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Thomas Berry 101

by Rich Heffern

Here are four key insights from Thomas Berry's books and talks that provide a spiritual framework for the work of transforming our relationship with the planet.

1. When we destroy the natural world, we destroy the ground of our religious imagination.

Our ability to imagine what God is like owes everything to the world around us. We have a wonderful idea of God because we have always lived on a planet that is chock-full, every nook and cranny, with marvels and mysteries, dark beauty, happy encounters and splendid landscapes. How could we picture God in our heads as an ever fresh and creative daybreak, as a compassionate father or nurturing mother, as a wonder-counselor if we had never experienced these qualities in the people, land and life around us?

What kind of God would we pray to if we lived on the bleak surface of the moon? We are literally killing off our religious imagination when we destroy the natural world. Fr. Berry pointed out that the real human tragedy lies in this soul starvation.

2. We have forgotten that the revelation found in the natural world and in the wider universe around us is the primary divine revelation.

Revelation is the awakening in us of a sense of divine mystery and power; it is the way the divine communicates. God's revelation to us lies in the scriptures, but also primarily in the story of how our universe began, evolved and brought us humans forth. Berry's namesake, Thomas Aquinas, wrote: "A mistake about creation means a mistake about God."

Since we have learned so much in the past two centuries about the universe and how it unfolded life, then it follows that we have new insight into that primary revelation, an increased understanding of God. We must take this new story of the universe seriously in order to fully understand both God and ourselves.

Spirituality, for Berry, was about enchantment. Awe and wonder are the primary spiritual qualities, the cure for our spiritual autism. Seeing the universe and the earth that gave us birth as sacred mysteries is key to turning the world around.

"If this fascination, this entrancement with life isn't evoked," Berry said, "then our children won't have the energies needed to sustain the sorrows inherent in our condition. They might never discover their true place in the vast world of time and space."

3. Our Christian preoccupation with personal salvation can yield to a more holistic understanding of Jesus Christ.

Christianity now is too focused on redemption, said Berry. "Being a Christian has to do with the Christ reality and this is thought to have nothing to do with the earth." The personal relationship between the individual and the person of Jesus is seen as primary, as salvific, to the exclusion of all else. The redemption view misses a great deal of the doctrine of Christ as spoken by St. Paul, for example, who writes that "in Christ, all things hold together." This is a way of thinking of Christ as a cosmic person and the universe as a collection of subjects rather than objects. The reality of Christ is a "communion" between various levels of reality -- cosmic, social and personal.

There are other strains in the Christian tradition, Berry pointed out, that are less focused on redemption, more on that relationship between the earth's economy and ours: the animate spirituality of the Celtic period, for example, or the custodial model of the Benedictine monasteries and convents, the fraternal model of St. Francis, the fertility model presented by Hildegard of Bingen, the integral model brought to us by Teilhard de Chardin, the poetic imagery of Jesuit Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins.

These strains in Christianity present a view of God and God's world where deep in the heart of matter, right here, right now and always, everything is interconnected and all is well and all manner of things shall be well. The love that moves the sun and stars beams out of every atom, molecule, face and flower.

This is not pantheism but pan-en-theism, the mystery of the divine in everything, shining out like shook foil, in the laughter of children, in the goodness of summer sweet corn, in the God-haunted sound of the wind through the pines, in North Carolina meadows.

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4. Berry's essential message as a prophet for the earth is the necessity of establishing a mutually enhancing human presence on the planet.

This is the "great work" of our time. The primary object of all our endeavors should be to make sure the earth does not fall into deficit as a result of our presence. No enterprise serves us unless it is grounded in this earth-human relationship. The primary focus of our medicine, for example, should be to maintain the earth's health. Fr. Berry asked: What sense does it make to have healthy humans living on a terminally ill planet?

Our businesses must change the bottom line from "profit" to "healthy globe." If the earth corporation goes bankrupt, where does that leave the rest? Our legal system should be concerned about just distribution of the earth's resources, with preventing harm to the air, land and sea. Our politics must lead to cooperative, earth-based decisions and public policies.

Or, as theologian Daniel Maguire says, "If present trends continue, we won't." Thus, the need for, in

Berry's words, a "great courtesy toward the earth."

A bibliography

Some of his early works include: *The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico* (1949), *Buddhism* (1968), and *The Religions of India* (1972).

His writings on eco-spirituality and the human relationship with the Earth begin in 1988.

- *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), Sierra Club Books.
- *Befriending the Earth* (with Thomas Clarke, 1991). Paulist Press.
- *The Universe Story From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (with physicist Brian Swimme (1992). HarperSanFrancisco.
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- *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (2006), Essays, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, (Sierra Club Books, with the Univ. of California Press).
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More Resources:

- **Thomas Berry, environmentalist-priest**, dies NCR's obituary of Fr. Berry
- **Awakening people to something inside them**, Tom Fox talks with Thomas Berry, a podcast interview from 2006.
- **Thomas Berry 101**: Some key ideas from the work of Fr. Thomas Berry

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