

The Sacred from Below: the ecological spirit of our time

David Tacey

Our civilisation is at the edge of a new experience of the sacred. The sacred is about to be realised where it is not 'supposed' to be, in the realm of nature, earth, embodiment and physicality. This is a momentous change not only for the West, but insofar as a Western-style mentality has infiltrated every corner of the world, for the entire globe. The shift is a relocation of the sacred from the heavens to the earth, from the higher cosmic realm to the natural realm 'below'. Typically, in the three major monotheisms of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the divine has been located in the realm 'above', in the empyrean of starry space and distant skies. In symbolic terms, the figure of a Heavenly Father has ruled over our apprehension of the sacred for millennia. But the Sky God has expired, 'God is dead', and the divine effulgence appears to have fallen to earth, lighting up the world of nature with an otherworldly glow.

The divine energy never completely disappears; it merely shifts its location. It cannot disappear, as it is archetypal, that is to say, a core feature of reality. In physics, too, energy changes its form and never expires. When one god dies, another appears, but the new god is often in a place where we least expect it. The divine is mercurial and plays tricks on us, especially if we have killed off the last god through our egotism and lack of reverence. The new god will not reveal itself immediately, but only gradually, through time. The new god will appear under our noses, but it requires an act of vision, of prophetic imagination, to see it. Poets get there first, and artists and musicians. Only later do the intellectuals and theologians follow suit. Philosophers come after the poets and before the theologians, who only 'see' once it has all been written down. Theologians spend too long mourning the death of the old god, and as such are not predisposed to welcome the new.

This changing of the gods comes at an auspicious time in human history. The earth is facing an unprecedented ecological crisis, and the biophysical depletion of nature and its resources has been carried to an alarming degree by the progressive mentality that has governed Western society since the rise of science and technology. As the earth faces a pivotal 'point of no return', it is timely, to say the least, that the earth should appear at this moment as a source for the resacralisation of consciousness. The so-called 'environmental crisis' is wrongly termed, in my view, for it is a crisis of human consciousness, a failure to view the physical world and its elements as sacred. For only that which is sacred is treated with respect, and when something is treated as profane it is taken for granted and discounted. The earth once was a sacred creation, and the invisible hand of the creator was seen in every rock, river and blade of grass. But as soon as we lost this awareness, we began to treat the earth as a lifeless and empty resource for human

advancement, and since then the natural world has been disrespected. The desacralisation of consciousness is responsible for the environmental crisis, and the sooner we can recover a sense of the sacred, the sooner will the earth be able to recover from the damage that has occurred.

One cannot escape the impression that the issue of gender lurks just beneath the surface of this history of disrespect. In the same way that Western patriarchy has devalued women and the human embodiment of the feminine, so has it devalued the earthly embodiment of the feminine. As ancient mythologies and pagan religions attest, nature is best personified as the Earth Mother who governs the field of creation, procreation, birth, death and rebirth. Indeed, the English word 'matter' derives from the Latin term *mater*, meaning mother. It is not accidental that centuries of patriarchal consciousness have culminated in an industrial-technological complex that has devalued the feminine earth and brought it, or *her*, to the point of ecological collapse.

It is important that we attempt to bring this mythic personification of nature back into our cultural awareness, and not just treat the earth as an external object, lacking identity or independent life of its own. As Jung wrote in the last year of his life:

A concept like 'physical matter', stripped of its numinous connotation of the 'Great Mother', no longer expresses the vast emotional meaning of 'Mother Earth'. It is a mere intellectual term, dry as dust and entirely inhuman. (1961: 584)

I remember the first time I heard of 'Mother Earth', my heart leapt forth and I felt stirred from within. It was in an assembly in primary school, and the headmistress was trying to convey to the students something of the importance of the rhythm of the seasons. I suppose from a rational point of view, her talk about Mother Earth must have looked old-fashioned and quaintly sentimental, but it conveyed meaning to me in such a way that no mere talk about the seasonal cycles could ever have done. Later in life, when I heard about the 'Gaia hypothesis' of James Lovelock, it too meant more to me than any merely intellectual term. I think there is a part of us that comes alive when we return to the mythic personifications that scientifically-based education has dispensed with. Emotional knowing is as important, and sometimes more important, than conceptual knowing, especially if we need to summon psychic energy to meet the ecological crisis that we currently face.

Some people refer to the 'rape' of nature, and this is an apt metaphor because the mentality that abuses nature is a heroic-masculinist one that has run rampant and unchecked for too long. It might therefore be a ruse of nature to suddenly reverse the tables, and to present matter, *mater*, physicality and creation as sacred, at precisely the time when it is most threatened by a consciousness that has been blind to nature's sacredness. Moreover, at this same time we are witnessing the decline of the patriarchal sacred order, and the loss of God the Father from our cultural awareness. Nietzsche declared that God was dead in the

nineteenth century, and ever since the West has moved steadily away from a religious awareness that could make sense of the old deity. In the 1960s, an American astronaut returning from space was asked by a cynical journalist if he had seen God out there. His humorous reply was, 'Yes, and she's black!'. This was probably more profound than either the journalist or the astronaut were able to appreciate. For the fact remains that the decline of the Heavenly Father as the centre of sacred life in the West has left a spiritual void, which may need to be filled by an equal and opposite archetypal force.

It was the philosopher Heraclitus who proposed the principle of *enantiodromia* in the psyche, that is, a tendency for psychic energy to 'run in the opposite direction', once it had reached its limit in an existing situation. What we are seeing today, I believe, is nothing less than a 'changing of the gods' in our culture. This dramatic shift is not of our conscious choosing, but is happening of its own accord, since the archetypal dominants of our culture are disturbed or imbalanced, and need to be compensated by a new development. Psychic energy in the patriarchal mould has 'peaked' and is in rapid decline. Even feminism, with all its revolutionary energy and protest, is a response to an enantiodromia rather than the instigator of it. There are objective forces at work in the *zeitgeist* or spirit of the time, and at such a time we can only stand in awe of the pace at which long-established values are being reversed and time-honoured practices and beliefs are being overturned. As Jung wrote:

We are living in what the Greeks called the *kairos*, the right moment, for a 'metamorphosis of the gods', of the fundamental principles and symbols. This peculiarity of our time, which is certainly not of our conscious choosing, is the expression of the unconscious man within us who is changing. (1957: 585)

Jung's language is dated and not precise. It is not so much the 'unconscious man within us' who is changing, but rather the interior woman. It is 'she' who has had enough of patriarchal oppression, and is now bursting out with impact and force. The interior man stands amazed and confused, as his feminine counterpart takes on a new life and demands her right to expression and influence. Call this, if you will, feminism at the deep archetypal level, a psychic or mythic equivalent to what we have seen in the social and political sphere over the last forty or fifty years.

We are about to see, and are already beginning to see, the revival of pagan religions of the earth and its seasonal mysteries, as well as a rise in the cult of the feminine, the veneration of the goddesses and of the Earth Mother and Eternal Feminine. As well, at this same time, we are seeing an entirely new and remarkable worldwide respect for archaic, tribal, and indigenous religions and cultures, such as that of the North American Indians and the Australian Aboriginals, about whom this book is concerned. It is these ancient cosmologies, which historically can be seen to be on a completely different tack to the patriarchal monotheisms, and which appear to show the way in terms of how we might recover our lost respect for the earth and our veneration of natural mysteries.

Naturally, and expectedly, the remnant patriarchal traditions are alarmed by the rise of feminine spirit in our time. They warn of the ‘dangers’ of natural, as distinct from revealed, religion, of the ‘problems’ of heathenism, as distinct from transcendental and scriptural truth, and of the ‘temptations’ of the earthly pleasures and the body. But such warnings are anachronistic and false. The only danger that faces us today is continued one-sided adherence to a patriarchal order that scorns the feminine and reviles the earth. The greatest favour we can do to ourselves and the planet is to relax the anxiety of the patriarchal tradition toward the body and earth, and experience the feminine mysteries in a positive light. The pendulum of our civilisation needs to swing in the opposite direction; otherwise we will never find the balance that allows us to live in harmony with the earth and the natural mysteries.

There will be warnings that civilisation is going to the dogs unless we return to the ways of the past. But unless we break our moral and spiritual identifications with the former patriarchal system, unless we recognise that it is one-sided and needs complementing by a healthy dose of what it has suppressed, we will indeed be heading for ruin. So this makes this time all the more stressful, because many spiritual and moral authorities, acting in accordance with the light of the past, issue warnings and pleas based on the truth as they understand it. But in our time, truth has changed, and what was true in the past has become false in our day. We need a new ‘testament’ to take into account the rise of the feminine from its suppression, and the rise of nature from its subjugation by patriarchal spirit.

Jung puts our situation clearly: ‘Eternal truth needs a human language that alters with the spirit of the times’ (1946: 396), and in more paradoxical terms: ‘All the true things must change and only that which changes remains true’ (1955-56: 503). Truth never stays the same, and as the spirit of the times changes we have to change with it. This is hard to do, and for some it is impossible, especially if we feel that truth has been ‘written in stone’. The patriarchal order likes to believe that its truth is true for all time, that it has been handed down from on high. However, this notion has to be sacrificed, to make way for the new truth which is coming up from below. The challenge today, as I have suggested, is not to destroy the heavenly truth, but to put it to one side so we can listen to the new truth that demands to be heard, from nature and the feminine. We need to listen to its sacred voice, to hear its plea to be respected as we have respected the ‘law of the fathers’ in the past.

In this monumental turn that I am delineating, the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries begins to take on a new importance for us today. The Romantic movement in Europe and America generated some of the greatest poetry, literature, visual art and philosophy in Western history, and yet I do not believe that its spiritual and cultural significance has yet been fully grasped. It represented the compensatory return, in a patriarchal era, of the repressed feminine. Although the term ‘romanticism’ can be trivialised and reduced to an

aesthetic affectation or erotic swoon, it was, and continues to be, a major archetypal expression of the sanctity of nature, the sacredness of creation, and the holiness of desire, embodiment, sexuality and libido. Romanticism is not just a stuffy, high-cultural movement confined to love-struck poets and philosophers, but a serious renaissance of the feminine and matriarchal dominants that have always existed in the Western psyche but which have been driven underground.

In this sense, the contemporary interest in primitivism, indigenous tribes, earth cosmologies, wicca, paganism, divinatory systems, herbalism, gardening, natural remedies, goddesses, attunement with natural forces, are contiguous with a new romanticism in the arts, philosophy, music, ecological science, feminist theory and physics. All of these cultural expressions are, in turn, resonant with a new earth-romanticism found in Jungian depth psychology, with its emphasis on the recovery of what has been lost to the patriarchal frame. Based on Jungian thought, and on Hillman's archetypal psychology, a new discourse has emerged which calls itself eco-psychology. Jung's work was constantly attempting to re-establish the unitary reality of what he called 'primitive man', whose relationship with nature was binding and emotional. However, much of Jung's work is concerned with pointing out how this binding relationship has been lost to our consciousness:

Through scientific understanding our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him. Thunder is no longer the voice of a god, nor is lightning his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man's life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbours a great demon. Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to things, like stones, springs, plants and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious. (1961: 585).

One need only place this quotation beside contemporary ecological writings to realise to what extent Jung has prefigured, and perhaps influenced, the present preoccupation with the resacralisation of nature:

It is difficult to undo our own damage, and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave. It is hard to desecrate a sacred grove and change your mind.... We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it; we are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind once cry, and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech has perished from among the lifeless things of earth, and living things say very little to very few. (Dillard 1984: 70)

We seek to 'undo our damage', and we are not even sure how to go about it. Working at the purely external or economic level on climate change and environmental matters is not enough. It helps to attend to things from outside, but since the real problem has to do with our psychological attitude and an absence of sacred feeling, I doubt the capacity of secular governments and well-meaning agencies to resolve the 'environmental crisis'. To put this another way, one cannot resolve this crisis with the same mental approach that created it in the first place. Something further is needed, and that something is a movement of the soul into the

world, an act of vision which allows the so-called 'outside' world to reveal its interiority and its intense inward fire. If we continue to treat the world as 'outside' the soul, we continue to perpetuate the problem, rather than solve it.

However, the notion that the spiritual link with nature has 'gone forever' is an overstatement. As Jung himself says in the same essay, 'Since energy never vanishes, the emotional energy that manifests itself in all numinous phenomena does not cease to exist when it disappears from consciousness' (1961: 583). What is lost to our awareness falls into the unconscious, from where it has to be recovered, by hard labour, effort and creative endeavour. The emotional, psychic and spiritual connection with nature can still be brought into consciousness, so long as we have the courage to sacrifice some of our rationality and egotism, which keeps it at bay and prevents it from making its necessary return. For clearly, we cannot make way for the spiritual communication with nature unless we are able to make room for it in the psyche, and prepare a place for it in the hierarchy of our knowledge, wisdom and education.

It is the confinement of soul to the human being that has been responsible for the despiritualisation of nature. To walk again in a sacralized universe, we need to feel that we are walking through the soul of the world, and soul is not merely human, but is an aspect of creation. Soul is thus 'returned' to the world; not that it ever left the world, but in our error and misperception, we imagined soul was confined to the human. When we revise our philosophy, we will arrive at a poetics of being in which the idea of a sacralized universe can be experienced in our bodies and thought as the foundation for the animated life in creation. In this way, we no longer inhabit a dead, alien landscape, but the earth becomes alive with the presence of the sacred, and the order of things is restored.

References

- Dillard, Annie 1984: *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. London: Picador.
- Jung, C. G. 1961: 'Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams', in *The Collected Works*, Vol.18, *The Symbolic Life*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977.
- Jung, C. G. 1946: 'The Psychology of the Transference', in *The Collected Works*, Vol.16, *The Symbolic Life*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954/1966.
- Jung, C. G. 1955-6: *Mysterium Coniunctionis*. *The Collected Works*, Vol.14, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963/1970.
- Jung, C. G. 1957: 'The Undiscovered Self: Present and Future', in *The Collected Works*, Vol.10, *Civilization in Transition*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.
- Roszak, Theodore, Mary E. Gomes and Allen K. Kanner (eds.) 1995: *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

David Tacey is the author of eight books and many essays and articles. His books include: *ReEnchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 2000; and *The Spirituality Revolution*, Sydney: Harper Collins, 2003. His most recent book is *How to Read Jung*, London: Granta, 2006.

