developing self-directing walking guide for trails |
|                                       | Collaborated with other agencies in their environmental campaigns e.g. Social Action Office (SAO), Mercy Institute Ecojustice Group, Wilderness Society, Friends of Earth, Qld Conservation Council, Australian Conservation Foundation  |

In the course of discerning the future of the project during this year, the Core Group came to a strong conviction that the deepening of Ecospirituality requires access to some wilderness places as well as cultivated ones. The property, *Four Winds*, provides safe access to such and, with funding from Pine Rivers Shire Council, we have been able to improve the tracks and develop a resource for meditative walking on the trails. We also offer our programmes at other venues, usually in Brisbane. We do this especially if they are newer programmes and we want to make them accessible to people from a range of geographical locations. It is to *Four Winds*, however, that interstate and overseas visitors come to find out about the *Earth Link* project, and to experience our connectedness with earth, the permaculture garden and the Cosmic Walk and other ritual activities.

We have been fortunate to gain Envirofunding for assisted rehabilitation of the riparian corridor. As there is native seed able to regenerate under improved conditions, the main task is weed management which is being done to our satisfaction by the Pine Rivers Catchment Association. A Property Group held a few meetings about future uses of the property, that might generate enough money to support the project. The property was assessed for its potential for sustainable harvesting of timber, but the quantities of suitable timber would not justify the expense of binging in harvesting equipment.

In 2006, we held an *Earth Healing Fair* which was our largest event, inviting the wider community to consider the connections between spirituality, cosmology, permaculture, weed management, developing respect and reverence for water, and care for our bodies as part of the earth community. It was a big undertaking but was well attended by people in the local area and beyond. One person noted in feedback that her most positive experience of *Earth Link* was “to see the enormous variety of people who were attracted to that event, and to continue networking with some of them.” The *Earth and the Arts* festival scheduled for October is intended to draw on the creative arts in order to promote respect, reverence and care for earth.

To date, the fund raising efforts for the Solar Hot Water system have brought in about \$3,000 towards the target of \$5,000, so we are planning for its purchase and installation.



Marilyn Cuttler continues to tend the vegetable garden and attend to the many daily requirements of the property. Since Marilyn went away, Margaret Gilmore began as a volunteer.

Action for Justice for Earth is stepping up in this Federal election year. The Social Action Office (SAO) has taken Climate Change as one of its focal areas, and hosted a training day with The Change Agency. Earlier in the year, the SAO and the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace co-sponsored a workshop on Climate Change. The national Sisters of Mercy Ecojustice Group, of which I am a member, is also focusing on Climate Change. The efforts of the various conservation groups around Australia are being coordinated by the Climate Action Network of Australia (CANA). The issue is the subject of serious political debate in this election.

| <b>Goal 3: To manage Earth Link responsibly</b> |  |
|---|--|
| We  | Appointed an Assistant to the Director (.2 FTE)  |
|   | Obtained grants from diverse bodies eg Community Gambling Benefit Fund, Envirofunding, Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (CLRIQ), Presentation Sisters, Pine Rivers Shire Council Community Assistance Scheme. |
|   | Developed budgets, management and staffing plans.  |
|   | Promoted Earth Link through web site, e-newsletter, and articles and advertisements in newspapers.   |
|   | Reviewed scenarios for the future of the property.   |
|   | Offered programmes at a variety of venues to tap into different geographical populations.  |
|   | Negotiated ongoing use of <i>Four Winds</i> (2008-2010) with the Sisters of Mercy.   |

The future viability of the *Earth Link* project is related to its ongoing access to *Four Winds*, to its continued financial support by the Sisters of Mercy, and the outcome of succession planning as the current Director reduces her involvement. In brief, the financial situation during the period 2005-2007 is as follows:

|                    | <b>2005</b>     | <b>2006</b>      | <b>Budget 2007</b> |
|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Income</b>      | <b>\$60,682</b> | <b>\$81,388</b>  | <b>\$67,300</b>    |
| <b>Grants</b>      | <b>\$15,551</b> | <b>\$ 20,005</b> | <b>\$6,480</b>     |
| <b>Expenditure</b> | <b>\$56,150</b> | <b>\$77,425</b>  | <b>\$74,200</b>    |

The *Earth Link* project continues to generate about one-third of its required income, and to be subsidized by the Sisters of Mercy. At this time, the Sisters of Mercy have decided not to explore the feasibility of selling some parcels of the property in order to generate investment income for the project. So, while *Earth Link* is guaranteed access to the property for the period 2008-2010, the future of both the property and the project after that time will be considered in the wider context of developments within the Sisters of Mercy.

The project has been successful in its applications for grants which have contributed significantly to caring sustainably for the *Four Winds* property (upgrading trails, riparian management through weed control, redeveloping vegetable garden, and building chook pen and wood shed) and to improving the infrastructure (composting toilet, tank, water saving devices, laptop computer, Cosmic Walk). Funding from the Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (CLRIQ) and the Presentation Mission Fund enabled a break-through with the establishment of the Spirituality Team (.2FTE).

The viability of the project has been enhanced by the expansion of the personnel and skills base from 1.5 to 1.9 FTE. The Assistant to the Director has enabled an upgrading of

communication via our e-newsletter, *Earth Linking*, (circulation about 700) and greater capacity for applying for grant funding and for planning and conducting events such as the *Earth Healing Fair*. The formation of the Spirituality Team has brought the project to a new point with the articulation and deepening of *Earth Link* spirituality. The Core Group (John Long, Mary Long, Anne McLay, Peta-Anne Molloy, Darryl Nelson Maureen Walsh) have met every two months and provided support and management advice. We are grateful for the hospitality of the Franciscan Sisters at *Delamore* Kedron for the comfort and convenience of meeting there. The project now moves into a transition phase which will be as vital as the people who step forward to carry it into the future.

### **Where to from here?**

This is a relatively new project in a new area of awareness. Its vision, principles, goals and objectives challenge the person-centred worldview which has been dominant in western society since the Renaissance and the emergence of the Industrial Age. It advocates the development of an eco- or life-centred world view which includes the whole of the earth community. The adoption of such a world view requires a rethinking of many treasured ways of considering the world and its social, economic, cultural and political systems. We believe that this change of mindset is needed if we are to continue to have a beautiful planet and universe, and redress some of the imbalances that we, humans, have caused

We invited feedback from the readers of our e Newsletter, *Earth Linking*. Here are some snippets of feedback that we received from around Australia:

All I can say re the invitation to comment/suggest is that your program seems very well balanced, taking into account the reverential attitude we must bring to our Earth connection as well as the big questions of Climate Change, Nuclear issues, the destruction of the Planet's life-support systems and the very practical personal things each can (must?) do in the way of lobbying, advocacy and lifestyle. Keep it going !

*Earth Linking* is just great. I love getting it and feel very envious when I read all the things happening. It seems in Sydney there is nothing like that. Brisbane and Melbourne seem to be the places. Some one recently said to me, "Isn't *Earth Linking* wonderful? It gives me such hope when I see all that is happening." For the next three years - keep doing what you are doing. Thanks

And this response from India:

Thanks for the newsletter. Each issue is a feast for me. Thanks very much. I am linked to *Earth Link* on a broadband connection! But there is a connection of the heart. *Earth Link* vibrates with me and what we stand for. Presently I am co-coordinating a centre similar to *Earth Link* in India. We have been linked also to other earth related organizations including the UN.

The best part of the *Earth Link* is the glimpse of the Earth around your centre through small photographs and write ups. I wish there is more of it. For example, the feature on the summer at your centre could be further illustrated with a few pictures of the place and your activities.

I suggest that *Earth Link* get connected to the third world countries where the battle for the earth is to be fought. In a few years, China and India will be the most polluting countries in the world outdoing USA and Australia.

I feel that a group like *Earth Link* becomes part of a global campaign to stand by the Earth Mother. I wish we could organize some eco-exchanges. For example a few of our students from India and Australia get a chance for sharing of life and love for the earth. One of my plans is to look for an opportunity to visit your place and indulge in a sojourn of sorts at the four winds. Thanks very much.



The future of the project may be different. *Four Winds* has potential as a centre for promoting a healthy body in a healthy planet. It may be possible to attract sessional spiritual directors, counselors, massage and other health therapists, earth artists etc. If there is a demand for this expansion of offerings, it may create a new role of Coordinator of a *Four Winds Healing Centre*. Consideration could be given to developing stronger connections between *Earth Link* and other environmental centres with a view to relocating in closer proximity to a project with some shared goals, gathering spaces, natural environment and working spaces.

Expressions of interest have been invited for part time voluntary or paid involvement in the project. These are due by the middle of August. The current Director will continue to be the Coordinator, and we see that these other tasks need to be done:

- Administration including finance, communication, information technology
- Sustainable property management, maintenance, and promotion of biodiversity
- Programme development and delivery as per the vision, mission, principles, goals and strategies

We have scheduled a planning meeting early in September which will be designed to draw forth suggestions for 2008-2010 in the light of available personnel.

There has been an increase in earth consciousness since *Earth Link* came into existence. It is more obviously on the public and the church agenda. It has always been on the agenda of the environmentalists and is in the bones and instincts of those who live and work close to earth. We believe that a project like this has a contribution to make to the change of mindset that is required as we live into what many are naming a new geological and cultural era. As Jean Houston says, "These are the times and we are the people". Earth will evolve and change, and we are an integral part of that earth community, so we need to play our part in its unfolding story.



# Ecology and Christian Faith

This reflection explores ways in which the Christian perspective on the connections between earth, human and the Sacred is both problematic and full of promise in addressing the reality of environmental degradation. It builds on the principles developed by Earth Link in the area of ecospirituality.

Mary Tinney  
31-12-2009

## Introduction

We live at a time when climate change is one of the major threats facing planet Earth and its inhabitants. Religion cannot ignore this crisis facing us. There have been suggestions that religion is responsible. Lynn White<sup>1</sup> in 1967 suggested that the emphasis in Judaism and Christianity on the transcendence of God above nature and the dominion of humans over nature has led to a devaluing of the natural world and a subsequent destruction of its resources for utilitarian ends. Christians have been denying this, speaking out in their own defence, or trying to accommodate the truth of the accusation ever since!

This reflection on *Ecology and Christian Faith* recognises that Christianity is part of the **problem** of environmental degradation, but also acknowledges that Christianity contains within it the **promise** of a better future if it recognises the role that it can play as a partner with others who are addressing the environmental crisis. I am writing from within that faith tradition, as one who has made a life commitment to what it stands for, and as one who recognises the need for a revised theology and spirituality that speak to the daily challenges that face us and our earth.

Is there really a **problem** with the western Christian approach to the environment? It is my experience that most western Christians lack any deep awareness that our relationship with earth/universe/cosmos is a dimension of Christian life. The committed are focussed on social justice, on building right relations between people, on addressing social and economic injustice and on deepening a spirituality which is essentially about the God-human connection. This is the everyday face of anthropocentrism, or human-centredness. For many, if not the majority, responsibility for the wellbeing of earth as a good in itself is outside the scope of Christianity. They are aware that they have a general responsibility to care for earth as created by God as good, as existing for human advancement, and because a healthy earth is a better environment for human beings. Those brought up in a rural or semi-rural environment are generally more connected to nature, while many urban dwellers are geared to controlling and managing unruly nature in manicured gardens. The Judaeo-Christian tradition of stewardship requires the responsible use of nature, and abhors its exploitation for economic gain. But many people are disconnected from nature or the environment, and see it primarily as fulfilling their needs for economic security, for food and for recreation. This is problematic as it presents as apathy, or lack of concern about earth wellbeing, if not outright disregard for the ongoing sustainability of our earth systems.

Our attitudes towards earth have been undergoing constant revision since Copernicus and Galileo discovered that earth was a planet circling the Sun, and discredited the Ptolemaic world view that the sun, moon and planets circled the earth. Now one of the most serious challenges is to the world view that holds

1 Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" in *Science* 155 (March 1967), 1203-1207

that one species, the human, is supreme over other species, and has the right to dominate other species for its own benefit. At its worst, such an attitude underlies the major environmental crisis of our time, namely climate change. Our economic system since the industrial revolution has been built on the ever greater extraction of natural resources. It has given rise to our consumerist society where meeting our wants takes precedence over meeting our basic needs. It has developed into a global situation where two billion of the world's 6.5 billion people live on less than US\$2 per day. These attitudes are deeply engrained in our systems, and the cracks become visible only in times of crises that seriously impact our human lives.

In our times (2009-2010), we are faced with the global crisis of climate change. and living into the first human induced mass extinction . All is not well! While Christianity has many values that moderate human excesses, we need to admit that the integration of its traditional values into our western cultural, religious and economic systems has not been sufficient to avert the environmental degradation that we are experiencing. We need to look deeper into our tradition, admit that there are problems, and search for ways of releasing the potential of Christianity for contributing to creating a healthier planet.

However, Christianity, along with other religious systems, has **possibilities** which need to be released. Gary Gardner<sup>2</sup> reminds us that religion has an important contribution to make to sustainable development in the shaping of an ethical definition of progress bounded by ecology and the requirements of wellbeing. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, have long traditions around the formulation of vision and values, around motivation and spirituality that provide meaning and sustain our action, and around commitment to ethical response. These need to be revisited and reshaped if we are to engage in meaningful dialogue with others about addressing environmental degradation and promoting sustainability. Fortunately there are some significant developments around collaboration between different faith traditions in the pursuit of a sustainable future for the cosmos/earth. Mary Evelyn Tucker suggests that religions are entering their ecological phase<sup>3</sup>. One project that addressed this across the major religious traditions was initiated by the Centre for the Study of World Religions in the USA, which co-sponsored a series of ten conferences between 1996 and 1998, the proceedings of which were produced as a series of books written from the perspectives of the different faith traditions. The fifth Parliament of World Religions held in Melbourne at the end of 2009 featured an environmental strand for the first time, in addition to its emphases on peace, justice and multi-faith relations. There is, however, a place for greater clarity about one's own tradition in order to enter into meaningful dialogue with others, and hence the focus of this paper on Christianity.

I will be building on work previously developed by the *Earth Link* project. *Earth Link* believes that "deep bonding with earth" is at the heart of the matter if we are

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2 Gary Gardiner, *Inspiring Progress*, ( New York: Norton and Co, 2006), 1-5

3 Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Worldly Wonder*, (Chicago: Open Court, 2003)

to move towards its vision of a world where there is respect, reverence and care for the whole earth community.

To date, *Earth Link* has focussed on cosmology, the importance of a sense of place, and ecospirituality, and has synthesised these in its five principles. Earth Link invites people to:

- Listen to the wisdom of earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude.
- Deepen a relationship with the cosmos/earth, beginning with one's own particular place.
- Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life.
- Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living.
- Live in right relationships with the interdependent web of life.

The first principle stresses the importance of an open, attentive and receptive listening to the whole of the earth community, of which we are part. The principles underline the importance of beginning with one's place, while situating that within the unfolding story of the universe and the interconnected web of life. Spirituality is an expression of belief, and that leads us to consider how earth, human and the Sacred are interconnected. Belief leads us to its communal expression in ritual, and its public expression in ethical behaviour.

In this reflection, I will explore the needed movement from a static to a dynamic, unfolding world view by examining the nature of the earth-human connection, by critiquing the hierarchical and dualistic underpinnings of traditional Christianity, and considering how we can revision earth-human-Sacred connections in the light of more recent understandings from cosmology, ecology and theology.. In the second section, I will explore the connection of both earth and the human to the Sacred.

I acknowledge at the outset that each segment of this reflection could be the subject of its own reflection. This is basically an introduction to many of the themes.

## **Part A: Earth-Human Connection**

The earth-human connection has been the subject of consideration since the dawn of human consciousness. The German philosopher, Karl Jaspers<sup>4</sup>, developed the notion of an axial period, the first of which he dates from 800 BCE to 200 BCE. During this period a new kind of thinking arose in the major areas of the world (eg China, India, Persia, Greece and Israel). During this time prophetic individuals

<sup>4</sup> Jaspers, Karl, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1,23,27



emerged in each of the above cultures who reflected critically, rather than living by the mythic awareness and immediacy of their predecessors. Out of this context, Jesus was recognised as one of the prophets, and indeed as the Christ or Messiah. Consciousness has been progressively developing through the great minds and movements of human history. However, these are new times, a new axial period, and we need to reflect critically about some of our basic assumptions.

There are **problems** in the static world view that underpins traditional western Christianity. Its view of earth-human relations is hierarchical and dualistic, and places humans at the centre of decision-making. This world view has been influenced by classical Greek thought and some strands within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Sacred, the human and the earth are envisaged as part of a great chain of being with the Sacred at the apex, humans below that, animate beings below that, and inanimate matter below that. Mind and intelligence place humans higher on the chain of being than less developed parts. This **hierarchical approach**, which recognises value as ranked from lesser to higher, lends itself to attitudes and practices whereby the more intelligent make decisions which affect the lesser in value, and exercise power over them. Such attitudes and practices need critical examination at a time when the fourth report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC4) is clearly documenting that humans are impacting negatively on global climate change. Human attitudes and practices, both deliberate and unintentional, are affecting the other-than-human reality, and also aggravating the situation of those humans already living in poverty.

In addition to the hierarchical ordering of the great chain of being, Christianity is based on **dualistic distinctions** between spirit and matter and between soul and body, with the spiritual or otherworldly being superior to the material and earthly. The emphasis is on difference, on separation, on superiority and inferiority. Spiritual beings, such as humans, are superior to merely material beings. Spiritual beings find their true fulfilment by moving beyond the limits of the material to an otherworldly existence. In such a situation, the material or earthly is a means to an end. This attitude becomes problematic with the emergence of cosmology and ecology which situate the human within an unfolding universe and an interconnected web of life in which the interdependence of the parts is vital to the wellbeing of the whole.

In the worldview underlying traditional western Christianity, **humans are at the centre**, and decisions are made to their advantage. Earth and its species are without rights and much lower in the priorities for decision making and the allocation of resources. This approach is central to the way we have built up our major economic, cultural, and religious systems, and challenging its veracity for these times has enormous implications.

Challenge we must if we are to move beyond devaluing reality and exploiting it for our own ends. If we do not address the dysfunctional aspects of this world view, environmental degradation will continue unabated.

## What is the place of humans in the Universe?

Cosmology, evolutionary biology, and ecology are newer disciplines which challenge us to reconsider the hierarchical, dualistic and anthropocentric world view underlying traditional western Christianity, and consider a world view that recognises that cosmos, earth, and human are interconnected and unfolding while being distinctive parts within the whole. What is needed is a **new ontology**, a new sense of the place of humans in the Universe, based on the recognition that we are a planetary power and thus have responsibility for the whole, and not just our own species.<sup>5</sup> Many contemporary philosophers, theologians and ethicists are addressing the earth-human connection. At one end of the spectrum are the deep ecologists such as John Seed who espouse a view of humans as one species among many, and encourage us to experience the world from a position of solidarity with other species. Thomas Berry suggests that we need a new mode of human-earth relations which enhances the wellbeing of both.<sup>6</sup> Brian Swimme calls humans to the exercise of “comprehensive compassion”<sup>7</sup> where our primate selves extend our instinctual care for our own species into care for all species. Contemporary Christian scripture scholars, such as Theodore Hiebert,<sup>8</sup> are revisiting texts such as Genesis 1,28 (subdue the earth/land) which advocate human domination over the rest of creation, situating these texts within their Priestly and patriarchal context, mining them for interpretations that reclaim the best of the stewardship tradition, while recognising the multiplicity of traditions within the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures, some of which are green or earth-friendly<sup>9</sup> and some of which are not.

While there are some significant differences between these ontological positions, they all address the need to recognise our place in the unfolding evolutionary story of the universe, and to assume the responsibilities that come from being part of that story and not superior nor external to it. We are one with the universe, and also have obligations as the species that is shaping the future of its unfolding story, and apparently not always in ways that are beneficial to the whole.

## Connected

Cosmology and evolutionary biology have contributed to a deepening understanding of the relatively recent emergence of *homo sapiens* (2-1.8 mya) within a 13.7 billion year old universe. We are part of a process in which that universe and earth as one of its planets are unfolding according to self-organising principles inherent in that

5 Mary Evelyn Tucker, “Ethics and Ecology” in *Ecospirit*, ed Laurel Kearns and Catherine Keller, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007)

6 Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme. *The Universe Story*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 86

7 Brian Swimme: *The Earth's Imagination*, DVD series

8 Theodore Hiebert, “The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther, (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 2000)

9 Norm Habel, *An inconvenient Text*, (Hindmarsh SA: Australasian Theological Forum, 2009)

universe, which Swimme and Berry <sup>10</sup> identify as interiority (or the uniqueness or inner qualities of each part), differentiation (or the distinctiveness of the separate entities) and communion (or the interrelatedness of the parts). As that process unfolds there is growth in complexity. We embody the powers of the universe<sup>11</sup>, and we also have the capacity to imagine a different future and work towards it. We can make choices, and we need to exercise these now when it is becoming evident that some of the choices we have made are not enhancing planet earth and the universe.

At the same time as we are reconsidering our notion of humans as superior to the rest of created reality, we are encountering newer insights about earth, Gaia, as having the properties of a living organism.<sup>12</sup> Earth is a remarkably resilient system, capable of adaptation and adjustment to changing conditions, except when the rate of change exceeds that capacity, which is the case with the rate of increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

Ecophilosophers, such as the late Val Plumwood,<sup>13</sup> identified the need to recognise the intrinsic value of all reality. We have valued many things for their usefulness to humans. That recognition of their “instrumental” value is being countered by the recognition of the “intrinsic” value of material things, and by considering earth-human relationships according to different criteria such as consciousness and sentience. This opens up the potential for human beings to relate differently to the other-than-human reality, and explore subject-to-subject encounters, rather than those of object-to-object.

There is a strong sense of earth-human connection in those strands in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures which remind humans of their origins in earth/humus. In the Yahwist creation narrative (Genesis, 2, 4b-3,24), the human is not “distinguished from other forms of life, but identified with them”.<sup>14</sup>

All of this is mere theory until it becomes grounded in experience. Many people have intuitively grasped their connectedness to all that is around them in moments of beauty, awe, and even terror, as they experience events such as a beautiful sunset, the birth of a child or a severe weather event. These moments are key to having a personal conviction about our interconnectedness within the whole web of life.

Our world view and the felt sense of our place in the Universe influence the exercise of power, decision-making, the allocation of resources, and the way in which we live. If one has a strong sense of being part of the earth community, then one has a framework that can facilitate the making of decisions that benefit the whole earth community, and not just the human community.

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10 Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme op cit

11 Brian Swimme, *Powers of the Universe*, DVD series

12 James Lovelock, *The Ages of Gaia*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

13 Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2002)

14 Theodore Hiebert, op cit, 139



## Distinct

The growing acceptance of the sentience of planet earth, of its having the properties of a living organism, raises its status to the point where meaningful earth-human relationships are more of a possibility. Any move from espousing the great chain of being as a world view towards accepting the chain of evolution chips at the elevated status of humans, and calls into scrutiny the theology which recognises the dignity and superiority of humans because they are made in the image and likeness of God. So what is the place of humans in the universe? Are they superior to other-kind, or distinct, with the qualities and responsibilities that go with that?

The cosmic and evolutionary journeys are marked by a progression from energy to matter, from inorganic matter to life, to awareness of life, and to self-reflective consciousness in organisms with more complex brains. Transformation is built into the journey and manifests itself when life-forms transition beyond their current capacity. The Universe is unfolding according to principles inherent in it, such as interiority, differentiation and communion.

The emergence of more sophisticated organisms is dependent on the prior existence of less sophisticated organisms. The emergence of primates with self-reflective consciousness gifts the universe with new abilities. Brian Swimme, in the DVD series *The Earth's Imagination*, explores both the primate qualities of humans whose DNA is 98.6% the same as that of chimpanzees, and the human capacity for imagining an alternative future and making the choices that can bring it about.

It seems to me that if the world view that saw humans as superior is replaced by one that recognises human distinctiveness, then humans are not reduced in significance. Traditionally, the Judaeo-Christian scriptural tradition has grounded human dignity in being made in the image of God (Genesis 1, 26-27). There has been considerable debate about what qualities this endows on humans. From the Priestly and patriarchal perspective of that text, humans have responsibility as representatives of God on earth.<sup>15</sup> This is widely known to be the basis of the call to humans to be responsible stewards of creation. More recent theological studies emphasise the connectedness of the human with earth, and see humans as part of an ecosystem, rather than managing and controlling it. Jason John<sup>16</sup> embraces the whole of created reality as made in the image of God, and reflecting God's intimate relationship with the universe. This approach underlines the dignity of both humans and the other-than-human, and opens up the possibility for mutual relations.

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15 Ibid, 138

16 Jason John, *Biocentric Theology*, Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, February 2005, School of Theology, Faculty of Education, Humanities, Flinders University, Adelaide

## Limited, Finite

The earth-human connection is not all sweetness and light. It has a violent side, and we are forced to make meaning of extreme weather events, of the death and destruction of one species by another, of human violence towards other humans and nature, of the loss and death of loved ones. Since the emergence of the human species about 2 million years ago, there is evidence of continuing attempts to make meaning of this negativity. Brian Swimme sees these experiences of cataclysm as expressions or powers of the universe.<sup>17</sup> The powers of Catclysm, Transmutation and Transformation are forces that break down, and the powers of Centration, Allurement and Interrelatedness/Care are forces or powers that build up and bring together. These powers or forces are natural, and the tension between destruction and creativity, between break-down and build-up, is inevitable.

Swimme offers a value-neutral way of perceiving the negative and the positive, the destructive and the creative, and how they balance out each other. Humankind has attempted ever since the Middle Ages and the devastation of the Black Death plague to bring earth's destructive forces under control. We have developed technologies to address the worst of nature's excesses; we have developed legal systems to create boundaries about unacceptable human behaviour; we have advanced medical science to increasingly resist disease and defer the inevitability of death. The Judaeo-Christian tradition from the time of its earliest narratives has tried to make sense of the apparent contradictions between the goodness of created reality and human imperfection and violence in nature. The Judaeo-Christian worldview suggests that both humans and nature are inherently flawed and need to be controlled, or redeemed by the very Creator who made them. So are earth and humans flawed or merely limited?

Rosemary Radford Reuther<sup>18</sup> is influenced by the thought of Ivone Gebara, an ecofeminist from Brazil, as she theologises about evil and redemption.

In Gebara's view, evil, in the sense of finitude and tragedy, has always been with us and all life forms on earth, and this will always be so. The primal sin is not a disobedience that caused us to fall into a mortality to which we were not originally subjected. Rather the primal sin lies in the effort to escape from mortality, finitude and vulnerability.

For Gebara, attempts to escape this vulnerability have morphed into systems of oppression, domination and exploitation. Redemption will come if these systems of oppression are overthrown, rather than from attempting to overcome tragedy and death. This approach will inevitably take us into a space where we need to revision God and the very notion of redemption.

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17 Brian Swimme, *Powers of the Universe*, DVD

18 Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Ecofeminism" in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther, (Cambridge Ma: Harvard Uni Press, 2000), 105

## Of and for this earth: What is the ultimate destiny for earth and for humans?

It has been proposed for many years that the destiny of humans is to move beyond mortality and death to a realm where death no longer has sway, and all is eternal happiness with God, or eternal damnation in the nether world. The words used when placing ashes on the forehead at the beginning of the penitential season of Lent seem to be more of a reminder of our weakness as a creature of earth, rather than a celebration of our oneness with earth and a reminder that we will return to it.

Is returning to dust all that will remain at the end of our earthly existence? While returning to dust is not all that bad as it means that our matter will continue to be “stuff” of the unfolding story of the universe, I am rather taken with the idea of living on in memory<sup>19</sup>— the memory of the universe, of those who knew us, and in the memory of the Sacred. This idea is worth exploring once we accept that the spatial concepts of heaven and hell have no basis.

Living on in memory is a form of transformation. Transformation is part of the story of the universe. The energy that was present at the moment of the flaring forth of the universe from a singularity, morphed into atoms which are the building blocks of matter. That matter morphed into organic matter, which, in time, continued this journey of ever-increasing complexity into the development of the human species with consciousness, understood as capacities of mind and intelligence. This evolutionary perspective posits that all was there in potential from the beginning, but has unfolded in response to the capacity of this organism, Earth, for autopoiesis or unfurling from within. It is reasonable to move with the insights of Teilhard de Chardin that this process of transformation will continue into a future that we cannot envisage. Once we move beyond our need to escape the inevitability of death, however frightening this may be, we can open ourselves to the possibility of living on in memory of the universe, of friends, and family, of the Sacred. This may be a more liberating approach than a literal embrace of the apocalyptic vision of St John<sup>20</sup> in which the new heavens and the new earth involve the dissolution of the existing sea and earth. While inorganic and organic matter go through the process of break-down, and contribute to the ongoing story of evolution, we can move, like Teilhard, to a faith position that all will be transformed into the perfection of the Cosmic Christ, whose relationship to creation extends beyond the compass of earthly humans, and includes the whole cosmos (cf Col 1, 15-20). Of course, we will never really know what lies beyond our material existence, but our conjectures need to be built on a sense of the interconnectedness of earth/cosmos, human and Sacred.

Having considered the limits of hierarchical, dualistic and anthropocentric world views in the light of contemporary scientific and philosophical understandings, and

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19 Catherine Keller, “No More Sea” in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2000,)

20 Revelations 21, 1-4: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.”

the nature of human and earth as connected, distinct, limited, finite, and valuable rather than incidental on the journey to an otherworldly destiny, it seems timely to continue my reflection by considering the nature of the connection between earth, human and the Sacred.



## Part 2: Earth-Human-Sacred Connection

In this reflection I am responding to the reality of environmental degradation and climate change from a Christian perspective. I have noted the widespread apathy in the Christian community about such issues, and a general lack of awareness that our relationship with earth/universe/cosmos is a dimension of Christian life. I noted, too, that I believe that at the heart of the **problem** is the outmoded understanding of a cosmos envisaged as having been launched in a finished form by the hand of the Creator, rather than as a dynamic, unfolding universe, in which the earth, the human and the Sacred are integral and connected parts of the process.

This problem manifests, not only in the response to climate change, but generally in the interface of Christianity with the world in which it is lived out. Pannikar<sup>21</sup> views present day Christianity as a rather weak religion, and most Christians as apathetic

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21 Raimon Pannikar, "A Christophany for our Time" in *Theology Digest*, 39, No 1 (Spring 1992), 13-14



to the problems of the world, concerned only with their inner power struggles and private problems--almost in a new flight from the world. This resonates with my impression that the dominant spirituality of our time has also become increasingly individualised and privatised.

It seems, too, from where I stand, that those who are concerned about issues of social and environmental significance are also increasing in flight from institutionalised Christianity. I suspect that for them, as for Teilhard de Chardin, the problem with Christianity is one of increasing irrelevance. de Chardin's basic complaint was with an outmoded Christianity formulated many centuries ago,<sup>22</sup> which does not speak to contemporary situations.

If we want to take our part with others in addressing issues of global concern, such as environmental degradation and climate change, we need to admit that there are problems, face them, and release the **possibilities** of the Christian message, reformulated against the backdrop of a cosmology that recognises that the universe is dynamic and unfolding, and that the earth, the human and the Sacred are integral and connected parts of the process.

Some strands of Christianity have moved into the ecological age. Ecological theology and ecospirituality are emerging alongside liberation, feminist, indigenous, interreligious and other theologies and spiritualities. Theological and exegetical methodologies are striving to hear the voice of earth. Within the scope of this reflection, I will focus, from a Christian perspective, on the key concept of the earth-human-Sacred connection. I will use the same pattern that I used in the first part, viz to consider the nature of the connection, and then to revision the Sacred as integrally connected to earth and humans. In this way, we have a more meaningful theological base on which to base our spirituality, ritual and action for earth in these times of environmental degradation.

## Connected

The nature of earth-human-Sacred connections has long been part of theological discourse. There is a new poignancy to our exploration of these connections as a consequence of evolutionary theory. In a post-Darwinian world, we are more conscious of the interconnectedness of all within the web of life. That is where we live as part of the community of life. That is where we encounter the Sacred.

When it comes to the connection of the Sacred with earth and human, we are also searching for unity and communion, as these have long been goals of the encounter with the Sacred. This is not just a quest for knowledge about the nature of the connection; it is also a quest for meaning, for intimacy, for a living in and with the Sacred. It is a quest to be part of God's creative dream for the world. The nature of

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22 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, trans Rene Hague, (New York: Harcourt Bruce Jovanovick, 1971), 78

the connection needs to make sense to our daily lives in an ecological and multifaith world.

There are **problems** in the traditional Christian approach to the earth-human-Sacred connection. Earth has largely been ignored as a vital party in the theological and spiritual journey. This was not always the case. As mentioned in the third of the Ecospirituality Principles of *Earth Link*, Pannikar<sup>23</sup> identifies three main chapters in the understanding of the connection: the time when earth, human and Sacred were seen almost as one; the time when they were understood to be quite separate and seen to have a hierarchy of importance; and the current time when we attempt to hold together the best of both of those understandings, without slipping into merging them all.

At the time of the first axial period, mythic consciousness dominated and Spirit was perceived in all. Then climatic and cultural developments gave rise to a sense of the separateness of the Sacred from the web of life, and a conviction that our encounter with the Sacred is outside of space and time. This separation of the Sacred from universe and earth led to an over-emphasis on the transcendent, and to a sense that our material reality is inferior and in need of control. While there have been notable mystical exceptions, such as Francis of Assisi and Hildegard of Bingen, earth has been minimised as a partner in the sacred journey.

This has been our underlying world view from the patriarchal times (ca 3,000 BCE) to our present time. In this dualistic and hierarchical world view, organic is seen as higher than inorganic, sacred higher than secular, and spirit higher than matter. Not only is the separateness of the Sacred stressed, but also the separateness of humans and nature, and animate nature from inanimate nature.

There are ways of imaging the Sacred that reinforce this disconnection, and other images that hold in tension the connection of the human, earth and the Sacred, while recognising the distinctiveness of each. There is a need to revision theologies of God which overemphasise the otherness of the Sacred at the expense of the immanence and humility of God. There are theologies that address evil and the destructive tendencies of nature by stressing the need for created reality to be redeemed from its sinful materiality. These theologies which are based on hierarchical, dualistic and anthropocentric thought need to be revisited in order to reimage the Sacred in connection with earth and human within the evolving cosmos. This requires searching for the heart of what those theologies and spiritualities express, and revisioning the tradition in the light of new data available from other disciplines.

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23 Raimon Pannikar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience: Emerging Religious Consciousness*, (New York: Orbis, 1994), 26

In order to explore the connection between the Sacred and universe/earth/cosmos, some theologians are turning to the concept of panentheism. It is generally understood as meaning that all things are in God, and God is in all things. As a theological concept, it is distinct from pantheism which means that all things are divine, and from theism which distinguishes and separates God from the world. Panentheism balances out the connection or communion of the Sacred, the earth and the human, with the interiority and differentiation which characterises each of those parts. It allows for the parts to be distinctive, while being interconnected.

Panentheism gives expression to the Sacred-earth-human connection in a way that redresses an overemphasis on the transcendence, omnipotence, and omniscience of the Sacred. Joseph Prabhu outlined in his presentation on the panel “Panentheism: God and World in an Ecological Age” at the fifth Parliament of World Religions in December, 2009, that there is a continuum in the world religions ranging from high transcendentalism in Judaism, to immanence-transcendence in Christianity, to limited transcendence-immanence in Buddhism, and immanence in nature based spiritual traditions. In this context, Christianity has potential that needs redressing in order to retain that balance between immanence and transcendence.

In the post-Darwinian world, there is a growing body of adherents to a Gaian consciousness which rejects any form of Sacred presence in earth/cosmos. James Lovelock and Richard Dawkins would be in this group. There is an upsurge in neo-paganism based on pantheism or animism which recognises that the world is alive, not only in itself, but as embodying Sacred presence. Graham Harvey states that “[p]agans are people who consider the world to be alive; they are listening to a speaking earth.”<sup>24</sup> Being at home on the earth, which for them is the source of the Sacred, they have a life-affirming, nature-celebrating spiritual tradition that is much needed in an ecologically threatened environment today. Catherine Keller describes pantheism as the identification of God as spirit with the body of the world, from which perspective all is divine.<sup>25</sup> The reverence for earth expressed in this approach can be recognised in indigenous traditions which follow an earth-nature-cosmos-based spirituality.<sup>26</sup> This approach is important in the region where *Earth Link* is located at Ocean View. The Kabul or carpet python which is found in this area is a manifestation of the Rainbow Serpent which features prominently in local Aboriginal Dreaming stories.

Panentheism, as an understanding of how finite reality is related to its infinite ground, features prominently in the work of contemporary Christian theologians such as the Australian Denis Edwards, who view the earth-human-Sacred connection as a form of mutuality, as a manifestation of all things in God, and God in all

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24 Graham Harvey, *Listening People, Speaking Earth: Contemporary Paganism* (Kent Town: Wakefield, 1997), viii.

25 Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 53

26 Vivianne Crowley, *A Woman's Guide to the Earth Traditions* (London: Thorsons, 2001), 1.

things.<sup>27</sup> Panentheism allows for an intimacy, an interconnectedness, which respects the inner nature of the parts and their capacity to relate, to connect, from distinct positions. Catherine Keller calls this “radical incarnationism”<sup>28</sup>, which does not blur the distinction between earth and divine mystery, but allows for intense and open-ended interaction between them. The Sacred contains all of reality, does not take on the limits of the parts, but is intensely related. Similarly, we are encouraged to see all of reality, not merely as a mirror of the Sacred, but for what it is, which also embodies God. Sallie McFague speaks of this as “horizontal sacramentality”, where the focus of the eye is not on seeing God, but in seeing each particular reality and respecting it for what it is, which is also God.<sup>29</sup> This calls forth a spirituality of presence<sup>30</sup> whereby the Sacred is intimately connected, and in relationship with all of reality. It acknowledges the potential of matter for embodying the Sacred while the Sacred is not contained by matter.

The earth-human-Sacred connection is also there in the strong sacramental tradition within Christianity where the “stuff” of earth, bread, wine, water, and oil, are the vehicle of the connection with the Sacred. In a panentheistic way of experiencing reality, “what is” is valued for itself, and is also the place for encountering the Sacred and being encountered by the Sacred. The tradition can be interpreted in terms of relationships, rather than in terms of substance or essence.

At the end of all this, what is different? For me “stuff” is not just matter. It is valuable in itself, beautiful, awe-inspiring, terrifying, ravaged, endangered, engaged and engaging, suffering, celebrating, present and sanctifying. The Sacred is near, intimately present, beyond the limitations of our earthliness, but deeply connected, rather than aloof and independent of our human and earthly reality. This leads to a consideration of the Sacred with whom we and the universe are in relationship.

### **Revisioning the Sacred/ God in the Connections**

Contemporary understandings from cosmology, ecology and evolutionary biology point to interconnected and unfolding relationships in the web of life, as outlined in the first part of this reflection. This requires us to revision God in those connections. This is not about finding a new God, but it is about reformulating our understanding of the Sacred whom we encounter in the midst of our contemporary living situations. As Elizabeth Johnson points out in *Quest for the Living God*<sup>31</sup>:

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27 Denis Edwards is a systematic theologian who has been revisioning traditional Christian theology from the perspective of cosmology and evolutionary biology. His most recent publication is *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, (New York: Maryknoll, 2006)

28 Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008) 53

29 Sallie McFague, *Super Natural Christians*, 172

30 See Barbara Fiand, *Awe Filled Wonder* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008) for a development of such a spirituality.

31 Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, (New York: Continuum, 2007), 13



The experience of God is always mediated....When circumstances change, the experience of the divine undergoes a shift. Images, intellectual constructs, and rituals that mediated a sense of God in one age often do not make sense in the next with its change of perceptions, values, and life styles. The search must be undertaken anew if religious traditions are to remain vibrant and alive.

Out of experiences of both awe and degradation, out of awareness that ours is a dynamic, unfolding universe, out of a strong sense that the Sacred, earth and humans are interconnected, we search for a meaningful understanding of the Sacred.

I will consider, in turn, the God who creates (and destroys), and the God who came among us and who continues among us.

### **God who creates**

How did cosmos/earth/human begin? There are creation narratives in Babylonian, Sumerian, and Greek traditions, to name just a few which have influenced Western thought. They are there in most of the religious and spiritual traditions, as people address that perennial need for a sense of where we come from.

The Priestly creation account in Genesis, 1- 2,4a has elements of similarity and difference with the *Enuma Elish*, the oldest of these narratives which originated in Sumeria. The Genesis story is not violent; it establishes that the Sacred was intimately present when cosmos and earth emerged from formlessness (or is this the singularity that is now understood as the point of origin of time and space?); that God saw that it was good (and is this the goodness that is inherent in matter, rather than something poured into it from above?); and that stars, rocks, plants, animals and humans were part of the same unfolding process (which scientist currently date as beginning about 13.7 billion years ago). Humans are given a source of food, and asked to assume Priestly style responsibility (dominion) for created reality. In this they are to be in the image of the Sacred.

It is possible to read even this most controversial of the Hebrew scriptural creation narratives from the perspective of creation from within, rather than creation from above. It is possible to view it as an unfolding story, consistent with more recent evolutionary theory, rather than happening all at once, and it is possible to read it in the context of the beginnings of agriculture, with attempts to discredit earlier images of the Sacred in human, snake or animal form. This is one example of how the tradition can be revisited and seen as compatible with contemporary knowledge, while retaining its real and mythic purpose of introducing us to a Creator God who is

- intimately present in material reality,
- active even while that matter unfolds according to its own logic,

- satisfied with the work in hand,
- attentive to the interconnections and relationships which come into being, and
- involved with the work that is accomplished.

There are other creation accounts within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, such as those in Wisdom 8 and Psalm 104, which could be the subject of our scrutiny in a more extended reflection. There are also narratives which Norm Habel refers to as “inconvenient texts”. Within his recent publication<sup>32</sup> and drawing on the work done over the last 20 years in the Earth Bible project, he acknowledges that there are “grey” texts which do not reflect a genuine concern for creation or empathy for earth. But our concern here is with the insight that we gain into the God who creates.

What about the God who destroys? What about earth and humans who are destroyed? In the flood narrative (Gen 6, 6), God seems to justify the destruction of the environment and its creatures as retribution for human sin. This is a continuation of the tradition that places the blame for evil in choices made by the prototype humans, Adam and Eve. There is a reversal in the story in Genesis 8, 21, when God says: “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind”. As people make sense of natural disasters and human suffering in the extremes of floods and bushfires in Australia and overseas, both of these perspectives continue to be heard.

The unfolding story of the universe is full of moments of destruction from which arise new life. This seems to be a pattern in nature, and even in human nature. In the flood narratives mentioned above, there is resolution in the covenant made with all of creation:

God said: “This is the sign of the covenant I will make between me and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth”(Gen 9,12-13)

Teilhard de Chardin, a palaeontologist very familiar with the evidence for these sequences in nature, came experientially to love and feel loved by the Cosmic Christ present in the universe, and to see such contradictions as part of this pattern of love<sup>33</sup>. While that may not be the way I would make meaning of destruction and creativity, I do resonate with the words of Elizabeth Johnson when she says that we

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32 Norman Habel, *An Inconvenient Text*

33 For a concise treatment of the thought and spirituality of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin see *Christ in Evolution*, by Ilia Delio, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008)

are “called into the immediacy of God’s own self”<sup>34</sup> in our evolutionary universe”. She continues:

If we accept the silent immensity that surrounds us as something infinite or distant and yet ineffably near; if we receive it as a sheltering nearness and tender love that does not make any reservations; and if in this embrace we have the courage to accept our own life in all its concreteness and yearning, which is possible only by grace, then we have the deep mystical experience of faith. Accepting our life means letting ourselves fall into this unfathomable mystery at the heart of our existence in an act of loving self-surrender. Such an act does not make everything clear.... But God is present where life is lived bravely, eagerly, responsibly, even without any explicit reference to religion.

After all, the Universe Story is probably the greatest love story what will ever be told! A significant moment in that story was the birth, life and death of Jesus in Israel, and it is to this manifestation of the Sacred that we now turn as we explore our understanding of the God who is connected with earth and human.

### **God as Jesus who comes among us**

In the person of Jesus, the early Christian community recognised Emmanuel, God-among-us. Jesus was and continues to be the focal point of the faith traditions which derive from his life and teachings. It is imperative, however, that the formulation of our understanding and our experience of Jesus, the Christ, be shaped by contemporary knowledge and language. Teilhard de Chardin goes so far as to say that “Christ must be born again....He must be reincarnated in a world that has become too different from that in which he lived.”<sup>35</sup> Again this is not a break from traditional Western theological understandings and spirituality, but a necessary evolution.

So who is Jesus, God who became flesh and lived as one of us? He was human with a body, intellect and emotions. He had family and friends. He had a mission to bring the good news of God’s love, and he gathered a group around him in order to do this. He died the death of a criminal, an outcast in the religious tradition that he was born into, yet his followers came progressively to believe that he was the Christ, the promised Messiah, and that his presence continued to be with them, even after his death. He entered the unfolding story of the universe at a particular time and place, yet his influence has continued through several centuries and in many places.

Jesus is the embodiment of the connection, communion, unity of all created reality with the Sacred, an embodiment of God’s nearness, and indeed of God’s love. His is an important chapter in this great love story that is the story of the Universe. Raimon Pannikar writes of Jesus, the Christ, as the symbol of our human identity

34 Elizabeth Johnson, op cit, 45

35 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, 94-95

and our call to union and communion with the Sacred, and participation in God's creative dream for the world. His understanding of symbol is important in this context. As summarised by Ilia Delio<sup>36</sup>:

The symbol introduces us into a realm to which it itself belongs, that is an order of meaning in its radical otherness. A symbol retains its value only through the place that it occupies within the whole; an element becomes a symbol only to the extent that it represents the whole, from which it is inseparable.

Gustave Martelet clarifies that "Christ is the fullness of symbol, for in his incarnation, death and resurrection, he is the fully actualised gather-together of God and human, of the eternal and passage of time."<sup>37</sup> Jesus is a very significant manifestation of the connection of the Sacred with earth and human.

Despite our historical experience of Jesus as the exception, Jesus is, in fact, the norm, for the human-earth-Sacred connection. His existence took the understanding of this connection to a new level from what was possible in an earlier stage of human/earth evolution. He was an ethical human being who embodied the divine. He lived in the fullness of God's love. He spoke out about temple and civic abuse of power, and was killed for his efforts. He modelled not the superiority or aloofness of the transcendent God, but the presence, immersion in, and humility of God within the unfolding story of the Universe. He was active in that story, but accepting of the way in which it was unfolding- not that he would have conceptualised what was happening out of the framework of an evolutionary world view!

Jesus showed his own and future generations that matter is good and that it embodies the Sacred. He emerged in human history, was born, grew and advanced in wisdom and understanding. His intimacy with God was recognised as distinctive, and God did not intervene to change his historical existence. To refer again to Pannikar, Jesus was a christophany, a model of what we and the universe are called to. His existence was not a reaction to human sinfulness, but rather an acknowledgement that the Sacred was present in love in the unfolding story of the Universe from the beginning of time.

In his resurrection, Jesus was understood to be present in a different way. The faith community came to understand that human and earthly life contain within them the potential for transformation, for self-transcendence. This does not devalue earth or humanity. It does not need to be rescued from its own reality, but rather released to ever greater potential.

If Jesus was the norm for earth and humanity in their communion with God, we are on a similar journey into communion. We, too, are called to be part of

36 Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, 90

37 Gustave Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*, trans Rene Hague (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 24

God's creative dream for the world. For a map of what this might look like, we might consider what Sallie McFague articulate as the hallmarks of an ecological Christianity. These are

- the insistence on justice to the oppressed, including nature, and the realisation that solidarity with the oppressed will result in cruciform living for the affluent;
- the need to turn to the earth, respecting it and caring for it in local, ordinary, mundane ways;
- the recognition that God is with us, embodied not only in Jesus of Nazareth, but in all of nature, thus uniting all creation and sanctifying bodily life;
- the promise of a renewed creation through the hope of the resurrection, a promise that includes the whole cosmos and speaks to our ecological despair;
- the appreciation of the intrinsic worth of all life forms, not just of human beings; and finally
- acknowledgment that human salvation or wellbeing and nature's health are intrinsically connected.<sup>38</sup>

If we accept the map, the next step is either to embark on the journey, or discover how far we have proceeded. In this we are not alone, because we have been assured that the Spirit continues to be with us.

### **God, Spirit, who is among us**

God continues to be present in the unfolding story of the universe: present in its autopoiesis or self emergence, present in its groaning, present intimately in love at all time. The resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples on the first Pentecost as tongues of fire, of heat, light and warmth. The Spirit is often referred to as "Ruah" or breath of God, actively involved in the very act that marks our living from our dying. Even this use of terminology is significant, drawing as it does on our experience of nature as a metaphor for divine presence and action.

The presence of Spirit with and within created reality has often been interpreted in a way that presumes that the all-perfect God knows all and has power over all, and can intervene at any moment if we ask in the right way.<sup>39</sup> While these attributes

38 Sallie McFague, "An Ecological Christianity: Does Christianity Have It?" in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther ( Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 33

39 Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2006), Chapter 3

safeguard the otherness of the Sacred, and warn us against presuming that we can know or manipulate the mind of God, there are other ways of envisaging the presence of Spirit/God among us and in all of reality. We can remember that the Christ message was one of love and fidelity, even unto death. God did not intervene in the life of Jesus to remove suffering and death. Nor did Jesus come among us just to suffer and die. His death was a consequence of his disturbing message that there were other sources of life, love and power than those being demonstrated by the civil and religious leaders of the time. His was a message that challenged the power of tyrants, while apparently succumbing to that same power. After his death, the continuing presence and power of Spirit/God within our reality enables us to encounter the Sacred present in the unfolding universe story, in leadership that is humble, rather than overpowering, and in lives lived in love and fidelity.

The Spirit is God with us, with every star, rock, plant, and animal, and at every moment. The Spirit is a loving presence. For those who treasure a personal God, there can be some dislocation as one is challenged to move beyond the human face to a more inclusive and anthropocentric sense of the presence of God.<sup>40</sup> However, communion with the Sacred deepens as we open ourselves to Spirit present within and beyond, extend our sense of connectedness with our kin, our brothers and sisters, be they animate or inanimate, and encounter the Sacred present in all.

### **Where are we headed?**

It seems innate for us to strain forward--towards what? As noted in the first part of this reflection, transmutation and transformation are powers of the universe that we see at work around us. This is the universe in which we encounter mystery as a profound sense that there is something more. John Haught challenges the theology built on "nostalgia for lost perfection",<sup>41</sup> and draws on what people experience as the power of the future to draw us forward into fullness of being. With Catherine Keller<sup>42</sup>, I am drawn towards an exploration of the future as whirlwind, an exploration of the creative edges of chaos which brim with potential. Here may well be the place of ultimate encounter with "Ruah", the creative breath of the Sacred in all things, but mysterious beyond what we can imagine.

### **In conclusion**

This reflection needs to be considered as a work in progress, perhaps for the rest of my life. I have touched lightly on many issues as I have explored what I consider to underlie the present state of apathy in Christian circles about the environmental crisis and its connection to Christianity viz a clinging to a static view of reality and a lack of acknowledgement that we are part of a dynamic and unfolding Universe in which earth, human and Sacred are vitally connected. I have recognised that there

40 Barbara Fiand, *Awe-Filled Wonder*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008)

41 John F Haught, *God After Darwin*, (Colorado: Westview, 2000), 85

42 Catherine Keller, "No More Sea" in *Christianity and Ecology*, ed Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford-Reuther (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 193



are **problems** with the theology, spirituality, ethics and ritual which are built on this static and disconnected world view, and opened up some **possibilities** inherent in the Christian tradition that have the potential to invigorate a Christian response to the environmental crisis that is facing the whole earth community. If we embrace this project, we may indeed have a healthier planet and a more meaningful faith tradition and personal faith.

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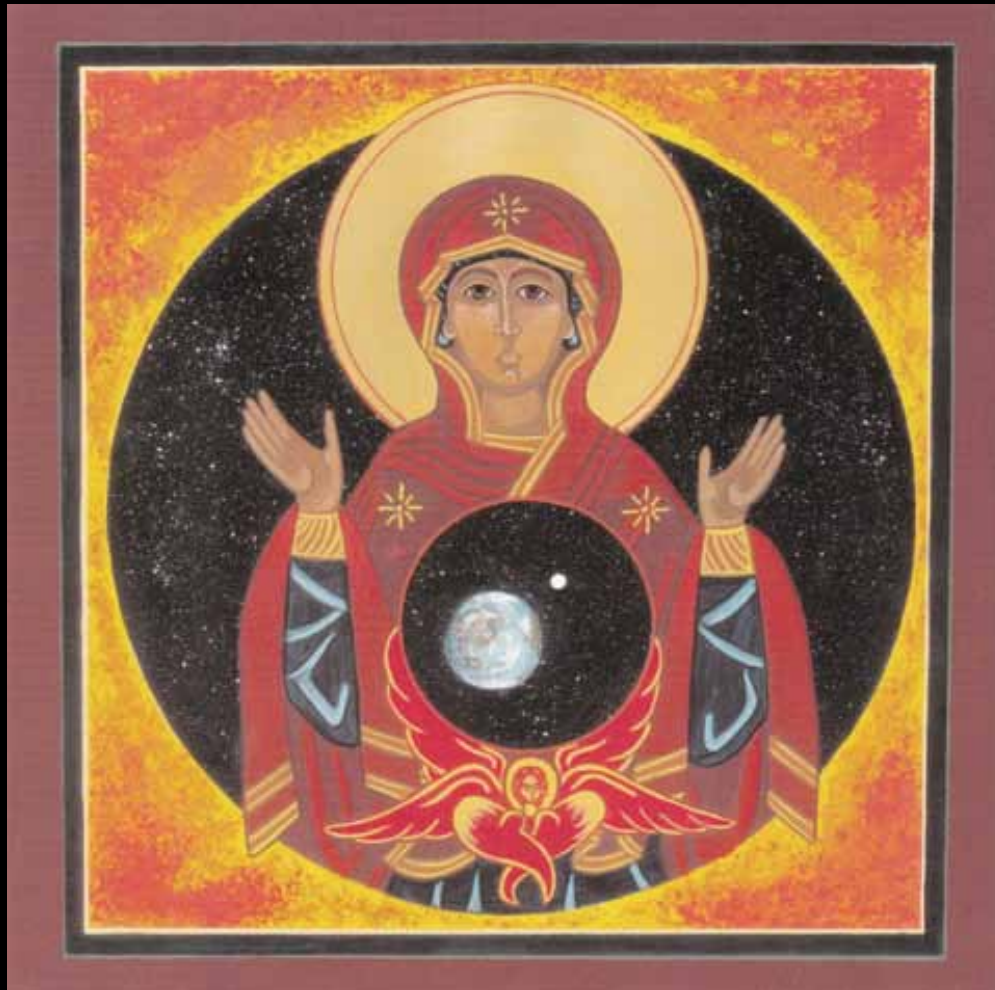
## **Earth Link**

### **A collaborative project of the Sisters of Mercy**

*Earth Link envisions a future where there  
is a culture of respect, reverence and care  
for the whole earth community.*

Four Winds  
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## Mary of the Cosmos

Artist- Bernadette Bostwick, sgm

This image of Mary of the Cosmos celebrates the beauty of our embodiment and the sacredness and holiness of all matter in the cosmos. In this Icon, the universe is flowing through Mary, (mother, matter, mater) whose body is made of the star stuff of the cosmos. In her Iconoclastic form with Earth at her center, the planet becomes the birthing bed of Jesus. The 3 stars represent the cosmological ethics of differentiation, interiority and communion. The relationship between Earth and moon speak of rhythm, tides and the wisdom of the feminine. The red cloak that Mary wears points to her humanity while the blue undergarment reflects her rootedness in the Divine. The flash of flame circling Mary of the Cosmos is the fireball, the initial flaring forth, reminding us of the sacrificial nature of the entire Universe Story. Mary's posture of outstretched arms invites us into that open handed giving for the sake of the whole. The straightforward gaze of Mary as she looks into the future, reveals a unified vision of matter and spirit, inviting us into the fullness of communion consciousness.

(Used with Permission)



# REVIEW OF EARTH LINK

**Mary McDonald SGS**

August 2009

## **REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF *EARTH LINK***

### **PURPOSE OF THE REVIEW OF *EARTH LINK***

The review is to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the *Earth Link* project, its programmes, its personnel, and its resources, and to make recommendations about the future directions of the project for the period 2011-2013.

*Earth Link* is at another crucial time in its history. Since its establishment in 2000 it has had a considerable impact on awareness raising, education, appreciative ecological experiences at *Four Winds* and offering insights into the place of the Sacred in the whole of creation.

### **REVIEW PRINCIPLES**

The Review process is based upon the principles of inclusively, transparency, fairness/impartiality, justice, continual improvement and future orientation.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The approach is a qualitative one using the rich data from people's experience and observations as well as insights and hopes for the future. Feedback from data gathering and records is recorded in italics.

### **DATA GATHERING:**

At an initial meeting with the members of the Core Group, there was sharing about the achievements of *Earth Link* and some hopes for the future. This meeting was attended by Mary Tinney, Marilyn Cuttler, Darryl Nelson Sr Peta Anne Molloy. Apology: Mary Long, Sue Smith, Helen Rhue, and Jennifer Garner.

A data source has also been in the **documentation** provided:

- Education Programs
- *Earth Link* DVD
- Previous reviews and reports
- *Earth Link* Website
- Feedback 2007-2009
- *Earth Link* Calendar of Events
- Statistics of Accommodation, Education/Spirituality and Sustainable living/Wellbeing
- Educative Reflective Guide: Walking the Earth
- Information Brochure
- *Four Winds* resource folder
- Management Profile 2009 (appended)

Email questionnaire followed by a **phone conversation** with **Core Group** members:

- Peta Anne Molloy
- Marilyn Cuttler
- Darryl Nelson
- Mary Long
- **Spirituality:** Philip Costigan
- **Participant:** Joan Pender

**Contracted Staff:** Jennifer Garner and Helen Rhue,  
**Primary School Principal** – name withheld.

A **meeting** with Mary Tinney and a visit to *Four Winds*.

A **meeting** with the Leadership Team of the Sisters of Mercy

### **MERCY COMMITMENT TO STEWARDSHIP OF CREATION**

The Sisters of Mercy have continued to show commitment to *Earth Link* by the appointment of Sr Mary Tinney, RSM and through the allocation of appropriate funds.

In their recent Congregation Chapter 2008 the Sisters of Mercy Brisbane, made a commitment to the *Stewardship of Creation* as evidenced in the following statement:

*A spirituality that recognizes the goodness of God's creation compels us to respond to the consequences of environmental damage for the Earth and all life.*

*We acknowledge that climate change is a reality of our world and a human rights issue of our times, impacting most seriously on the poorest people of our planet.*

*We will respond through:*

- *Awareness raising and education;*
- *Advocacy on behalf of those suffering as a result of environmental harm, and*
- *Personal and communal action.*

### **FINDINGS FROM THE REVIEW**

#### **Vision of *Earth Link***

*We envision a future where there is respect, reverence and care for the whole earth community.*

Some feedback:

*This vision has relevance to the needs of today's world.*

*I can identify with the concepts of respect, reverence and care for the whole earth community because these are values that I hold very dear.*

*I am enriched by sharing in and handing on this vision.*

*There have been significant global changes that offer encouragement to those who share this vision in the last 8 years.*

*I love the hope permeating this vision – if we respect, reverence and care. At first, I found the idea of “the whole earth community” rather challenging. However, through the project I grew in knowledge and understanding and can now fully embrace it fully at the heart level though old ways of thinking can still surface.*

At *Four Winds*, the home of *Earth Link*, the Sisters of Mercy have dedicated the 17 hectare rural property and accommodation for the express purpose of exposure to and education for deep bonding with earth.

**Current thinking about ecological sustainability requires:**

Experience and exposure IN the environment

Knowledge ABOUT ecological and related issues, and

Action FOR the environment.

The combination of all three aspects provides the best outcome.

The present form of *Earth Link* is clearly an outstanding example of this model.

**Mission**

*Earth Link* facilitates deep bonding with the whole earth community through educative and reflective programmes in spirituality and earth-human wellbeing.

**Goals of *Earth Link***

*To encourage respect and reverence for the whole earth community*

*To manage *Earth Link* responsibly.*

**Focus Goals: To encourage respect and reverence for the whole earth community**

**To improve the well being of the earth community**

Because of the extensive work already done by *Earth Link* in this area, there is now an integration between these two goals, though each aspect does have some separate expression. This would indicate the significant growth that has taken place through the many offerings listed over the years in the calendar of events.

**Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality**

The original aim of *Earth Link* was to develop and nurture an ecologically sensitive spirituality. It is based on a clear set of principles which underpin all aspects of *Earth Link*.

- Listen to the wisdom of earth with an open, attentive and receptive attitude

- Deepen your relationship with cosmos/earth, beginning with your own particular place
- Acknowledge the Sacred in the interdependent web of life
- Honour the Sacred in the web of life through rituals and holistic living
- Live in right relationships within the interdependent web of life

Earth Link documentation states:

*"We understand that the Earth Link spirituality comes from the transformative experience of deep bonding with earth. Reflection has led us to believe that this is an experience of the Sacred, and that earth and cosmos constitute for us a primary revelation of Ultimate Mystery. This belief guides what we do and what we offer at Earth Link."*

This focus is still given high priority. To that end retreats and spirituality sessions as well as workshops continue to be offered both at Four Winds and in other venues.

For example this year the following have been offered at Four Winds:

*Once Upon A Universe* celebrating the amazing Love that holds us in the Universe.

*Mothers' Retreat* –nurturers being nurtured

*Women and Earth Retreat Day*

*Earth in Celtic Spirituality*

*Christian Faith and the Eco-Crisis*

The partnership with Australian Catholic University in the presentation of Cosmology, Ecology and Theology, a course for credit and audit, is an outstanding achievement. This is now available on DVD.

### **Eco-rituals**

Rituals and dinners mark the changing of the seasons, Summer, Winter Solstice, Spring Equinox and an Easter Sunday Ritual is also held from 5.50am -7am.

The Way of the Cross, held each year at *Four Winds*, continues to draw many people to attend, particularly from Ocean View and the surrounding districts.

*Thank you so much for the Stations of the Cross again today. Steve and I really appreciate the opportunity to go deeper into our selves and the mystery of the Cross in such a beautiful place (2009)*

While the impacts of climate change have raised people's consciousness about the need to care for the environment, *Earth Link's* many and varied programs provide information and education well beyond this pragmatic approach.

*I am very grateful that Earth Link is available to us. I do believe that our spirituality has become more earth based. I have at the same time become more energised towards action on behalf of earth.*

*Deep bonding is happening as we have learnt so much exciting stuff and participated in some wonderful rituals.*

### **Residential Opportunities:**

*Four Winds* provides a welcoming, hospitable environment where individuals or groups can enter the peace, simplicity and beauty of the bushland.

The well maintained house can provide residential accommodation for 8 people and day groups of up to 30 people.

The *Four Winds* brochure invites people to come and immerses themselves in the biodiversity of the place

- Spend quiet time walking and reflecting
- Conduct small or medium group activities
- Visit for a day
- Stay for a week or a month. (*Invitation on web page*)

It is also a suitable place to:

- \* conduct seminars or workshops
- \* write
- \* resolve the past
- \* plan for the future
- \* free creative energies
- \* enjoy some solitude
- \* experience community with others.

For a sabbatical experience or an extended stay, an individualised program is developed and guidance from Mary Tinney is available. Again this is a valued part of the outreach as individual needs and life stages are respected and responded to in creative ways.

Feedback from participants say that *Four Winds* is a place where users not only appreciate the country environment that they find themselves immersed in, but leave with gratitude in their hearts for the bounty and beauty of creation, feeling empowered to become more active in making changes to their lifestyle that will reduce their impact on the environment.

*Recently I spent four weeks at Four Winds. I had wanted to learn more about Eco-Spirituality and my enquiries and web search led me to consider that the Earth Link*



*programme might be the right choice for this. I had been very impressed by the information provided by the web.*

*Keep up the wonderful work for the blessings of creation*

*The Four Winds property has been significantly improved over the last 8 years.*

### **Programs and Workshops:**

An important aspect of *Earth Link* is the offering of workshops, retreats and rituals either at *Four Winds* or at a venue offered by the inviting group. The records show that people from all walks of life have accessed these services - school staffs, academics, community groups, including the disadvantaged.

*Thanks for organising an interesting day yesterday - both Richard and I really enjoyed ourselves, and the learnings of the day will deepen our experience of the Celtic countries we will be visiting in July and August.*

*Thank you again, Mary. This is an amazing list of options.*

*Thank you for organising the day in Beerwah and guiding us with such accuracy and, at the same time, simplicity of language.*

*We have generally increased participation of the community and in particular the local community in *Earth link* programs.*

One principal who was interviewed about taking the staff to *Four Winds* for the day was high in praise for all aspects of the experience:

*The staff came away with a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of life, the bounty and beauty of our creator God and a commitment to sustainability. This has had lasting effects even through the busyness of school life.*

### **Teaching by Example**

*Four Winds* draws upon renewable energy sources and energy saving facilities and so clearly demonstrates lived values. This gives people new hope and energises them to make a contribution to conservationism, anti-pollution, and use of resources related to industry and energy. Raising people's level of awareness and of encouraging their preparedness to use some small alternatives in daily life is a valuable contribution *Earth Link* makes to the present and future use of the earth.

*These are evident in the care of the earth and the sustainability values that are promoted on the property and through education and spirituality programs.*

*The accomplishments may seem small but I believe they are part of a rising spirit emerging in many ways and in many parts of the world.*



Some people remarked that while the *Four Winds* property and views are stunning, it is difficult to access. One respondent suggested some sort of car pooling arrangements that could be published when advertising events.

The brochure states that when making a booking, if transport is required from Petrie train station or Dayboro to *Four Wind*, it can be arranged.

The question was raised whether *Earth Link* has the need of a *Four Winds* Centre. Could the web page and the programs be offered from another venue, or indeed was there even need for a “place”?

When asked this question, respondents believed that *Four Winds* or a similar venue was integral to a holistic approach to achieving the goals of *Earth Link*. This view is supported by a strand of “theology of place or landscape”. *Four Winds* provides a living example of what is possible in household sustainability and responsible property management, but more so, those who come are immersed in the beauty of the place that speaks the glory of God and the diversity and beauty of creation. It reflects a founding value: “We understand that the *Earth Link* spirituality comes from the transformative experience of deep bonding with earth”.

*The very atmosphere, the magical feel and the love that is felt brings people back again to Four Winds.*

The series of **Winter Walks** exploring the North Pine River are a great way of community building and raising awareness of the beauty, fragility and diversity of the district.

The program **Women’s Health, Herbs and Healing** promotes holistic and natural ways to well-being, for example, alternative healing techniques, as well as some of the secrets that herbs contain.

The **Go Green Fair** is currently being organised and many people are involved in the preparation. The purpose of this fair is to increase public understanding of energy efficiency, to raise awareness of the need to “Go Green”, and to promote actions to combat climate change. This event will be held at *Four Winds* on the 17<sup>th</sup> April, 2010.

The “**Land for Wildlife**” recognises the land restoration and improvement that is constantly undertaken at *Four Winds*.

#### **Library and Resources:**

Many people come to *Four Winds* to be immersed in the wonder and beauty of creation and need no further planned program. Others are grateful for the guidance given in the form of a retreat, a reading program, particularly access to the rich resources held in the *Earth Link* library. The current reading and reflection group

meet regularly and share insights from books including *Awe-Filled Wonder* by Barbara Fiand.

*Many thanks Mary for the continuing transmission of the Earth Linking news. It is such a rich resource that you have developed ... Also the book review is very interesting indeed.*

*I appreciate the Earth Link newsletter with its reflection, book review and advice about coming events.*

*I have found the books and DVD's in the library beneficial to me personally and helpful in my preparation of prayers and presentations.*

*I have been enriched by my participation in the reading groups.*

### **Web Page ([www.earth-link.org.au](http://www.earth-link.org.au))**

The web page is a rich resource as the index indicates:

|                              |  |                   |
|------------------------------|--|-------------------|
| <b>Home</b>                  | <b>Calendar</b>                        |                   |
| <b>Earth-Human Wellbeing</b> | <b>Respect and Reverence for Earth</b> | <b>About Us</b>   |
| <b>News</b>                  | <b>Community Noticeboard</b>           | <b>Library</b>    |
| <b>Four Winds</b>            | <b>Links</b>                           | <b>Contact Us</b> |

### **Newsletter:**

The monthly e-newsletter is exactly what the title claims. Registration is simple through the web site and accessed through email.

*Thanks for this .... It's a jewel in my day (newsletter)*

*This is a stunning newsletter and full of such rich stuff Earth Linking is just great. I love getting it and feel very envious when I read all the things happening in Qld..*

### **Management of Earth Link**

*Earth Link* is competently managed by Mary Tinney with the assistance and advice of the Core (Management Advisory) Group.

The role responsibilities, accountabilities and remuneration for all members of staff are clearly recorded in the Management Profile 2009.

*Earth Link* operates under the ABN of the Sisters of Mercy and is covered by insurance as part of the comprehensive policy of the Sisters of Mercy.

Financial records are kept according to the financial system of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane Congregation.

The annual budget is submitted to the Core Group and then to the Congregation. The Core Group monitors the budget through progress reports and the members advise on particular aspects of expenditure.

*All three goals have been addressed comprehensively through this project. The documentation of this has always been excellent. Revisiting the goals maintains our momentum.*

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

One of the key reasons for this review was to make recommendations about the future directions of *Earth Link* for the period 2011-2013.

### **Goals of *Earth Link***

*To encourage respect and reverence for the whole earth community*

**Focus Goals: To encourage respect and reverence for the whole earth community  
To improve the well being of the earth community**

Clearly from all evidence gathered, this goal is being address through the multiple ways that have been described in the findings.

- a) Continue to put strong emphasis on opportunities to encounter the sacred, offer programs and experiences that will assist people to understand the beauty and fragility of the whole earth community and be motivated in their own lives to improve the well being of the earth community.
- b) Keep this goal to the fore and try to discover new and engaging approaches, particularly in the area of cosmology, theology and eco-spirituality.
- c) Explore ways to assist people from within their own religious and spiritual traditions .e.g Catholicism, Buddhism etc, to name and claim their experience of the Sacred.
- d) Continue to operate *Four Winds* into the future as an integral aspect of *Earth Link*.

### **Directions for 2011 - 2013**

These coming years will be a time of transition and consolidation. Given the gradual withdrawal of Mary Tinney from the responsibility of managing *Earth Link*, a new management structure and staffing arrangements will have to be introduced. The challenge for both the Core Group and the Leadership Team of the Sisters of Mercy is to decide upon the most desirable future and gradually implement this plan.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE GOVERNANCE

Into the future, the Sisters of Mercy Leadership Team see the need for a more formal Governance Structure.

- a) Establish a Board of Management, incorporating some members of the Core Group as well as others with particular expertise.
- b) The Board will monitor and advise on present operations and future directions of *Earth Link*.
- c) The Board would be set up to align with other Boards currently operating in aspects of Mercy Services.
- d) The Leadership Team will appoint a Board Member (perhaps a Sister of Mercy) to be the liaison person with the Mercy Leadership Team.

### Recommendations for Administration

New ways will need to be explored to determine the best and most financially viable administrative structure to take *Earth Link* into the future.

Several possible scenarios are proposed for consideration and exploration. Current salary rates for ongoing positions would remain in place using the annual CPI or agreed annual increase. A stipend would be paid to the Sisters of Mercy.

### ONE

| Responsibilities   | Allocation |
|--|------------|
| Manager who will keep an oversight of Mercy Link <i>Four Winds</i> and be the person to whom other staff are responsible (Sr of Mercy) | .2         |
| Program co-ordinator and web update (Sr Mary Tinney)   | .3         |
| Spirituality   | .1         |
| Well-being   | .1         |
| Administration and Hospitality   | .3         |
| Property   | .1         |

For this scenario, costing of the remuneration for a management position would be pro rata on the Community Services award which is the one usually applied to community or neighbourhood centre coordinators.

### TWO

| Responsibilities                                     | Allocation |
|--|------------|
| Manager, administration, hospitality, property       | .6         |
| Program co-ordinator and web-update (Sr Mary Tinney) | .3         |
| Spirituality   | .1         |
| Well-being   | .1         |

### THREE

| Responsibilities   | Allocation |
|--|------------|
| Manager  | .1         |
| Caretaker, hospitality, property (Resident in cottage option)* | .3         |
| Administration   | .2         |
| Program co-ordinator and web update (Sr Mary Tinney)           | .3         |
| Spirituality   | .1         |
| Well-being   | .1         |

\* Fringe benefit tax could be calculated by either an evaluation of local rental value or using the pensioner rental assistance scale.

### FOUR

| Responsibilities   | Allocation |
|--|------------|
| Manager  | .1         |
| Administration, Caretaker, hospitality, property (Resident in cottage option)* | .5         |
| Program co-ordinator and web update (Sr Mary Tinney)                           | .3         |
| Spirituality   | .1         |
| Well-being   | .1         |

\*As above.

### CONCLUSION

The findings of this review provide strong evidence of the wonderful spirit and work for human-earth well being that is being done by committed and informed people from many walks of life. Particular recognition is given to Sr Mary Tinney for her visionary leadership over many years.

The Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, Brisbane, have ensured the continuance of this ministry by their generous support given in both personnel and finance. It does give reality to their commitment to be Stewards of Creation.

Finally I would like to thank everyone for the generous and open participation of all who engaged in this review. It was indeed a privilege to work with you and I am deeply grateful.

Mary McDonald sgs PhD, M. Env Ed, M A(Theol), Dip Ed Admin.

August 2009