

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

THE CENTER FOR REFLECTION ON THE SECOND LAW

8420 Camellia Drive, Raleigh, North Carolina (919) 847-5819

Affiliated with the The Riverdale Center for Religious Research
5801 Palisade Avenue, Bronx, N.Y. 10471

James F Berry
American Teilhard Assoc.

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EXPLAINING THINGS

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The Random House dictionary gives as its first definition of religion: "a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature and purpose of the universe, especially when considered as the creation of a superhuman agency or agencies, usually involving devotional and ritual observances and often having a moral code for the conduct of human affairs." The OED and Webster's Ninth do not give such a definition. They confine religion to the arena of divinity or the conduct of divine worship, to institutions and to their adherents. But it seems to me that Random House is more on the mark.

Religion is the repository for the "story" and the agency for transmitting the "story" from generation to generation. The "story" is the account of how things came to be and it sets the values which establish right and wrong and control decision making. Religion should be the center for explaining things that have to do with reality and the meaning of human existence, and right relationships between humans, between humans and the divine and between humans and the non-human world. Any question about the cause, nature and purpose of the world and the human presence in it is a religious question. Whatever moral sense guides one in making choices is religious in its nature. All explanations ultimately are grounded in an understanding of one's identity, one's "story". In this way of looking at it no one escapes religion. Everyone behaves in a way that corresponds to his or her religion.

One goes to religion or to religious persons for answers to questions about why and what ought, and how to interpret something. When science tells us that the universe is 15 billion years old, it is up to religion to put that revelation into its story and to make sense out of it. And when science tells us that the universe occupies a space so huge it would take many billions of years travelling at the speed of light to go from one edge to another, while it takes just eight minutes from earth to the sun, religion has the job of incorporating that into its "story" and reinterpreting its "story" in that light. When observation tells us that the goods of the world are inequitably distributed it is up to religion to explain that and to provide a basis for seeking justice. When our eyes and ears tell us that the earth is being terribly mistreated it is up to religion to explain to us why that is not alright and to urge correction. More than that it must foster a loving interaction between humans and the earth.

But it looks like institutional religion has just about quit explaining things. While it is obvious that ecological disaster is forcing us into a new understanding of the human presence in the world, institutional religion pulls into a shell of authoritarianism and fundamentalism and watches its former followers seek for desperately needed explanations in other places.

The desperately needed explanations pertain to the human role in creation. It has become obvious that the human is not an unearthly or an otherearthy phenomenon; destined for a place far, far away. The human destiny and the earth destiny are inseparable. Salvation out of this world is a fantasy which carries no conviction to those who watch the ruination of a glorious earth by people who amass wealth and power by plundering and poisoning and polluting. Established religion has not identified poisoning and polluting

and plundering as major sins to be explicitly and severely condemned in the moral code. And so the perpetrators are not sinners and they may very well enjoy good standing in the established churches. Indeed, the great sinners of our time in the eyes of the ecologists are, in their own societies and on their own terms, often models of virtue, acclaimed for their generosity and charity. They will endow an orphanage on Monday and order the clear cut of a forest on Tuesday. The saints in the ecological world and the saints in the world of established religion are very different.

A growing population begins to understand that the human has a close connection to the non-human and to understand that the human has responsibilities as a species, responsibilities to the system the human belongs in. And it is the duty of religion to define those responsibilities. Established religion may be hopeless in this regard. It fails to do religions's work of setting up and sanctifying a set of beliefs that adequately explains things. If existing structures do not do what religion is meant to do, they have to be changed or new structures have to be invented. My point is that as we get our theories straight and begin to explain the cause and nature and purpose of creation in a way that takes all knowledge and all revelation into account, and begin to define a morality that provides for all creatures and all creation, we are going to have a new religion unless the old structures wake up and do what they ought to be doing.

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