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Prophet for the Earth: An exploration of the thought of Fr. Thomas Berry

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The late Fr. Thomas Berry is one of the key figures that have shaped the Catholic ecology movement. This is the first of a series of articles that will explore his thought and writings.

Many believe that the roots of our environmental crisis today lie in our values, grounded solidly within our religious concepts. As we believe and hope, so do we act and behave. We must discern our proper relationship with nature, and this is fundamentally a religious search. Its answers are found in an encounter with the Creator, and that encounter takes place within the created world. Until this religious perspective changes, the plundering and destruction of the natural world will probably continue.

One of the voices in the Catholic tradition that has called us to wake up to what lies behind the ruinous assault on the earth is that of the late Fr. Thomas Berry. A cultural historian and director of the Riverdale Center in New York City, Fr. Berry was an author and teacher who was very influential in promoting a dialogue between religion and the ecology movement. His avowed aim was a reconciliation between humans and the Earth.

Fr. Berry went to a high school one day to talk to the students. He wanted to convey to them a sense of our spiritual predicament. The term ?autism? came to his mind, and he asked if anyone in the class could define for everyone what that meant, unsure if he would get a good answer.

A student jumped up and explained very clearly: ?Persons being so locked up in themselves that no one and nothing else can get it.? Exactly, Berry thought. ?That?s what has happened to the human community in our times. We are talking to ourselves. We are no longer talking to the rivers and forests, we are no longer listening to the winds and the stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation, we have shattered the universe. All the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of this spiritual autism.?

How did our religious vision become so distorted? Berry felt that it?s a result of some ways of understanding that have become part of our religious traditions over the centuries. One of these ways he identifies as an excessive emphasis on the transcendence of God at the expense of God?s immanent presence within creation.

Humans have always experienced God as the creator who is above and beyond all that is, while at the same time

within everything as the principle of life and existence. God is the mysterious beyond who dwells within our world. Our Christian tradition has tended to gather this divine presence together and place all of it within that Sustainer who exists far beyond our world and is related by covenant with us. We have thereby neglected the valid experience of divine participation within the people, the events, the life, the land and sky around us. God is a continent with two shores. For too long, we have pitched our religious tents on only one.

In everyday terms, think for a moment about our sense of what ?sacredness? or ?holiness? has been, and of where these qualities can be found. Holiness and sacredness, of course, are attributes of the divine. In my own experience as a child, for example, the sanctuary of our parish church was presented to us as a sacred place, whereas the grove of elm and oak trees down in the park, full of the magic play of light, shadow, aromas and refreshing breezes ? in which all of us neighborhood kids played and delighted ? was not especially sacred to anyone of importance.

The priest at our Sunday worship was on the inside track to ?holiness? status, while my parents and neighbors were way down the list. Even within my own person, there were ?thoughts? that were holy and those (usually associated with sexuality) that, in fact, were deemed most unholy. The notion that the valiant struggle my parents fought to raise me properly was a truly holy enterprise or even that my own awkward attempt to integrate an irrepressible sexuality honorably and sensibly into my life were an area of blessing was, let?s face it, an idea akin to science fiction.

By overemphasizing one facet of who God is and where God can be found, Berry feels we have both gained and lost. What we have lost is the sense of God?s pervasive presence within the creation and within the natural world around us. By establishing a covenant relationship with divinity, Berry said, we tend to diminish the relationship that exists with the living world, with the plants and animals, with the mountains, the vast seas and twinkling stars aloft. We cannot see these as evidence of divine activity; hence the spiritual autism.

Both ways of understanding God have benefits, but our relationship to nature depends on our understanding of how God is related to creation. Thus, our grave environmental predicament can be linked to our collective forgetting that, in Berry?s words, ?the trees, the birds, the various life forms around us, are all voices awakening us to the deep mystery of life, to the deep feelings and spontaneities of existence that give us the fascination and healing we all need.?

In fact, our ability to imagine what God is like owes everything to the natural world around us. Why do we have such a wonderful idea of God? Why are the Old Testament psalms filled with such lively images for divine action in our midst?

Because we have always lived on a planet that is chock full, every nook and cranny, with marvels and beauty, with mysteries, with happy encounters and splendid landscapes. How could we picture God in our heads as an ever fresh and creative daybreak, as a compassionate mother, a wonder-counselor, a nurturing father, a luminous and caring enigma, if we had never experienced these qualities in the people, the life, the animals, the shapes of the land and moods of the weather around us? What kind of God could we imagine if we lived on the bleak and sterile surface of the moon?

A mysterious perfection

Another way of understanding that greatly influences our spirituality and the ways we relate to the Earth, according to Berry, is our forgetting that the revelation found in the natural world and in the wider universe around us is the primary divine revelation.

What is revelation? It is the awakening deep within our awareness of a sense of divine mystery and power; it is

the way that divinity communicates itself to us. Berry was saying that God?s revelation to us lies in the scriptures, and also in the story of how our universe began and how it evolved and brought us humans into being. And, since we have learned so much in the past two centuries about the universe and how it unfolded life, it follows then that we have additional important revelation. Our new way of understanding the universe increases our understanding of God. In fact, our scientific endeavor can be seen as an act of reverence for the Creator as it uncovers an epic religious drama, full of grandeur, splendor and purpose.

In 1929, astronomer Edwin Hubble made one of the most remarkable discoveries in human history when he observed that the smudges in the sky that most thought were nebula within the Milky Way galaxy were instead distant galaxies themselves. He also observed that wherever you look in the universe these distant galaxies are moving very rapidly away from us. In fact, it is established that there was a time long ago when all the matter in the universe was at exactly the same place, packed into an infinite density at an infinite temperature. This density expanded in an instant, creating both time and space.

In 1965, two physicists Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, at the Bell Laboratories in New Jersey, while trying to communicate by radio with satellites, detected a pervasive background static that they couldn?t get rid of in their transmissions. The only explanation possible, it turned out, was that this low-level radiation emanating from every direction in space was a physical remnant providing conclusive evidence that the universe began in a titanic explosion some 15 billion years ago. Penzias and Wilson had heard the echo of God?s command: ?Let there be light!?

What?s more, scientists have measured the rate of expansion after the birth of our universe and have calculated a mathematical value for that rate, known as Hubble?s constant. Physicist Stephen Hawking at Oxford University noticed something extraordinary about this simple number; namely, that if the expansion rate had varied an infinitesimal amount in either direction, slower or faster, then the universe would have expanded either too rapidly or too slowly to permit galaxy or star formation. There is a mysterious perfection to that number. It seems that, from the very beginning, the universe was designed in such a way that eventually life and consciousness would emerge.

Today scientists describe the universe in terms of very basic theories, which are among the great intellectual achievements of the 20th century. And what they tell us is that events in the universe do not happen in an arbitrary manner but reflect a certain underlying order, a design that had a beginning and has laboriously evolved over unimaginable eons of time, eventually devising, among other things, you and me ? our brains crammed full with 100 billion interlocking nerve cells, who can stand in a field full of clover of a summer evening and look up at the twinkling vault of stars overhead and shiver with goosebumps in awe and wonder.

The awakening of enchantment

Modern science has given us a new revelatory experience. For the first time in our history humans have a common account of the universe. The significance of this revelation is that it provides us with a new awareness and a new intimacy with the Earth. What this adds up to practically ? and what is most important for our everyday spirituality ? is the awakening of an energetic enchantment within us as we see, with profound awe and wonder, the whole universe and the Earth that gave us birth as a vast sacred mystery.

Berry felt that this re-enchantment, this vitality and excitement, this goosebump-producing fascination that come from a hearty and genuine awe and wonder is the very condition of our rescue from the impending destruction we?re imposing on the planet. Awe is powerfully healing. Wonder is the therapy for our deadly spiritual autism.

If we do not experience the sacred mystery within our world, if we do not see that every bush can burn with God?s fire, then the excitement and vigor of our living is greatly diminished. Meaninglessness paralyzes us as

grim headlines in the newspapers announce ever-rising crime rates, teen suicides, political corruption, rampant addiction and mindless consumerism.

We?re disheartened and drained by the vampires of cynicism and despair. ?If this fascination, this entrancement with life is not evoked,? Berry wrote, ?then our children will not 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.?

If we are to overcome the environmental threats and endure along with a healthy planet, then surely that reverence for the uttermost mystery, magic and ongoing creativity of the Earth and the universe beyond is absolutely essential for the healing task.

As we see and understand that those creative processes of the Earth have long been active fashioning the world around us and that the whole universe is holy ground, we take off our shoes and connect with a dynamic and transfiguring energy and will. Albert Einstein said this: ?The most beautiful and powerful experience we can have is the encounter with mystery. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true science, true art, and true religion. Whoever does not know it is as good as dead. His eyes are dimmed.?

Over the past centuries we have lost that sense of an enchanted world. Now we listen to scientists? accounts of galaxies spinning in vast orbits, of stars exploding into the infinite darkness thereby giving birth to new stars, in a state much like the homebound citizens of Venice must have been in as they heard Marco Polo?s bedazzling descriptions of the wonders of Kubla Khan?s distant realms. For zest and power, poetry and wisdom are born from this enchantment with and curiosity about the universe in which we live.

The poet Robinson Jeffers heard the splendor and grandeur in science?s new story and wrote:
t??all that exists
tRoars into flame, the tortured fragments rush away
tFrom each other into all the night sky, new universes
tJewel the black breast of the night; and far off the
tOuter nebulae like charging spearmen again
tInvade emptiness.?

Compare this to the wonder of an Old Testament encounter with Yahweh, dressed in questions, speaking to Job (and us) out of the heart of a whirlwind:

?Where were you when I laid the earth?s foundations?
Who laid its cornerstone, when all the stars of morning were singing with joy,
tand the sons of God in chorus where chanting praise?
Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning
or sent the dawn to its post?
Which is the way to the home of the light, and where does darkness live? ??\\
Have you ever walked down the source of the seas, where the abyss is deepest?
tWill lightning flashes come at your command and answer ?Here we are!??
tWhose skill details every cloud and tilts the flask of heaven??

Job?s encounter, one of the most dramatic in the Bible, describes the religious experience of our ancestors who wondered and saw that the world is full of blessings and numberless marvels beyond our understanding. Not by our wisdom does the dawn come or the rain fall. Awe, whether at the Old Testament?s Yawheh or science?s description of wheeling galaxies is a fundamental emotion that drives our spiritual quest, our spirituality.

Science offers us a new story, and it stands side by side with our old story of God?s providence in the world recorded in the Bible. Each illumines and informs the other. Science is no longer the foe of religion. Both

together can provide that enchantment and ardent awe, that complete religious vision that energizes and guides us in the task of turning around the Earth?s destruction.

For it?s time to stop blacktopping over the journeywork of the stars, our Earth, and start deepening our delight in its beauty, cherishing its life. Christians must become loving and earthkeeping people, such as scientist Loren Eiseley describes ?with just a touch of wonder in their eye, a sense of marvel, a glimpse of what is happening behind the visible, who see the whole of the living world as though turning a child?s kaleidoscope.?

A Great Courtesy

Thomas Berry?s essential message as a prophet for the Earth is the necessity of establishing a mutually enhancing human presence on the planet. The primary object of all human endeavors must be to make the Earth does not go into deficit as a result of our presence. We cannot just take care of us humans. If we try to exploit the Earth for our benefit, we follow a course that will lead to our extinction. This task is so large and comprehensive that Berry tagged it ?reinventing the human.? He also called it the ?great work? for our time.

?There is need,? said Berry, who grew up in the hills of North Carolina, ?for a great courtesy toward the Earth.?

Berry points out that our Earth care is like being a member of a healthy family. If each individual in the family seeks only his or her own gain or exploits other members, then the whole family falls into ruin. The wellbeing of the individual depends of the wellbeing of the whole family. Or, in other words, what sense does it make to have healthy humans living on a dying planet?

So we must have mutually enhancing relationships within the family if is to be healthy and survive. Just so with the Earth. The wellbeing of the planet underlies the wellbeing of each individual. We must use our technology appropriately. We must learn to live graciously together with all life on the planet.

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. Our legal system should be concerned first with just distribution of the planet?s resources, with preventing harm to the land, air and water. Our businesses must change the bottom line from ?profit? to ?healthy globe,? for General Motors and Microsoft can?t succeed if the Earth corporation goes bankrupt. Our politics must lead to responsible, cooperative Earth-based decisions and public policies.

Fr. Berry had a dream for our Earth, that we not only preserve it for our children but that, in order to do this work, we open ourselves to a wider and deeper spirituality. Such a spirituality recognizes that we live, work and pray in the midst of a sacred community made up of the human, of the other life on the planet, and of the whole universe. We need to build a rapport with that universe, recognizing that all things speak to us of God.

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