

# Eucalyptus rubida

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## The Agenda of the World is a Sacred Agenda

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Over the last twelve months or so three books have 'invited themselves' onto the shelves of my library. They are *Sacred Unity* and *Angels Fear, (Towards an epistemology of the Sacred)*, both by Gregory Bateson, and *Reinventing the Sacred* by Stuart Kaufmann. They have inspired me to use the word in the title of this issue.

The other part of the title '*The Agenda of the World*' has come from an internal document of our order (the Christian Brothers) where we have been exhorted to address the agenda of the world in our activities.

We are very often trapped by the words we use. In this instance what do we mean by the 'world'? Taken in a cosmological sense I think it means not just the world as we see it now, a collection of objects not much different from day to day, but more than that. I see the world as an ongoing, evolving, emerging event straining toward spirit, driven by this spirit, right from day one (sic) when our great origin event began in time-space.

Now I am in trouble because I have introduced a new word 'spirit' without defining what I mean. Many thinkers both ancient and modern have tried to put words around what animates the universe, if in fact they believe in such an animating principle. Most common in our cultural context is, of course, God.

I have never found this way of putting it very satisfactory. It has been common that when our human argument or science comes up with a final obstacle, we invoke God as the probable explanation. The default assumptions seem to be 1) such a god is pre-existent in time to the world. 2) such a god is by nature personal. 3) such a god is transcendent, meaning, exists separate from the world.

The mystics have more often than not preferred not to be so dualistic, but to stress what we have come to know divinity as 'immanence' and something (not a thing really) substantive to our order of reality. In the last analysis our attempts to elucidate the subject are irretrievably foiled by our very language.

So when I use the word 'spirit' I am attempting to span both worlds, with their competing polarities. Better in many ways not to use words at all, but let's use them with qualification. Early Chinese wisdom had an interesting take on this:

*Tao is beyond words A beyond things.*

*It is not expressed Either in word or in silence.*

*Where there is no longer word or silence Tao is apprehended. Chuang Tzu (287 BC)*

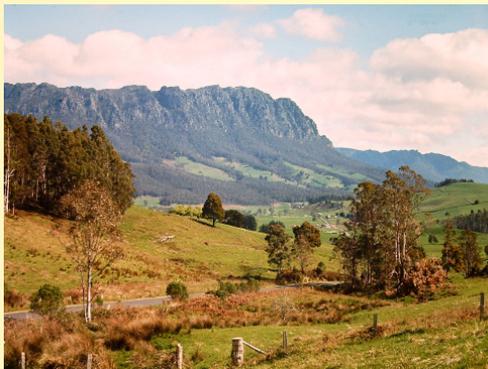
In more recent times we might consider the

Vedantic scholar and mystic Sri Aurobindo. In this instance he uses the word 'Life' where we might read 'spirit'.

*Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in Life because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life. Life a form of veiled consciousness.*

*Sri Aurobindo The Life Divine*

In recent times the cyberneticist Gregory Bateson's views are well documented in his and his wife's joint volume *Angels Fear - Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred*. This might sound like a difficult idea but I think it boils down to this. How do we come to know about the 'sacred'. Bateson is very good at not defining many of his concepts,



and I am not necessarily recommending this book to the casual reader, but I think he has something to tell us. Though admitting to a lineage of atheism, as an anthropologist he has had a life-time of exposure to the sacred in culture, and committed himself to write in its defence, and to explain it as he sees it.

He is critical of the religious far-right who uncritically isolate some religious beliefs from rational examination, declaring them to be immune from reason. At the same time he is critical of the left-brain rationalists who deny any realism to what we might call the 'spiritual realm'. In a lecture *Ecology of Mind: The Sacred* he states about the Eucharist:

*...bread and wine are sacred objects. Now bread and wine are sacred not because they represent the body and blood of Christ, but because they are of the stuff of life, the stuff of hospitality so we secondarily relate them with Christ, with sacrifice and the rest of it.*

So it is the whole world and its associated life that is sacred and not secular or profane. In Bateson's view what is profane is when the sacred is abused. This concept is interesting for us at a time when the ecology of our sacred world is being abused in so many ways.

Perhaps that is why we can say that the agenda of the world is a sacred agenda, and only becomes profane when we divorce it from its deeper spiritual relationship to us.

Stuart Kaufmann has been widely criticised for his excursion into the sacred. He is better known as an evolutionary biologist and mathematician, and was famously involved with the Santa Fe Institute where he developed a theory of life by auto-catalysis.

His immersion into the very basics of life has led him to suggest that creativity lies at the source of evolving life. This puts him very close to 'vitalist; thinking which is anathema to most of science. However he is unapologetic and is prepared to say things like:

*Thus, beyond the new science that glimmers a new world view, we have a new view of God, not as transcendent, not as an agent, but as the very creativity of the universe itself. This God brings with it a sense of oneness, unity, with all of life, and our planet — it expands our consciousness and naturally seems to lead to an enhanced potential global ethic of wonder, awe, responsibility within the bounded limits of our capacity, for all of life and its home, the Earth, and beyond as we explore the Solar System.*

The new science he speaks of includes values and ethics - not normally accepted in science.

When one attempts to integrate the thinking of these two authors, the conclusion might be stated something like this:

1. The world and all life presents itself to us as a sacred and personal invitation to relationship.
2. The agenda of the world is spirit infused i.e. it appeals to us deeply and invites awe, wonder and engagement.
3. That disconnect between the rational and the sacred results in disaster, both personally and globally.

When we come to accept that the agenda of the world is a sacred agenda, and that we are an integral part of the world and not separate from it, and that this 'agenda' has been in the very DNA of our universe for almost 14 billion years, then we have a lot of listening to do to our world in its wisdom and creativity, and its radical invitation to be in a deep love relationship with it and with what we might call its desire for fulfilment. In many ways we are the creativity of the universe in its human expression.

When we stand in ecstatic contemplation of the threatened orangutan of Borneo, we find ourselves looking at a vulnerable expression of ourselves, and a loving compassion is evoked. As in so many other examples in our world, the only thing we need to fear is not having compassion, of doing nothing. And while we cannot do everything all at once, doing nothing at all is not an option for a human fully alive to the sacred.

Trevor Parton

Photo: Mt Roland, Tasmania