

A CHRISTIAN EARTH- CENTRED SPIRITUALITY AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

by

Mary C. Maitland

**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the
Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of [Spiritual Growth Ministries](http://www.sgm.org.nz)
(www.sgm.org.nz).**

INTRODUCTION

My fascination with the sacredness of Earth can be traced back into early childhood in my wondering about and experiencing the amazing unfolding of the universe. Looking back I am able to pinpoint a moment when as a six-year-old I experienced the Holy Mystery, God, in creation. My memory is sharp with the details and my feelings still hold the experience of a profound awe as well as an awareness of interconnectedness with the fuchsia bush and bee and a sense of God's delight in all three of us. I can now identify this as a foundational spiritual experience that has nourished and shaped my spirituality over the years despite being raised in the pre-Vatican II era of catholic school and youth systems, and at a time when human beings were increasingly exploiting, damaging and degrading our Earth as never before.

Recently, I was with eighteen women of all ages, from a wide range of church and non-church backgrounds. In the first five minutes of interacting together they named the sources of their spirituality as experiences of beauty, of goodness, creation, family relationships, gratitude, music, challenges in life and such like. No one mentioned the Bible, church rituals or services.

Today we are more consciously aware of the complexity, beauty and fragility of Earth, our home planet and the sacred site of our living and ministry. There is too, a developing moral consciousness about our use of the Earth's resources in lifestyles that are destroying ecosystems, leaving land denuded and exploited, so that eco-justice is finding a home in the agenda of Christians.

FOCUS

All of this has led to a growing amount of theologising and reflection on Creation theology and Earth spirituality and the emergence of some new questions about what constitutes an authentic Christian spirituality. So, in this paper I will argue that an authentic Christian spirituality today must include Earth as a central dimension. I also intend to explore how the ministry of spiritual direction, which enables individuals to respond more fully to the experience of God in their lives, may inspire a more holistic response to the mystery of God's creation.

CLARIFYING TERMS

I think that the personal and collective examples referred to at the beginning of this paper both show that experience of the divine cannot be confined to traditional religious categories. They also hint at how people are defining spirituality today. For example, as that which is the deepest source of their most authentic being, that which arises out of encountering the Divine Mystery, shapes their values and attitudes and moves them to act. Or, in Michael Morwood's words, "... the manner in which we allow our images of God and of our relationship with God to direct the way we live."¹ Our spirituality is revealed not so much by the theories we propose but by the way we act and react.

Most importantly, spirituality is about the experience or encounter of God. I have heard some argue against this but to me the very word "spirituality" refers to the spirit, to the core of life, the essence of one's being. Certainly, the word "God" comes loaded with

¹ Michael Morwood, *Tomorrow's Catholic*, p.97

undesirable meanings but in this paper I mean it to hold the richest transcendent creative presence possible, who can be immanent at every point in the universe.

It may also be pertinent to note here, that in today's world religion and spirituality are often confused giving the impression that one can be spiritual only by adopting and practising a formal, official faith system. Generally here in New Zealand church practice is in decline, but something deeper is happening in the hearts of many people that is leading to a revitalisation of grappling with spiritual questions and their consequences for living. An Earth-centred spirituality is one result.

THE NEED TO REDEFINE THE SACRED

When considerations of our relationship to planet Earth become an important dimension of our being and we take note of the exciting new information available to us from the many scientific disciplines and eco-theologians² and explore these issues a new ecological consciousness emerges. This consciousness invites a deeper contemplation of the God-Mystery, and a rethinking of many of our prior theological understandings. An example of this kind of rethinking can be seen in the area of biblical research where distinctions are being made between the inspired message and the world view and thought patterns, including the cosmology, of the time and cultures in which it emerges. This distinction becomes important when we discover that biblical cosmology does not fit with contemporary knowledge and experience about how our world came to be and yet many of our theological understandings seem to be based on it. Another dimension of this is the exclusive use of distant male images of God that distort not only our imaging of God but also reduce our relationships with God.

With the spread of Christianity into the Hellenistic world and the necessary communication of its message in the categories and thought patterns of Greek philosophy there emerged in Christian theology a tendency to value an immaterial intellectual world over the material cosmos. This view held that God is essentially elsewhere - in heaven - and comes from elsewhere to save humanity, a fallen race.³ While there existed an alternative tradition, expressed through people like Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechtilde and others, notions of a distant and different God became dominant and exercised a profound impact on Christian belief and doctrine in the following centuries.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, around the Council of Trent, the operative theology/cosmology was one which made distinctions between the "next world" - heaven/hell, "this world" - planet Earth, and "the church" - the organisation that got you from one to the other. What really counted was the human soul making its journey to God and dualistic notions of good and bad that denied the ultimate significance of everything aligned with nature or creation. There are still remnants of this around not only in individual spirituality but sadly in the language of church rituals, prayers and hymns where the focus is on that "other" world and life, and the belief that divinity is a reality that exists only there.

So, we now need a cosmology that fits with what is actually happening in the dynamism of the universe. Modern science tells us that the universe came to be when, out of the middle of "no-thing-ness", a creative process exploded into being. From that

² cf. writers such as Berry, Fox, McDonagh, McFague, Swimme.

³ Paul Collins, *God's Earth*, Chapter 3 gives a fuller overview, as does: Michael Morwood, *Tomorrow's Catholic*, p.64-71

original fireball has emerged everything in the universe, including the human race. We are part of the same creative process that gave birth to the stars and we are not the different and distant creatures that we had been led by our theology to think we were. Whether we can continue to believe in a distant and different God, an interventionist God, in this context is another major question. Can we get our minds around the notion of an evolutionary God, who is working from within the process rather than from outside it and what implications would that have for the rest of theology, especially our understanding of the process of redemption?

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

In grappling with the experiences arising from such issues as mentioned above, the process of the pastoral ministry of spiritual direction is a helpful tool. Spiritual direction facilitates the growth of the individual Christian's God-self-other relationship as he/she experiences this in the context of ordinary living. Barry & Connolly⁴ suggest three phases in enabling a person to honour the experience of God:

- by paying attention to it;
- by interpreting it;
- and by responding to it.

A major spiritual question then becomes how we encounter the God who bubbles up in the middle of our lives and of our universe and how we are to notice, interpret and respond to these encounters. A basic starting point given the brief history mentioned above is to encourage people to redirect their gaze from somehow looking for God outside of created reality to looking within. This focus fits with how Jesus directed the gaze of those who were looking for the reign of God to look for God “in your midst”. It also corresponds well with the parables. These invite people to look at the ordinary stuff of life - children leaving home, people baking bread or sowing seeds, in need of help or having a party, being busy or just contemplating the flowers of the fields and the birds of the air. It asks them to sit with the ordinary until the mystery that is in the middle of it is revealed. A fundamental conviction of the parables is that God is to be found in the middle of life and of creation.

A second step is in relation to interpretation. An outcome of the different and distant theology was to set up a struggle between secular and sacred, between creation and redemption, which suggested that the more we have to do with created things the further we go from God. There was a narrowing of the world of the sacred to a confined area and a corresponding exclusion of other things from the sacred realm. This now calls for a redefining of what we think is sacred. If everything created has value for God (cf. Gen. 1), then this endows the non-human world with rights that are intrinsic to their being, challenges our way of relating to them and calls us to a more inclusive understanding of justice.

It also recognises that God is immanent in every moment and everything, and for those who can see, the Earth is a primary source of revelation. I deliberately name planet Earth because our roots embed us here. This is humanity's common experience, and our vision of the universe, of God's wisdom at work, is from this viewpoint. I do not intend to isolate Earth from the other planets, suns, galaxies and space, but rather to highlight the significance of the home we live within, and therefore our commitment to its well

⁴ Barry & Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p.8

being.⁵ Second, for Christians, God's wisdom was embodied here in a special way in Jesus, so the mystery of the incarnation is an invitation to take the material world seriously as the home of God, and the place where the reign of God unfolds.

When we find ourselves in tune with encountering God within Earth's context as a follower of Jesus, the contemplation of this experience invites us to conversion. In our attitudes, through our actions, in our life-styles we are called to consciously connect faith with right relationships with the whole of created reality. If we take this seriously we discover that it involves a self-giving in love after the manner of the God we encounter, for the good of the whole creative, transformative process, leading to the fulfilment of the universe. Conversion is an essential notion in the development of this self-giving love. Close attention to Earth's complex processes reveals chaos, struggle, birth, growth, dying and death, played out on many scales. Reflection on these natural processes enables a more conscious and gracious living of them in our own lives. It makes us more sensitive to our common interdependence with things and more awake to the trauma humanity's greed and vandalism causes, not only to our fellow human beings, but also to the whole created reality.

An ecological conversion begins to take place as our sense of interconnectedness grows and our attitudes to living within Earth are modified with a reverence for all creation.

There is also a call to celebrate and a call to new forms of celebration that include the cycles of nature and life, as well as the traditional mysteries of faith. This means treating nature not just in terms of its symbolic meaning, which tends to be the present pattern, but as it is in itself. There are a growing number of resources such as hymns, prayers, blessings and rituals that celebrate nature in this way, which could be added to a spiritual director's repertoire.⁶ This does not mean that the director imposes her agenda, but in her careful listening to the other's experience different ways of honouring and celebrating this experience can be suggested. The director is thereby enabled to integrate the experience and respond in a more holistic way to the sacrament of God's presence in life.

CONCLUSION

These are just some of the dimensions that follow from an Earth-based spirituality. This is a relatively new area, albeit an urgent one, and these dimensions need further clarification, and other aspects may emerge. There is a risk that romanticising nature and over-emphasising the goodness of all things can lead to an inability to consider the problem of human evil or sinfulness whether in the individual or in human social systems. Nevertheless the gift of integrating Earth into Christian spirituality far outweighs the risks. Given the ecological crisis that confronts us the embrace of an Earth spirituality can help Christians to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem, as some people suggest⁷ or merely distant observers.

⁵ Neil Darragh: I need to acknowledge the reflection Neil has done with groups of Mission Sisters in which he shared some of his unpublished work. Also, cf. Creation Theology: How Well Are We Coping With Ecological Issues? Compass 27 Spring, 1993.

⁶ Helpful examples might include: Joy Cowley, Aotearoa Psalms and Psalms Down-Under, Elizabeth Roberts (Editor), Earth Prayers From Around the World, Chris Skinner, Chants for Silence (CD), Trisha Watts, Deep Waters (Poems and chants - book and CD), Miriam Therese Winter, Woman Prayer Woman Song and Earth Song

⁷ Paul Collins, God's Earth, p.87 on Lynn White's argument.

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