



# ECOLOGICAL SPIRITUALITY

Caring for Our Common Home

TRISH HINDMARSH



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# Introduction

*Sensing the sacred in all creation.*

Imagine the first shafts of light playing on tall Tasmanian oaks and blackwoods that tower above the Emu River valley in north-west Tasmania. A pair of blue fairy-wrens skitter across the grass, and a thousand yellow daffodils and creamy jonquils are swaying in a light breeze. The breath of God's creative spirit is rising in the sap of a bare walnut tree as hints of its new shoots promise spring at the end of a COVID-19 winter. Creation renews itself constantly, most spectacularly each spring, and speaks of newness of life. We each have our favourite examples of the miracles of nature.

“There lives the dearest freshness deep down things”, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. We can find God’s love expressed on the canvas of life and breathe a prayer of thanks ... “I’m alive, how blessed I am”.

We can share with the psalmist  
a hymn of quiet praise,  
‘O LORD, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all’.

Psalm 104

## Awakening and responding

An ecological spirituality helps us to wake up to the bounty and beauty of the natural world we live in, to be awake to God’s gift of the cosmos, and to be grateful. During the COVID-19 epidemic, a time of catastrophic change for humanity, our lives slowed and many realised how our frenetic, wasteful ways of living had impacted for generations on the health of the planet. Many people desire to live more respectful, sustainable and grateful lives when the pandemic has passed. The image of the New Delhi-based journalist on his rooftop noticing with awe the magnificent backdrop of the snow-capped Himalayas, visible for the first time as the city smog lifted, became an iconic global image of a new possibility for the earth.

In spite of all we humans have thrown at Mother Earth since the Industrial Revolution, we still have grain, fruits, fish and all manner of life-giving foods and medicinal cures from her bounty. The first commercial crops of cannabis are being processed in Australia, with millions of bottles of oil to be sent out annually to salve the sickness of humans around the world. There is news of a seaweed supplement being introduced to sheep and cattle paddocks in an effort to both mitigate methane in the atmosphere and enrich nutrient intake. Ploughing techniques are being improved to avoid run-off of precious topsoil during heavy rains.

Project West Wind on the east Coast of New Zealand capitalising on the famous ‘windy Wellington’ and Cook Strait squalls, is one of hundreds of wind farms operational in countries around the globe. West Wind generates annually as much electricity as 70,000 average New Zealand homes would use in the same period. That is the equivalent to powering all the homes in Wellington City.<sup>1</sup> One might wonder if all the plastic, concrete and metal that make up the components will prove sustainable a century from now, but one has to admire the skill of the engineers and construction team who oversee installations capable of standing up to ferocious winds like the Roaring Forties.

We can be grateful that the scientists are there, patiently exploring and working, not only to advise us how to act in a pandemic, but also how better to utilise and protect the gifts of Mother Earth.

How vital it is that our experts love and respect earth’s fragile ecological systems, and do not succumb to quick scientific fixes that have short-term economic gain but



The Himalayas visible for the first time in Delhi as smog disappeared during COVID





hungry crowd, with emphasis on meeting the needs of the people by sharing what we have and on collecting the leftovers in twelve baskets, symbolising a new Israel where abundance wins over scarcity, regeneration over waste.

Students are learning to respect and care for their bodies, which are, as one physical education teacher explained to a group of fifteen-year-olds, the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (Paul said it first: “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you”, 1 Corinthians 6:19).

Planning for a balanced diet and exercise is an example of ecological spirituality in action.

In recent years, many adults have joined millions of students around the world demonstrating for climate change action, demanding policies and strategies from governments that can seriously address devastation of the earth and help protect our common home. The energy, commitment, courage and organisational capacity of these young people has to be experienced to be believed. Their well-honed skills of critical analysis and their sense of purpose are clearly in evidence. Creative slogans, a spirit of *joie de vivre* and careful, collaborative planning has built confidence and focused their efforts. Social media links them to millions of like-minded young people across the globe, building solidarity and strength. The Spirit of Life can be tangibly felt in those gatherings and it is energising to experience the sense of purpose and solidarity the young people have been able to generate.

Ecological spirituality can equip us to discern where ‘action on behalf of justice’<sup>2</sup> is needed, and how to build communities of peace and courage in challenging unjust structures and practices.

can drain and destroy the soil, pollute and deplete water sources and the air we humans and all species need in order to live. We can send all those working hard to create new ways and methods a quiet ‘thank you’ and a blessing: ‘may you think thoughts of life, may you go gently and wisely in your research and work, following the rhythms of nature that are in the DNA of Mother Earth. May the God who *is* Life be with you’.

An ecological spirituality can inspire us to be in tune with what is happening in our world and its impact on God’s gift of planet Earth.

Increasingly, schools across Australia have school gardens, greenhouses and bike tracks to provide for outdoor education as part of their strategic planning. Children are learning to grow vegetables and flowers, study the cycles of nature, compost waste and harvest their crops; they can learn to prepare vegetable soup for the local charity soup kitchen that operates in town to feed the homeless, learning to make the connection between the ‘fruits of the earth’ which are to be shared for all and the call of Jesus to ‘feed the hungry’ (Mt 25).

Mt 14:13–21 tells the story of the feeding of the





## Pope Francis' ecological revolution

In his major encyclical to humanity, *Laudato Si'*, (2015), Pope Francis encourages the young to rise up. He challenges adults from every nation and every state of life, towards an 'ecological conversion',<sup>3</sup> a change of mind and heart that can enable us to see with new eyes the preciousness of God's earth, and the impact of its abuse. This abuse especially affects the poor, who are always the ones to suffer most from ecological irresponsibility. The rich nations stand to benefit most from the plunder of mining, deforestation, toxicity and loss caused by a ceaseless search for resources to create more and more goods to be consumed by those who can afford them. Among the 'poor', Pope Francis includes the Earth herself and all other species who are being wiped out by human greed and exploitation. He laments:

**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; (LS,2)**

We humans are wrecking the ecological systems of earth and turning the planet into 'a pile of filth', to quote the Pope's stark phrase<sup>4</sup>. Australians are realising now as never before the destruction of species that catastrophic fires can cause. We lived through the 2019/2020 bush fires in which ecologists estimated that more than one billion native animals were burned alive. We mourned their loss and are searching our collective soul for answers.

In 2020, right in the midst of COVID-19, Pope Francis introduced the Season of Creation with a message of Jubilee, celebrating the five years since *Laudato Si'* was launched in 2015.

Jubilee is a biblical concept grounded in all three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Book of Leviticus calls for a Sabbath every fiftieth year and a mini-Sabbath every seven years (Leviticus 25:2–24). The 'Sabbath' means a time of rest for the earth, release of captives and recollection of God's goodness for all. Our modern 'Sabbath', almost a dim memory for many people now, remains still fresh for believing Christians and Jews.

Pope Francis invited us to revive this concept of Jubilee and of Sabbath. The experience of COVID-19 may well have heightened human understanding of the need for a 'Sabbath' of creation. Global economies slowed, the air cleared, acid rain abated, and carbon emissions were temporarily stalled.

The direction of this book is influenced and informed by the extraordinary work of Pope Francis, building on his two predecessor Popes, St John Paul II and Benedict XVI, sharing their passionate commitment to 'Our Common Home'<sup>5</sup>.







Baby Boomers joining School Strike 4 Climate 2021

## Our aim for this guide

An ecological spirituality can help us to reflect deeply on what we humans are doing to the earth and empower us to respond positively to the call to change both our individual and collective hearts and minds. Our cultural mindsets and ways of living and working need a radical overhaul. The ill-health of the ecologies that make up life on planet Earth is a huge wake up call, and perhaps only an inner enlightenment, a genuine eco-spirituality, can empower us to recognise the need for radical change in the way we relate to our planet, which is home to us all.

At this point it is interesting to consider the derivation of the word 'ecology', which comes from the same Greek word for 'home' (*'oikos'*), as does the word 'economy'. The human organisation of the economy and the ecology of the natural world are both related to providing a home for all that lives, a home for the human species and for all other species.

The aim of this guide is to help us find inspiration and be empowered. We are spiritual as well as physical and intellectual beings. We need to draw fresh water from the wells of spirituality, wherever those wells are to be found – in Jesus, 'the Bible' Francis of Assisi, Hildegard of Bingen and other spiritual guides, in dialogue with credible science, showing the way to a better future, and through the power of contemplation and prayer.

## The content

In Chapter 1, we introduce the concept of spirituality and what it means today. To be spiritual is part of being human. Many people have a heightened sense of the importance of recognising and nurturing their sense

of awe and wonder. The great religions have always respected and fostered the life of the spirit with their followers. In this book we largely draw upon Christian spiritual traditions, but not to the exclusion of other expressions of spirituality.

In Chapter 2, we focus specifically on ecological spirituality which celebrates the beauty and power of nature and acknowledges with gratitude the Creator of the cosmos. Care for the earth is recognised as an integral aspect of ecological spirituality. Prayer and contemplation allow us to enter into a relationship of love and respect for Mother Earth and all that has evolved during the billions of years of evolution. Our spiritual task is to realise we are members of the Earth Community, and that we must share responsibility for the health of our planet.

In Chapter 3 we explore the many ways in which spirituality can open our eyes and ears, and speak to the heart, through our personal experiences of being 'in' nature, and through music, poetry or the arts as mirrors of nature.

Chapter 4 asks, "Where did we go so wrong?" We face the evidence of utter devastation, greed and neglect that has caused our beautiful planet to be despoiled, acknowledging our failure, as human beneficiaries of earth's bounty, to care for the earth.

In Chapter 5 we introduce some sure guides for us in seeking an ecological spirituality: our First Peoples, historical saints and scholars, trailblazers and activists from our own times.

Chapter 6 explores the biblical concept of Sabbath as a time for rest, restoration and giving thanks for the Creator's bounty. We reflect on the importance and relevance of 'Sabbath' for the twenty-first century.

Chapter 7 addresses how we can respond in action to the realities reflected on in previous chapters. We find practical models, resources and actions to support us in



a commitment to mend our ways, opening ourselves to 'ecological conversion', both personally and as societies. We explore how we can act now to leave behind for our descendants a planet that is healthy, and social systems that better provide a just share of earth's resources for all.

Endnotes and Resources: Organisations, resources and strategies to support earth care and sustainable development are introduced at the end of the book for further consideration in moving towards serious ecological commitment.

As each chapter is read, alone or in a group, at home, in a parish, school, or other community setting, the questions for discussion at the end of each chapter can help provoke thought and encourage active responses.

## The way forward: science and spirituality working together

In her landmark work, *Silent Spring* (1962)<sup>6</sup>, Rachel Carson was the first modern scientist to bring global attention to the ecological devastation caused by DDT and other toxic chemicals on the ecology of planet Earth. It was the silence of the birds that alerted her to this environmental crisis. She courageously exposed how misdirected science can justify agricultural practices that damage soils, water, air and the thriving habitats of many species.

Sound spiritual insight and the strength of right living go hand in hand with honest, credible scientific research to inform and empower us in facing the ecological crisis. This crisis has escalated way beyond what Rachel Carson revealed in the early 1960s.

**The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. (LS, 217)**

*Laudato Si'* on ecological conversion

In the twenty-first century, there is at last a growing consciousness that we can and must face squarely the facts of our human relationship with God's earth. We humans are, as Thomas Berry explained, members of 'The Earth Community', not lords over it.<sup>7</sup>

Human gifts of intelligence, including emotional and spiritual intelligence, allow us to be conscious of and loving towards the created world. We are capable of being in relationship and communion with both the natural world we are all part of, and with its loving Creator.

An ecological spirituality can help us to be co-creators with God in our own lives and our own neck of the woods. We can grow in love and respect for God's creation as the gift of love. We can be activists with those committed to save our planet. We can be open to the vastness of the universe as God's handiwork, which, as poet Max Ehrmann wrote in the 1920s, continues "unfolding as it should".<sup>8</sup>

**You are a child of the universe,  
no less than the trees and the stars;  
you have a right to be here.  
And whether or not it is clear to you,  
no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.**

Extract from Max Ehrmann's poem *Desiderata*:  
*Words for Life* (1927)

We hope this book will be an accessible, useful companion on the road towards eco-spirituality and newness of life. Nothing could be more vital for our times.





