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James F. Berry
Advisory Board
American Teilhard Assoc.

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Thomas Berry said when he was here in December that no one has produced an appreciation of North Carolina which portrays its inner soul, its true identity; no one has done a reflective work that gives an understanding of the State as an interacting community of people, geography, history, climate and animals, trees, soil and water. Maybe what he was thinking about was something that would parallel Gilbert White's The Natural History of Selborne, which

" . . . has shaped our everyday view of the relation between man and nature, not just because of the accuracy and precipience of his observation, but because of the sense he gives of birds and animals as living things sharing a living situation with each other and with man. Through his writings, Selborne, the little English parish that the reader comes to know so well, becomes the secret private parish inside each of us." (from the back cover)

Or maybe Thomas was thinking of A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek in which Annie Dillard articulated the everyday intercommunion of life in a tiny corner of Virginia. Or he could have had Walden in mind or A Sand County Almanac. But of course none of these speak to so large a region as a State.

Well, what about North Carolina? Is there a way to look at this State as a community of life with geography, climate, people, resources, etc., that make it unique and possessed of a character quite its own? There seems to be something about the State that says that it does not have a unique identity that sets it apart and defines it; and from which emerges a message worth listening to. Wilbur J. Cash looked at the South as a region and in 1941 published a book called The Mind of the South. Everyone should get a copy and read and reread it. If you grew up in North Carolina you will² feel the ring of truth in this strange, strange book with all its perceptions as to how we got to be the way we are. Although it does not treat of the cataclysmic years since 1941, it still provides insights of blinding intensity on Southern weakness: the tendency to violence; the exaggerated and militaristic patriotism; the complicity at all levels of white society in the police-state terrorizing of the black population; the pervading sense of inferiority resulting from the necessity to defend the indefensible treatment of the negro; the paranoia fostered over the "red peril", closely related to the union-busting fervor of preachers and politicians who betray their constituencies at the bidding of the lords of commerce; the plantation mentality moved over into the board room; the worship of the corporation; the toadying to the Northern tycoon; the unquestioning, belligerent embrace of an economic system whose rewards are wildly disproportionate as between the employer and the employee; the fawning deferral to bankers; the belief that salvation lies in becoming a second yankeedom.

Many of the flaws enumerated have been in some part relieved or corrected and some of them are a reproach only to the policy makers and the established elites, not to the mass of the plain people. Underlying the patriotism and the militarism is the pride in Southern valor exhibited at Chickamauga and Sharpsburg and a hundred other hells during the War Between the States. That war and its aftermath accounts for many facets of the Southern character. It has never been sufficiently understood. The study of what happened there has been neglected to the loss of all but particularly to the Southerner.

But again, what about North Carolina? Does it have an identity of its own? The answer may be "No". Does it matter? I think it does. The absence of locally generated work has led to the belief that employment in this State must be industrial employment and that industry must be placed here by Northerners or foreigners if we are to have jobs. There is something wrong with wanting to have jobs just to have jobs, and being almost indiscriminate about what the jobs accomplish and at what cost. From the standpoint of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, the proper work for the human is to find his place in the natural order and to do his work enhancing the natural order, realizing human talent as a part of the earth processes. The aim is to cooperate in the earth process, to be a part of nature. This is elaborated in many of the Riverdale papers, and I will get more into it in the future.

One point I have room for here, is to repeat that our view of the human and his place in the earth process has only been perceived by parts of the Christian community since Teilhard, and that we are just beginning to have the necessary awareness to know that the human is part of nature and should live in that awareness. If it is true that the Christian perception of the human as exploiter of the earth and as only a temporary resident of the earth before he ascends to another world; if it is true that this perception has caused us to be despoilers, there is coming on the scene new perceptions. I call attention to the review of Karl Rahner's new book Foundations of Christian Faith appearing in the February 4, 1982 issue of The New York Review of Books. Reviewer Thomas Sheehan (a former student of Thomas Berry's) emphasises particularly Rahner's destruction of

". . . the closet platonism that has haunted Christianity for two millenia: The separation of reality into two realms, the spiritual and the material, to which correspond the two 'parts' of an equally divided self, soul and body. Platonic dualism is the presupposition that underlies a number of unfortunate formulations of Christian doctrine: the idea of death as the separation of the spirit and body; the notion that man's goal is immortality of the soul in an incorporeal heaven; and in general the belief that one's salvation is in inverse proportion to one's relation to the material world.

To be sure, Aquinas had long ago asserted the substantial unity of the human person against all Platonic readings of man as an angel imprisoned in an animal. But his followers too often took Aquinas to mean that man is a substantial unity of spirit and matter only in the current state of life before death and the liberation of the soul from matter. But what kind of substantial unity would it be, this pro tem gluing of soul to body, of the intellect to the senses? It took Rahner to argue emphatically that the so called present state of life is the only state of life, even if man be immortal, and to draw the startling conclusions following from this argument."

Well now! Put that together with Teilhard's evolutionary vision and you come up with a pretty good case for devoting our energies to getting along with the material world that produced us; and a case not to view the human as merely a job holder marking time in a factory processing earth stuff into junk. Life needs essential meaning here and now.

February 24th
5:30 PM

— Peter Batchelor: The Future City

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