

Matthew Fox Tribute to Thomas Berry – November 3rd 2002

In November 2002, the Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness department of the California Institute of Integral Studies held a Conference in Berkeley, California. The Conference paid tribute to the work of Thomas Berry, who was in attendance. One of the many speakers was Matthew Fox, Founder and Director of the University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California, and author of numerous books about Creation Spirituality. This is a transcript of his speech, made by Caroline Webb from an audio recording of the event.

“This next century is going to be quite complex and there are going to be struggles and we want to keep the big picture. One person recently told me he feels we are living in the bleakest of times. Another person said that she has never felt so apprehensive as she does these days, about the goings-on in the world. In that context I want to invoke a beautiful line from a Nobel prize winning poet, Derek Walcott, a Caribbean poet, who spoke these words when he won the Nobel Prize for poetry in 1992. He said: “ for every poet it is always morning in the world, history a forgotten insomniac night. History and elemental R are always our early beginning because the fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history.”

“The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history.” I believe that is an accomplishment of Thomas Berry, his poetical side, his mystical side. He calls all of us to fall in love with the world anew, in spite of human folly, human history and human complacency. He creates a context when he says that ‘Ecology is functional cosmology’. He creates a context in which we can *recover* the energies of falling in love with the world, with Creation once again. He puts our own history - personal and collective into context. And he puts the context itself into a sacred context by reminding us that the primary sacrament is the Universe itself. Every other sacrament, every other being, every other action is derivative of that holy sacrament.

When I think of Thomas Berry, one thing I am reminded of is the great mentor relationships of Western history. I think of Teilhard de Chardin’s influence on Thomas Berry just as I think of Plato’s influence on Aristotle and Albert the Great’s influence on Thomas Aquinas. I believe Thomas had a mentor and all studies show that when young men have mentors, they go into new paths and new spirals of achievement.

Speaking in general terms and using a biblical metaphor, I think that we might say that Thomas Berry stands up as a kind of new Moses, leading all religious people, people of religious sensibilities and certainly Christians, out of a bondage of a land of anthropocentrism, that kind of bondage created by anthropocentrism, to a land of cosmology and ecology, a land flowing with milk and honey. A land that promises to respond to the great needs of the great human heart.

He leads us out of a land of autism – his word – to a land of renewed communication with other beings and other species, who in fact are very eager to communicate, to reveal themselves to us. He leads us out of the land of academic barbarism – his words – to a land of educational responsibility, where the power of knowledge is subsumed to the greater common good, where PhD's instead of destroying the Earth, which is his observation, are employing wisdom to save the Earth and her beauty.

He leads us out of a land of psychologism, wherein disenchantment, cynicism, trivia, inertia, commercialism and what Berry calls the illusory world of advertising, and violence, reign, into a land of enchantment, wonder, beauty and intimacy and reality, and caring for what matters.

He leads us out of the land of domestication to recovery of the sacred, which always has something in common with the wild. For example he writes: “ *Wildness we might consider as a root of the authentic spontaneities of any being. It is that wellspring of creativity whence comes the instinctive activities that enable all living beings to obtain their food, to find shelter, to bring forth their young, to sing and dance and fly through the air and swim through the depths of the sea. This is the same inner tendency that evokes the insight of the poet, the skill of the artist and the power of the shaman.*”. How beautifully he marries the wild energy, the sacred energy of the more-than-human world with human creativity in that powerful passage. Such a reminder that we are capable as a species even of domesticating divinity, making divinity into our tidy images.

Thomas leads us out of the land of boredom to a sense of awe and with awe comes gratitude and with awe comes reverence - what Berry calls a “ sense of the numinous”. In that way he is re-setting faith in the pre-modern context of the sacredness of all creation, of cosmology, of the ‘more than human.’

If a new ‘Moses’ is too strong a term, for some, to reflect on Thomas’ contribution, then surely we could settle for the word ‘ prophet’, since the primary work of the prophet is to interfere and Thomas is nothing if not a great interferer... And he’s so subtle about it. They haven’t caught up with him yet...Prophets wake a sleeping people and Thomas does that. Prophets cry in the wilderness, cry in the wilderness - and Thomas Berry does that. Prophets call people, who are wallowing in injustice and neglect, back to justice and Thomas does that. He calls us to Eco-justice, which is the necessary context for all other social justice struggles, be they economic, or racial or gender or class. He calls us to the Great Work and to leave trivial work behind. He calls us to reach for the Ecozoic age, and indeed in his thoroughly challenging phrase, “ to re-invent our species”.

In trying to assess Thomas’s contribution to western spirituality, I believe we are assisted by his own work. In a brief essay on Hildegard of Bingen’s contribution... he wrote this about western spirituality. He said: “ *thus far Christians have been so concerned with their redemption out of this world, so attached to their spiritual life development or to their social mission of reconciliation that they have had little time for serious attention to the Earth. Nor do Christians seem to be aware of the futility of social transformations proceeding on an historical industrial rather than on a comprehensive ecological basis.*

Whatever the reasons for this situation, we find relatively few Christian guides in the past, to enlighten or inspire us to a more functional relationship between the human and natural worlds.”

Let me share with you some of Aquinas’ observations and see if you don’t feel the fraternity between him and Thomas Berry and how they really are on a tether together.

Aquinas said “ Faith comes in two volumes – Nature and the Bible.” Now we all know Thomas Berry’s notorious remark, that he has repeated more than once, that we should put the Bible on a shelf for 20 years. This is simply a logical conclusion. We have been overdoing the book bit in the name of revelation at least since the invention of the printing press. And why isn’t it that by now every seminary, every school that portends to be training spiritual leaders does not have scientists on their faculty telling us the revelations of nature, its mysticism and the ethics to be derived from that, as well as biblical theologians? Until that day comes, Thomas Berry is absolutely correct, that we must find the balance anew between the revelation of nature and the revelation of the Bible. And in fact, in the Bible, there is a whole tradition, a wisdom tradition, which scholars are now agreeing was the tradition of the historical Jesus, which is total nature mysticism. One prevalent theory by scholars today, being illegitimate, or being considered such, was excluded from the synagogue as a child, so he went out and played in nature while others were praying in a building and that’s what radicalized him. And it comes through in all of his parables, all of his teaching. They are nature-based. It’s wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is not based on reading books. Jesus no doubt was illiterate.

Another dimension where Thomas Berry and Aquinas link up – of course Berry is carrying us into new arenas – is Aquinas’ observation that every human person is “ *carpax universi*” – *capable of the universe*. That’s who we are as a species. That’s how big we are, and neither our souls, nor our hearts nor our minds will be satisfied and therefore relieved of temptations to greed, until we are re-set in the context of cosmology of the universe itself. In this regard, this exciting teaching in our time, that reflect and support the powerful work of Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme, and others in recovering a Universe Story.

Speaking, for example, about Otto Rank, the great psychologist, father of humanistic psychology, he broke with Freud over many things. But Rank came to the conclusion that the number one problem for human beings is our feeling of separation. This feeling begins with our leaving the womb, which was our universe for 9 months and he thinks the rest of life is about trying to find reunion with the cosmos. He says: “ we surrender ourselves, in art or in love, to a potential restoration of the union with the cosmos which once existed and was then lost.” He talks about the ‘original wound’, which is a much happier term than ‘original sin’, that haunts our species.

And this is the wound: that we feel separated from the cosmos.

He says the only solution is the *unio mystica* – the mystical union – our being one with the All, in tune with the cosmos, and this he points out, is something that indigenous people all know about. Rank says: “This identification is the echo of an original identity, not merely of child and mother but of everything living. Witness the reverence of the primitive for animals. In humans, identification aims at re-establishing a lost identity with the cosmic process, which has to be surrendered and continuously re-established in the course of self-development. Thomas Berry’s work is a profound work of human healing, because it restores that lost identity, that lost relationship, that lost passion – between the human and the cosmos.

Another powerful writing about what happens when psyche and cosmos re-connect, is found in the work of Gaston Blanchard, wonderful French philosopher of the late 20th century, in his great book ‘The Poetics of Space’, when he talks about what I would call the holy trinity – of immensity, intensity and intimacy. And he says in humans they all go together. When you have an experience of immensity – in Thomas’ words an experience of the cosmos and our relationship to it, it is an intense experience. All awe is intense experience. But it also an intimate experience. Humans cannot separate the immense from the intense and from the intimate, and Thomas Berry, by leading us into a cosmic awareness again, an awareness as important for our hearts as for our minds, is bathing us anew in immensity, intensity and intimacy, far beyond any mere anthropocentric relationships could ever do for us.

Here are a few lines from Gaston Blanchard: “Immensity in the intimate domain is intensity. Intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate immensity...” And he says that the proper naming of our soul is that it is a vast - a vast - soul. Well, this is an echo of Aquinas and an echo of everything that Berry is about. And he says: “Grandeur progresses in the world in proportion to the deepening of intimacy. Slowly immensity becomes a primal value, a primal intimate value. “That is what has to happen with Thomas’ work. We have to take back immensity as a primal intimate value. “Where” says Gaston “we are no longer shut up, in our weight, in the prison of our own beings.” He says: “immensity is within ourselves.”

There is a beautiful line in Ernest Holmes in defining ‘spirituality’. He says: “spirituality is often misused. From our viewpoint spirituality is one’s recognition of the universe, as a living presence of good, truth, beauty, peace, power, and love. Holmes recognized that spirituality is not spirituality if it’s psychologized. It’s not spirituality unless it’s about the universe. Holmes was right and Thomas Berry is right. Let me say it again. “Spirituality is one’s recognition of the Universe as a living presence of the good, truth, beauty, peace, power and love.”

Another area that Berry carries us further into the 21st century, is the area of diversity. Many Western philosophers have fought over the issue of One versus Many. It’s been going on for centuries. But neither Aquinas nor Thomas Berry are in doubt about the resolution. Many times I have heard Berry quote Aquinas on this issue of the wealth of diversity.

Berry calls the universe the ‘primary artist,’. He says that: “ *in every phrase of our imaginative, aesthetic and emotional lives, we are profoundly dependent on a larger context of the surrounding world. There is no inner life without outer experience and the tragedy of the ecological crisis is as much a soul tragedy as anything else, because our imaginations require diversity and we have been gifted with so much on this planet.*”

Aquinas said in the 13th century “ *because the divine goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, god produced many and diverse creatures, so that what was wanting in one in representing divine goodness might be supplied in another. Thus the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever.*” So the celebration of diversity is intrinsic, both in Thomas’ thinking and in Aquinas’ thinking.

But the whole sense of cosmology, of looking at the Whole and not the part, is of course intrinsic to all post-modern thinking but it is also intrinsic to pre-modern thinkers like Aquinas and to indigenous people. This is how Aquinas put it: “Divinity is better represented by the whole universe than by any single thing.” The whole universe then is the starting point for us re-understanding and perhaps projecting less onto our images of what divinity stands for. And Aquinas says: “Not only are individual creatures images of God, but so too is the whole cosmos.” How many theologians or preachers have you ever heard say that?...that the cosmos is an image of God. Thomas Berry says it.

Says Aquinas:

“God has produced a work in which the divine likeness is clearly reflected. I mean by this the world itself. The world itself is a mirror of the sacred, a mirror of divinity, a face, a Christ, a Buddha nature, a Goddess, call it what you will, all this is re-named in Thomas Berry’s contribution.

In another dimension to Berry’s work that gets a nice push in Aquinas’ work is that of asking the question: What is the human role in all this? Why are we here? Aquinas said: “God wills that human beings exist for the sake of the perfection of the Universe.” And by perfection he means ‘bringing to completion of task, contribution to the tasks of the universe.’ Like Thomas Berry, he is setting us in a context, an ethical context, of our work being that of carrying on the universe’s work. Says Aquinas very bluntly, very much like Thomas Berry, “It is false to say that humanity is the most excellent being in the world. The most excellent being in the world is the Universe itself.” And he says that: “we bless God that recognizing the divine goodness...”

I believe if I were to pick one line for Thomas Berry’s epitaph, it might be that. That Thomas Berry has taught us to see with new eyes, maybe old eyes, new-old eyes, the divine goodness. To see the beauty in all systems, eco-systems, cosmic systems, fireball systems, relationships of microcosm, atoms to macrocosm, to re-see the goodness, the blessing that is inherent in all of being.

It’s interesting that the many traditions of the world propose that the consequence of seeing the world cosmically and seeing the world in its sense of goodness, is in fact right

behavior. Right behavior. That: without this consciousness we are short on right behavior. For example, Black Elk put it this way: “The human heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the eye of the great spirit by which he sees all things and through which we see him.” Then in typical Native American fashion he turns to human behavior. He interprets this cosmology in terms of our ethics. He says “the first peace” – and surely we are all looking for peace today – “which is the most important peace, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness with the Universe and all its powers. And when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells Wankantun – the Holy One – and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us. This is a real peace and the others but reflections of this.” Thomas Berry draws us to this very teaching—that at the center of all hearts is the center of the Universe and that it’s out of this that real peace comes. So if Black Elk is correct, that this is the source of authentic human behavior, of right relationship and peace, then Thomas Berry is an ethical teacher, showing us the way to recover our peacefulness and it is a way of re-connecting to the powers of the Universe itself.

And still another dimension to Thomas Berry’s work, a common word in his work, is that of *‘intimacy’*. Intimacy. Aquinas put intimacy this way: He says: “God is in all things in the most intimate way. As far as a thing has existence, it is like God.” This is what Black Elk is saying. The Wankantana (?) is within all things. Hildegard of Bingen said “There is no creature that lacks an inner life.” So, our questing for intimacy is responded to by the yearning for intimacy from the other beings in this universe - that we have a right to intimacy and things are set up - biased - in favor of intimacy. An anthropocentric consciousness is not capable of intimacy and this is why television runs over with soap operas, an infinite amount of them, because we are looking in the wrong places for intimacy. That intimacy is found in a more than human context and that is what we bring to our human intimacy. And it’s not necessarily the other way round.

Another dimension to Thomas’ work that carries us into the next century is, of course, his profound study of so many traditions, religious traditions and of course, of science itself. His deep ecumenism embraces the wisdom of the diverse and rich culture and religious expressions of our species, but it also embraces the wisdom of science itself. He brings together what has been rent asunder in the 17th century, that is to say the potential wisdom of science and the wisdom of religion. His study has brought all this to the fore and inspires us to rediscover the ‘yoga’ of study itself. Thomas - by his lifestyle, by his accomplishments - reminds us of something that our educational system has practically forgotten, and that is that learning itself is prayer, learning itself is a spiritual experience. The pursuit of truth is a spiritual act. It is a meditation. The Rabbis of old knew that. Studying Torah was prayer. Aquinas knew that....Our secularization of education has often sapped us of the joy, and even the commitment and the thrill of the spiritual experience and the yoga, the spiritual discipline that study is, whether it is study of languages, study of mathematics, study of science, study of anything, if you bring your heart to it and that of the greater community that its meant to serve, it is a spiritual discipline. We thank Thomas for that.

And finally, a point that Robert referred to in his introduction. Thomas has been and is a true elder to the young. That is such an important gift in our time. The young people are yearning for elders. What can you say, for example, of a Pope that canonizes a fascist ? someone who was an admirer of Hitler and he did this three weeks ago. That is not a good place to invest one's yearning for truth. What can you say of the captains of industry, the Enrons, the world dot coms, the Andersons, the Talibans and the Vaticans in this moment in history? They all suffer from a terminal disease called 'patriarchal excess'. They also suffer from adultism. They want to use children, they want to use the youth, but they're not really there to awaken the stories of youth. And Thomas Berry is and has been, for all these years.

The real work of the elders is to pass on stories that motivate the young to be generous, and to be alive, and to use their god-given gifts to affect history so that history will not be the nightmare that Derek Walcott named it. But that it might become closer to that love of the world that it can become. And Thomas Berry has done this for so many individuals.

If human history survives, and our species survives into the 22nd century, I believe that history will record what I am talking about today, that among others, a certain prophet arose in the latter part of the 20th century, imbued with the spirit of Teilhard de Chardin, the intellect of Aquinas, the Eros of Hildegard, the humility of Francis, the science of Einstein and the courage and imagination of Jesus. His name was Thomas Berry. We will remember him, by carrying on his vision, by building institutions and movements and infiltrating all of our professions, from education to politics, to business, to worship, with his many and sustainable visions. Thank you.