

CHRONICLE 9: EARTH SPIRITUALITY

A Spirituality for the Anthropocene

In past chronicles I have discussed the economic, political and legal systems. In this chronicle I'll discuss another system—religion. It will contrast spirituality with church structure.

Spirituality is an internal consciousness that gives a sense of identity, meaning and a purpose to life. It manifests itself in actions. Structure refers to the organizational structure—the hierarchy.

(Full disclosure: I am a Christian and a former Roman Catholic monk and priest practicing my faith in a Unitarian Fellowship)

A Story

I have a friend, a nun, who tells a story about going to Sunday Mass when she was a little girl. Her family always sat in the same pew. High on the wall beside the pew was a stained glass window. It showed an image of the Trinity: an old man -the Father; a young man- the Son; and a dove- the Holy Spirit. My friend said, “Two guys and a bird don't do it for me anymore.”

Many Christians would find this comment sacrilegious. But my friend is a Christian and has dedicated her life as a nun. She believes in an Earth spirituality. I suspect she had two problems with the image.

First the image, often referred to as the Family Model, is missing a critical element—a mother.

Second, it reinforces the concept of a “God up there somewhere” while we are all down here trying to do the best with what we have to work with. A God “up there” seems completely divorced from the challenges we are facing.

So how did things get this way?

A Bit of History.

In the early years after the death of Jesus there was no church as such. There was a spirituality—-an inner awareness of the Divine based upon the example and teachings of Jesus. Small groups of people got together to share and practice their spirituality. Gradually more formal structures began to emerge but it wasn't until the end of the fourth century that the Roman Emperor declared Christianity as the official religion. From then on things got turned around. Though the hierarchy had emerged from Christian spirituality, soon the powerful church structure began to dictate the spirituality.

Down through the ages there were many conflicts between the church and the “outside world”. One thinks of the fights over doctrine, the persecution of heretics, the crusades, the Galileo problem, and so forth. Though the church did many great things for the sick, the suffering, and those in need, it also did some not so great things with efforts to change the belief systems of others, especially of indigenous peoples. Thus down through the ages the spirituality became subservient to the doctrinal edicts of the structure. The church hierarchy, reflecting on the scriptures determined for all what an appropriate spirituality must be.

Today most mainline churches in the U.S. and Canada are experiencing a major loss in members, especially among the young. Though there are many reasons for this, one of them is

the sense that church “doesn’t do it for me anymore.” As a result many people decide to develop their own spirituality.

For Thomas Berry and the New Cosmologists, the Bible is still highly respected. But it is Earth that is the primary source of divine revelation. As Berry put it, “If we lived on the moon we would have no idea of the beauty and munificence of a divine presence. It is only through Earth that we come to recognize the Divine.”

For many of us Christians this awakening to an Earth Spirituality is a significant change in our consciousness, I remember how it happened to me.

One day when I was visiting Berry n his home in North Carolina I said to him, “Tom, many people where I live in the Arctic have an Earth-based spirituality. Have you ever written something on an Earth-based spirituality?” He told me he hadn’t. I was surprised. Then he said to me, “I have written something on the Spirituality of Earth that you might find interesting.” And that is when I got it. I am an earthling, part of Earth and Earth is sacred. So Earth Spirituality is an awareness of the divine within me and within everything around me.

Conclusion

Every year when I open my Daytimer I write on the front page a favourite quotation from Teilhard de Chardin: *We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.*

And when I open the book of Genesis I’m attracted by the story of creation—not the story of Adam, Eve, and the snake in the Garden but the other story. I’m attracted to the second creation story by another author in the second chapter of Genesis. It is rarely noticed because it is only one sentence long, but is powerful and, I think, a foundation for an Earth Spirituality.

“And Yahweh- God shaped man from the soil of the ground and blew the breath of life into his nostrils and man became a living being.” (Gen 2:7) The word “human” comes from the Latin word “humus” meaning “soil”.

To conclude: We have to stop trying to convert people to our religions. Instead, we have to model for them in our thoughts, words and actions a way forward to an Earth Spirituality.

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