NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

My encounters with Fr. Thomas Berry

Rich Heffern | Jun. 1, 2009 NCR Today

I first heard Thomas Berry speak at the first North American Conference on Christianity and Ecology that was held the summer of 1987 in Indiana. The conference aimed to gather together for the first time religious leaders from the nation?s Christian denominations in order to begin to transform faith-based communities into forces for reshaping the human presence on the planet.

The dream was to enlist the nation?s 155 million church and synagogue members in the struggle. At that time, its roster of speakers and presenters made up a who?s who of the religion/ecology movement in America ? agriculturist Wes Jackson, poet-farmer Wendell Berry, bioregionalist David Haenke, Jesuit Fr. Al Fritsch, Protestant activist Calvin DeWitt, Srs. Miriam McGillis and Paula Gonzalez, and many more.

?Listen to these words carefully,? Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest with a sly grin and tousled hair, announced from the sunlit stage that August at Indiana?s Lake Webster Center. ?The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. And listen to this: The human is derivative. The planet is primary.? He repeated his words slowly, knowing it takes time for these kind of ideas to sink in.

That conference, attended by some 500 people from around the country, broke down almost as soon as it had begun. A Saturday evening plenary session was called to discuss the differences attendees were having with the way the program was set up. At its end, the conference produced two separate organizations that were dedicated to promoting an ecological vision in Christian congregations across the nation.

On one side of the contention was the ?stewardship? faction, those who essentially believed that humanity was given a charge by God to take care of the natural world, but that we humans are essentially ?separate? from it, specially created and destined to someday be extracted from it.

The other faction -- what I would call the ?deep ecology? people -- saw things differently. As Fr. Berry, himself a deep ecologist, had said in his keynote address, ?the human is derivative. The planet is primary.? The natural world, the Earth and the immense universe itself that produced the Earth are not mere backdrop or stage scenery to a salvation drama that involves only we humans and God. The Earth produced and sustains us, and we need to care for and respect it just as your right arm needs to care for and respect the rest of your body, as essential to its survival.

The difference in these two approaches lies at the heart of our Christian religion, and Berry was one of the key thinkers who explored the human relationship with the natural world and the implications of that relationship for religion together with the effect our religious views have on our environmental ethics.

Berry ? infamously ? said at one point: ?We need to put the Bible on the shelf for about 20 years.? What he was getting at, I believe, is that since our continued presence on the planet probably depends on some re-calibration in our deepest religious views, God?s revelation to humans needs to be widened drastically to include the natural world around us, to the amazing and awesome story astronomers and other scientists are telling us about the origin and development of the universe itself, and to what biologists are telling us about how life developed

and evolved on planet Earth. All of these sources of divine revelation need to be considered together to get a true estimation of who we are and what our destiny is as humans living on a fragile planet.

A few years after that important Indiana conference, Tom Fox, NCR?s editor, had Fr. Berry fly to Kansas City to spend some time with staff. Tom invited staff members and some key local environmental activists and religious leaders to an evening reception at his home. When my wife and I arrived, Thomas Berry was sitting in a comfortable chair in the Fox?s living room, a glass of wine in his hand. Sometime during the chit chat that preceded Berry?s presentation to the assembled guests, I remember his face transformed into a kind of not unpleasant grimace as he said: ?Just about everything has to change.?

I believe he was right, and still is. In religion particularly, a more creation-centered way of thinking about our human place in the cosmos and our human relationship with the planet that is our source is probably essential to our continued survival. Berry?s question: ?What sense does it make to have healthy humans living on a dying planet?? is central to any discussion about what we humans need in order to flourish and prosper both physically and spiritually.

His answer to that question is that we need a great and generous courtesy toward the planet Earth, together with a collective endeavor to join in what he called ?the great work? of re-inventing the human.

Berry?s message was particularly focused on the fact that we are, as he put it, ?in between stories,? as the creation myths that informed our ancestors yield to a contemporary understanding of who we are and how we got here, to the mesmerizing account of the unfolding and evolving universe of which we are a part.

?The universe story is the quintessence of reality.? he said. ?We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. The winds tell the story, literally, not just imaginatively. The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything.?

If, indeed, we don't really know much, then, indeed, almost everything needs to change.

The sentiment that right away comes to mind when someone dies -- that he/she is in a better place now -- doesn't apply well to Fr. Tom Berry. I'm certain he would say, with that same sly grin on his face: "I've always been in a good place."

More Resources:

- **Thomas Berry, environmentalist-priest** [1], dies NCR's obituary of Fr. Berry
- **Awakening people to something inside them** [2],Tom Fox talks with Thomas Berry, a podcast interview from 2006.
- **Thomas Berry 101:** [3] Some key ideas from the work of Fr. Thomas Berry

---

Source URL (retrieved on *02/27/2017 - 16:53*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/my-encounters-fr-thomas-berry

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/news/ecology/thomas-berry-environmentalist-priest-dies
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/4781
[3] http://ncronline.org/node/13349