

Thomas Berry: An Appreciation

Matthew Fox

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as in being able to remake ourselves.” Of course, we need to do both. But one cannot be done without the other. And to me, Thomas Berry is a living embodiment of a thinker who helps us to do both. He is not afraid to begin with remaking ourselves. It is Berry, after all, who counseled time and time again that we must “remake the human.” How did he propose we do that?

One way he taught us to remake the human was to move from the anthropocentrism of modern education and religion and science and culture to our kinship with other creatures and with the universe. This is no small revolution. In advising this radical shift Thomas both invokes the wisdom of the pre-modern worldviews of indigenous peoples, but also of medieval mystics such as Thomas Aquinas who did not hesitate to write about the “friendship of all beings” and the “oneness of the universe” and how humans are “not the most excellent thing in the universe—the universe is.” (See Matthew Fox, *Sheer Joy: Conversations with Thomas Aquinas on Creation Spirituality*.) More than once did I hear Thomas say he was proud to be named after Thomas Aquinas. I think Aquinas was equally proud.

The implications of moving from psychology to cosmology are very great in a culture that employs so many psychologists to assist us with our problems in day-to-day living and search for meaning. In our nine years of existence as the University of Creation Spirituality, we were blessed to have many students come to our program who were psychologists, counselors or psychiatrists. They recognized that in all their training they had received very little instruction in spirituality and mysticism, yet in their work they found themselves transported time and again by their clients into realms of dreams and visions and soul-needs that corresponded more to spiritual studies than to psychological ones. They also were little trained in today’s cosmology and even less in mystical practices of chanting, dancing, drumming, painting, clay-work, and more arts as meditation that bring the mystic alive in so many of us.

Thomas Berry’s words are also a great challenge to clergy. Sad to say, clergy of whatever denomination are as bereft of training in mysticism, spirituality and spiritual practices, including art as meditation, as are those in the counseling professions. After all, both pass through what is essentially the same educational process—a process that ignores and even kills the right hemisphere of the brain where mysticism takes place. Furthermore, there was a dash in seminaries beginning in the ’sixties into pastoral counseling which so often meant adapting a coping kind of psychology to issues of death and grief, but which rarely dealt with the lessons of the dark night of the soul or grieving rituals and other contributions from the mystical traditions.

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Thomas with Matthew Fox.
Photo by Caroline Webb.

All this is challenged by Thomas Berry's work. Thomas said on several occasions when I heard him speak: "The two greatest failures of the twentieth century were education and religion." He also talked about "barbaric academics." His challenge to bring cosmology and, with it, its young sister, ecology, into *all* levels of education is with us still. To get the human at an early age right up through professional schools to look up to "Father Sky" and see what is going on there—and there is so much going on there! — and down to Mother Earth and learn what is going on there and how thoroughly we depend on what is going on there—there lies a revolution that will in fact save Mother Earth from the current human onslaught against her. And it might even save psychology and religion from withering even further into boring and less-than-fruitful enterprises and into being part of the solution rather than integral to the problems we face.

The late physicist David Bohm commented that he was "a post-modern physicist who begins with the whole." Since "cosmos" means "whole" in Greek, we can also say that Thomas Berry, who spent his life studying the cosmos and therefore the whole, was also post-modern—a post-modern philosopher and religious thinker who began with the whole. How important is that? D.H. Lawrence perhaps put it most memorably when he wrote the following:

What a catastrophe, what a maiming of life when love was made a personal, merely personal feeling, taken away from the rising and setting of the sun, and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and equinox! This is what is the matter with us, we are bleeding at the roots because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of life and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.

If Lawrence is correct, then Thomas Berry has applied healing balm to the "maiming of life" that is the cause of "what is the matter with us" and our "bleeding at the roots." He has redeemed the word love for us. Love is no longer a "grinning mockery" or a mere "personal feeling." It has cosmic connections for us once again.

This is why aesthetics plays such a large role in Thomas Berry's worldview. How often he writes and talks about the aesthetics on the moon (very minimalist) vs. aesthetics on this amazing fertile and diverse and abundant earth planet. Berry is in touch with the beautiful. He sees it everywhere. And he sees beauty diminishing on our planet because of the hubris and blindness of the humans. But we can change, and he helps show us the way. Like his mentor, Aquinas, Berry can say that "zeal comes from an

intense experience of the beauty of things.” It is this zeal, this renewed energy, that is so lacking where couchpotatoitis takes over a culture. (The medievals called it a capital sin of “acedia” or the “lack of energy to begin new things” in Aquinas’s words.) Berry is talking about the renewal of energy. Interestingly, David Bohm says that all energy comes from meaning. A crisis in energy is a crisis in meaning. And we have inherited a crisis in meaning from the modern era.

In reinforcing our relationship to creation in its multiple manifestations, Berry is also standing up to the cynicism of modern science that, as Jay Gould put it, sees humans as a “fortuitous afterthought” of the universe, or as illustrated by Bertrand Russell when he declared that “only on the first foundation of unyielding despair can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.” Berry takes us to premodern thinking (and post-modern thinking) where, as Aquinas put it, philosophy or love or wisdom begins with “awe and wonder.” Not to do this is to submit to a meaningless universe and to a “collective irresponsibility” as Joel Primack and Nancy Abrams put it in their important book on the new cosmology, *View From the Center of the Universe*. They underscore how, from the perspective of current scientific understanding, humans are significant in the universe and special because of our size; because of our intelligence and creativity; and because of the time in which we arrived on the scene—the time of the history of the universe, the time in the history of this planet, and the time in the history of our solar system. Like Thomas Berry, they too urge the telling of the Universe Story.

All this telling is sure to bring about what Gandhi called for: a remaking of ourselves—where responsibility and beauty awaken us out of our collective couchpotatoitis and awaken our religions and our educational systems to new and more ancient and more exciting goings-on.