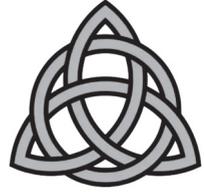


## CHAPTER 1

# Setting the scene



Earth is in crisis. We need a Christian spiritual praxis<sup>1</sup> that is relevant and possible, one that motivates and sustains us for action. At the heart of such a praxis is the way we envisage the meeting of Heaven and Earth.

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 world view,<sup>2</sup> which underpins much of Western culture, has led us to a disastrous state of affairs. We are in the midst of a global crisis, in which climate change and environmental degradation need to concern us all.<sup>3</sup> The data is to hand 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 tell us of the evolutionary or emerging nature of the universe, and of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all reality. For some, the world view of scientific naturalism provides a vision that can take us into the future, but I find this world view inadequate because it depends only on what we can see in a material sense. Neither can I accept a

1 Praxis differs from practice by having a considered theoretical underpinning.

2 The Oxford Dictionary defines world view as ‘a particular philosophy of life or conception of the world’, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/world-view>

3 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*. In Chapter 1 of the encyclical Pope Francis 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.

4 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), ‘Climate Change 2014’, p. 2. 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.’

world view that denigrates Earth in the pursuit of a heavenly future, or one in which Heaven and Earth completely overlap without allowing for differences. This book holds up a vision that links the material and the spiritual in a way that values both Heaven and Earth, recognising 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.

In this book I argue that it is possible for us to engage spiritually in an emerging universe if we have a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth<sup>5</sup> that is informed by contemporary science, if we underpin this vision with an ecotheology that recognises Heaven and Earth as interconnected while respecting their differences, and if we cultivate an open ecospiritual praxis in which we are attentive to, and aware of, divine presence in all that is. This is not the dominant paradigm. To adopt this new paradigm we will need to re-vision many assumptions.

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>6</sup> which heads this and most 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>7</sup> No part is complete except as part of the whole, and the whole ‘transcends yet includes’<sup>8</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.

The use of the Celtic triquetra also underlines that the parts are interconnected in their distinctiveness, and not in any sense of hierarchical

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5 References to Heaven and Earth, Planet Earth and the Earth community will be capitalised in this book.

6 There are many versions of the Celtic knot, but the one I am using has a circle going through the three parts of the triquetra or triangle, underlining the interconnectedness and unity of the three parts. The image is available in the public domain.

7 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, p. 269.

8 Phipps, *Evolutionaries*, p. 191. Phipps acknowledges Hegel’s recognition of this pattern of ‘transcending and including’ as a universal principle of evolutionary emergence.

value. At the same time, there is no hint that the parts are equal. While the title of the book contains only two elements, Heaven and Earth, we will at times consider humans as the third element of the triquetra when looking at Earth as the whole Earth or planetary community, and at other times 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.

In the context of this book, Heaven<sup>9</sup> is the locus or place of the Divine.<sup>10</sup> Heaven is not understood as an other-worldly realm<sup>11</sup>, but rather as a relational reality that 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 book. 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 book, I refer to God in various instances as God, Ultimate Mystery, the Divine and the Sacred. This is part of a sensitivity to those whom I have encountered who are experiencing what Ilia Delio calls a ‘new atheism,’<sup>12</sup> a necessary 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 they are seeking to revise.

When I refer to ‘Earth’<sup>13</sup>, I do not mean the soil but the planet, including the whole Earth community, to which human society belongs<sup>14</sup>, and all

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9 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,’ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/heaven>. This is not the sense in which the term is used here.

10 When I am using the Divine as a naming of God, I will use upper case.

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

12 Delio, *Unbearable Wholeness*. Chapter 4 is about birthing a new God.

13 In the Oxford Dictionary, ‘Earth’ is understood as the planet on which we live, and ‘earth’ is the soil, or substance of the land surface, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/earth>. I will use the term to mean the planet, including the Earth community.

14 Rasmussen, *Earth Community*, p. 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.’

parts of which are caught up in processes of evolutionary emergence.<sup>15</sup> Planet Earth is also part of the unfolding story of the universe and thus has a cosmic<sup>16</sup> dimension. This perspective influences the formation of an anthropocosmic<sup>17</sup> world view, which I explore for its theological meaning using the work of Elizabeth Johnson. It is the whole that is in relationship with the Divine, and this is the basis of a theocentric world view.

This book is about how we humans engage spiritually within an emerging universe. While the material is applicable generally, the focus is on one community group and the way it responds spiritually to the current environmental crisis. This book is grounded in the principles and practice of the Earth Link community, which since 2000 has 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>18</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>19</sup>

The journey described in the book takes the Earth Link community to a new place as it engages spiritually in our emerging universe. Spirituality is not necessarily aligned with a religious tradition, as we read in the words of Bron Taylor: ‘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

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15 Edwards, *Partaking of God*, p. 75. The term ‘evolutionary emergence’ provides a concise way of referring to the dynamics of the evolutionary process.

16 In the Oxford Dictionary, ‘cosmos’ is understood as the ‘universe seen as a well-ordered whole’, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cosmos>.

17 Grim & Tucker, *Ecology and Religion*, p. 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.’

18 Costigan, Rose & Tinney, *Introduction to Ecospirituality*. This publication was a series of essays on the principles of Earth Link, developed in 2007 by Dr Philip Costigan, Dr Patricia Rose and Sr Mary Tinney.

19 Statement of the Sisters of Mercy of Australia and Papua New Guinea, Chapter, 2011.

otherwise secular endeavours such as psychotherapy, political and environmental activism, and one's lifestyle and vocational choices.<sup>20</sup>

However, Earth Link engages 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, continues to feature prominently in this consideration of ecospirituality.

Ecospirituality needs to be grounded in well-considered ecotheology. The work of Elizabeth Johnson is very pertinent in this respect. Ecospirituality also needs to be relevant to the reality we live in, namely, that of an evolving, emerging universe. Ecospirituality and ecotheology need to be cognisant of developments in contemporary science and philosophy, and the implications that flow from them. Ecotheology is important for the enhanced ecospiritual principles and practice presented in this book, which I have developed for the Earth Link community.

## Outline

In Chapter 2, I begin with an introduction to Earth Link, its origins and what it stands for. The Earth Link community was the springboard for the thesis that forms the basis of much of this book. In Chapter 3, I first indicate how practical theology is an appropriate methodology for establishing connections between life and theology, then go on to summarise the dialogues with ecospirituality and ecotheology, and the affirmations and challenges, that my research opened up. In the main part of the book, in Chapters 4 to 8, I expound an enhanced version of the vision, mission and principles for Earth Link. I supplement this exposition with suggestions for reflection and conversation that can help to integrate the material into the praxis of individuals and groups who share a passionate concern for the wellbeing of Earth and cosmos, based in a vision of the embrace of Heaven and Earth.

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<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *Dark Green Religion*, p. 3.