

## The Church of Ten Thousand Things

Jay McDaniel

Most of us seek happiness in three ways: through healthy social relations among friends and family, through opportunities for rest and recreation, and through satisfying work. Thomas Berry addresses all three ways of finding happiness. He invites us to recognize that the hills and rivers can be among our family and friends. He reminds us that spending time in the presence of plants and animals can be more restful and regenerative than going to church. And he shows us that the Great Work of our time is to help build communities that are socially just, ecologically sustainable, and spiritually satisfying, with no one left behind. He offers hope to the world.

He offers this hope in ways that establish a dialogue between the head and the heart. On the one hand, he offers it in ways that are rationally compelling, because his writings place the human quest for happiness within the larger context of Earth history and scientific understanding. But he also offers this hope in ways that are poetically inspiring, because his writings appeal not only to our rational minds but also to our spiritual hearts. When we read his writings, we realize that we are on a journey within a Journey. Our companions in the Journey include other members of a larger congregation: the church of the Ten Thousand Things.

Some among us find ourselves asking if the Ten Thousand Things are themselves enfolded within a larger arc—a larger Womb—of compassion and care. Some such as I speak of this Womb as God. We sometimes wish he might speak more directly of this reality. People like me turn to the philosophy of Whitehead in this regard. Whitehead helps us link belief in God with an appreciation of the Universe Story.

But part of Thomas Berry's gift has been *not* to speak in this way. Too often such speech becomes trite or blasphemous. It reduces the Womb to a cliché or makes us think we can own it or possess it. In truth we cannot stand outside it and point to it as an object among objects, not even an intellectual object. We can only recognize that we are always already inside the Womb and that it is the larger context of our lives. We can trust the Womb, but not own it.

Still, we need to point to something. Thomas Berry invites us to point to hills and rivers and trees and stars, all of whom dwell within this Womb. With help from his writings we learn to point to the church of Ten Thousand Things, recognizing it many creatures as sacramental presences through which holy light shines. For centuries now, Christians have seen this light in bread and wine. Thomas Berry points to the wheat and berries from which they come, and also to wider systems of ecology from which the wheat and berries emerge. He has encouraged us to befriend the hidden soil from which all souls grow, ours included.

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For my part, I will forever be grateful to him for taking me beyond the bread and wine to wheat and berries. With his help I have learned to see burning bushes, not simply in the faces of other people, but also in the rivers and stars. I have always wanted to look at the world this way. Thomas Berry has opened that door for me, and for many, many others.