

Fr. Charles Brandt: The land as sacred commons, sacramental commons

Rich Heffern | Dec. 3, 2010 Eco Catholic

Fr. Charles Brandt lives as a hermit on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. He is active in the bioregional movement and in work that is underway to preserve the landscape in his Pacific Northwest location.

"It's the right thing to do." In the past several years this has been a favorite statement of intent by politicians, environmentalists, etc. Recently, President Obama used these words in addressing a group in Indonesia. What does "it's the right thing mean?" The statement has ethical if not moral implications.

As our community and other communities grapple with environmental issues that effect us as a community, and by extension the very land itself (which includes the soil, water, plants, and animal life and the atmosphere as well), we look for solutions to these issues. We seek a way to resolve them, whether it be politically, scientifically, socially or philosophically ? or a combination of the above. In these discussions, Watersheds are a common concern.

The philosophical or Zen approach in resolving these issues is worth considering. It is helpful to understand that the land, a watershed, is a sacramental commons, a sacred commons.

Edwin Grieve, vice-chairman of our Courtenay/Comox Regional Board asked me to speak briefly about sacred or sacramental commons at a recent forum of farmers, foresters, and fishermen which he convened at the regional board office. Sacred Commons had come up briefly at one of our Oyster River Watershed Management Committee meetings when the forest companies were present and I suggested that a watershed was a sacred commons. Curtis Schofield picked up on that and perhaps inspired Edwin Grieve to make this request.

Catholic bishops of the Northwest in their 1992 pastoral letter were concerned about the pollution of the Columbia river caused by a nuclear power plant, by the placement of dams in the river, etc. In their pastoral they stated that the watershed belongs to every one, that it belongs to no one: All have rights: the winter wren, aboriginal people, loggers, farmers: that we must respect these rights. They referred to the watershed as a sacramental commons.

Stephen Hume writes from time to time about the sacred commons: his understanding of the sacred commons is: "I would say it is the visible manifestation of the sacred, invisible rhythm or spirit or divine presence or Godhead which infuses the natural world. Perhaps it is what William Butler Yeats called the "animus mundi" or Dylan Thomas "the force that through the green fuse drives the flower." It is a physical place in the metaphysical matrix which supports and animates the natural world and, as it is the place we inhabit, we are called upon to be responsible stewards whatever our faith or creed. I understand there are more precise definitions in theology but that's how I would attempt to define it."

Other writers like Ray Grieg, Mike Bell , Brian Swimme are sympathetic to this point of view. Swimme calls the whole universe a sacred commons.

Fr. Tom Berry lists twelve principles for understanding the universe and the role of the human in the Universe process: among these principles are the following: From its beginning the universe is a psychic as well as a physical reality. And, the three laws of the universe at all levels of reality are differentiation, subjectivity and communion. These laws identify the values, and the directions in which the universe is proceeding.

The Universe is an expanding universe, which began 13.7 billions years ago as a tiny teardrop, smaller than an electron: before this there was only emptiness, nothing.

The expansion was just right according to cosmic physicists. Had it been 1 billionth of a second faster no galaxies would have formed; 1 billionth slower, just black holes. Some scientists believe that this rate of expansion manifested great wisdom.

There are three characteristics of the expanding universe: greater and greater bonding, greater interiority, and greater and greater bio-diversity.

Today this diversity has plummeted, now there is less and less instead of more and more. Cosmic historians identify three recent periods in the unfolding of the universe: the Paleozoic, Mesozoic and the Cenozoic, the Cenozoic being the period of the last 65 millions years which began with the disappearance of the dinosaurs. Because the diversity has decreased we refer to the period in which we find ourselves as the terminal phase of the Cenozoic. It is the hope of Thomas Berry and others that we are now moving into a new phase of the universe? history, a new period that Tom Berry labels The Eciozoic Era. This occurs as the human community and the natural world move together as a single sacred community. It will be a community not of objects, but of subjects in communion with one another, truly a sacred community.

Other thinkers who think along the lines of Thomas Berry and Stephen Hume are Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold (the father of North America ecology) and Julian of Norwich

Thoreau, who lived and wrote in the eastern United States in the mid-1850s, went to the woods to discover what life was all about, so that when he came to die he would not have lived in vain. He believed that most people lived "quiet lives of desperation". He gave us an important principle when he wrote "In wildness is the salvation of the world." We sometimes see environmentalists with "In wilderness is the salvation..." printed on their T-shirts. Thoreau said wildness not wilderness. We can save the wilderness yet lose its wildness, all those creatures that have rights to be respected in a commons that is sacred.

Aldo Leopold is another person who looked at the land as a sacred commons. Professor Leopold, the father of North American Ecology was the founder of the science of wildlife management. He said that conservation "is the harmony between people and the land". In 1949 he published his classic work the *Sand County Almanac*, in which he emphasized biodiversity and ecology.

As a young forester in New Mexico he was assigned the task of eliminating the wolf, the belief being that with the wolf gone hunters would have greater numbers of deer at their disposal. At the time he did not realize that killing the predator wolf had serious implications for the rest of the ecosystem.

Later, he had an experience of killing a wolf, and while holding it in his arms he saw the green light disappear from its eyes. He realized through this experience that the wolf and the mountain knew something that he did not know, which led him to a conversion experience, a conversion from a resource manager, man over nature, to the realization that he was a plain member of the biotic community, and he began to think like a mountain.

In *Sand County Almanac* he gives us a principle for dealing with the land, of resolving problems with watersheds. Etc. He wrote: "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the beauty, integrity and stability of the

biotic community. Otherwise, it is wrong.?

Thomas Berry, a cultural historian, who authored such works as *The Universe Story*, along with Brian Swimme, and *The Dream of the Earth*, is the foremost ecologist of our times. He spoke of himself as an geologist.

As a child he had an experience with the earth that became the referent for all he did and wrote in the future. I refer to this experience as the Meadow.

His father was constructing a new home on the outskirts of Greensboro, North Carolina. One afternoon Thomas walked down the slope from the new home and crossed a small stream and saw the Meadow, a field covered with lilies rising above the thick grass. It was not only the lilies, it was the singing of the birds and the crickets, the color of the sky. It was a magic moment. This experience gave to his life something he knew not. It seemed to explain his life at a more profound level than any experience he could ever remember. This experience he wrote ?? has become normative for me throughout the range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycle of transformation is good; what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion and whatever.?

Our society, Berry writes, has to make a transition from a society that is having a disruptive influence on the earth to a society that is having a benign presence.

We make this transition by experiencing creation with a sense of wonder and delight, rather than a commodity for our own personal benefit. We have to fall in love with the natural world. We only save something if we love it, and we only love it if we think it is sacred (sacramental commons). So only the sense of the sacred will save us.

Finally, Juliana of Norwich lived in the fourteenth century, a century not unlike our own, a century filled with sickness and death (the Black Death that decimated one half of the population of Europe), climate change (only the climate became cooler) and wars (the Hundred Year?s War and others). In Norwich where Juliana lived there was great poverty (Peasant?s Revolt) flooding and disease. In the midst of this seemingly hopeless situation there was a great spirit of hope and conversion. Julian wrote of a vision that she had had, a vision that we might have for the land: In her vision she understood God as holding all creation in his care, just like the little thing he showed her in her hand, the size of a hazel-nut, by which she came to understand that all creation ?continueth and always shall, because God knoweth it, loveth it, keepeth it?and all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.?

And so with The Land, our Watersheds, our hope is that all shall be well? if we are willing to share in the Great Work, helping to bring about a transition of our Society that is having a disruptive influence on the Earth to one that will have a Benign Presence to the Earth: To approach the Earth, the Universe with a sense of wonder and delight instead of a commodity for our personal benefit, as we fall in love with the earth, knowing that the earth is a sacred commons, and that we will only save what we love, only love that which is sacred: that only the sense of the sacred will save us.

-- Fr. Charles A.E. Brandt, erm

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