

We must deal with the earth on the earth's terms

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EARTH ETHICS AND RELIGION

Dear Emily and Laura and Beth and Seth: Last weekend I was at a conference in Florida that I thought might interest you. It was put on by an outfit named Earth Ethics Research Group and it aimed at exploring a claim that major world religions are beginning to view the destruction of our environment as a moral and ethical issue. The conference was called Earth Ethics in Religion, and it aimed its first examination at the Roman Catholic religion.

A Catholic intellectual, Sister Miriam Therese MacGillis, spoke to the philosophy of Thomas Berry, my brother and your great uncle, who is a Catholic priest alright but doesn't particularly want to be thought of as one who speaks in his religious role when he goes at the subject of the human fit in creation. He does believe that religion, all religions, must revise extensively their understanding of the meaning of being human. Miriam Therese is a friend we have known for several years. She studied with Thomas and knows how to give expression to his thought better than anyone else, maybe even better than Thomas in particular circumstances. She has developed her own way of getting his ideas across and she is very effective at it. The critical importance of cosmology is central to her presentation. Cosmology is the accounting for how things came to be. I will try to summarize what she said over eight hours.

Cosmology is a necessary support for the basic assumptions on which religions become institutionalized. A story arises. The function of story is to communicate what can not be understood. It's a way of getting at mystery. In the Judeo/Christian story, divinity is outside creation; humans have a special relationship with divinity, and the human and the divine encounter each other on a plane transcendent to nature, above the natural. The universe is matter and has no inherent spiritual dimension; the reality of the universe holds within it that which is negative: sin, death, pain and suffering which are the result of the Fall. There was once perfection and there will be again. After a period of travail God will recall that perfection and the millennium will ensue. The human, being detached from nature, can look at nature as object, and can make changes in it and work, through technology, at hurrying God up a little bit in pursuit of the millennium. The health of the natural is not a really serious concern. This way of interpreting the world is the result of the cosmology derived out of the ancient Judaic tribes and the Greek and Roman stories prevailing at the time when the Christian story was first being put together.

In contrast, the primal cosmologies of tribal peoples found a spirit presence in the oak and the buffalo and the elk. The locus of their encounter with the divine, with the mystery, with God, was in their surroundings and they found it necessary to bring themselves into harmony with nature. One doesn't change things; one lives with things as they are.

Today we find ourselves through empirical science able to trace human origins back 15 billion years to the beginning of it all. From the hydrogen atom to helium and so on to the formation of the elements and the collection of matter into galaxies, the occurrence of the milky way and finally some four to five billion years ago the appearance of the sun and then the earth. The rise of life on earth cannot but have evolved out of a life principle that lay in the interior, in the within of the hydrogen atom from the beginning. Primal cosmology must be respected.

The human having come on the scene in the last few seconds of geologic time brings to the universe the ability to know itself, to reflect on itself and to seek to find meaning in itself. If there is no human there is no capacity for the world to look at itself. "The human is that being in whom the universe reflects on itself." or "The human is the earth reflecting on itself."

There are three principles which characterize the universe. They are Differentiation, Subjectivity or Interiority, and Communion. Differentiation is simply understood. You are confronted with a multitude of different things, with diversity. The world is not a smudge of sameness. It is an unending, mind-stunning array of separate and individual things.

Interiority is inescapable. Your real identity is something only you know. You see the world from a viewpoint no other person ever can. your inner self is your interiority. Likewise there is an individuality in every atom, every cell, every unit of any kind. Perhaps Pierre Teilhard de Chardin best grasped this in his discussion of the "within of things" in *The Phenomenon of Man*. The within of the atom "agglomerates" in the molecule and the cell and in amino acids and nucleic acids until life arises and at last there is something called consciousness.

Communion also is quickly comprehended in our day. Science discovers the connectedness of everything to everything else. There is a wholeness, a unity to the universe, an interdependence which is more clearly articulated every day as we see the damage being done the earth and the way it affects all creatures.

Miriam was speaking as a dedicated Catholic. But she was proposing that Thomas' interpretation of the new cosmology which brings her to the recognition of her participation in the whole universe system brings its message to everyone and everything. The stunning importance of the new cosmology is that it illuminates all traditions, all religions, all philosophies and all social and economic analysis. For the first time in history all societies can have a common cosmology, a common story to account for the human presence. The principles of differentiation, interiority and communion place behavioral imperatives on everyone. A morality and an ethics emerges. The human is an earth creature whose uniqueness must complete the wholeness of creation. The horror of the human using those qualities to destroy creation is starkly revealed. The human now discovers cosmological, divine imperatives through empirical research and study. The rest of the natural world knows how to behave. Humans have to learn how from revelation in all its forms, by reason and study, by intuition and will.

Nancy Lee Nash, who came to the conference from Hong Kong where she directs a project called The Buddhist Perception of Nature, acknowledged the compatibility of Thomas Berry's cosmology with the Buddhist tradition. She has close contact with Buddhist intellectuals and with the Dalai Lama. Marissa Cohen, who set up the Assissi Nature Center in Rome, spoke of her intention to bring Thomas or Miriam to Europe to speak to Catholic intellectuals there and propose the new cosmology to them. Indian Army General, (Retired), Eustace D'Souza told about his ecological activities and proposed to introduce the thinking of Thomas Berry at a June gathering being sponsored by the Catholic Cardinal of Bombay. These three spoke at length on the situation in their areas of the globe. A willingness to examine this new cosmology and the way it might affect morality and ethics is growing.

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