The Dream of the Earth

Book by Thomas Berry, Published by Sierra Club Books, 1988
As Reviewed by Reverend Alex McGilvery

The Dream of the Earth is Thomas Berry’s call for humanity to lift its eyes from the allure of the industrial and consumer society to see the wonder of the Earth that surrounds and supports us. The content of the essays is well organized to pull the reader into what Berry calls an “intimate relationship with the Earth”. He is well situated in both eastern and western mystic philosophy and brings these understandings of the world to bear as he argues that we cannot continue as we are. He is right in arguing that we may have already paid too great a price for what we call progress.

The challenge for me through the essays is Berry’s willingness to appropriate aboriginal spirituality to his cause. I am not arguing that native spirituality is very earth oriented and more grounded in relationship with the earth than our Western notion of humanity as the owner and subduer of all we see. My problem is that he stereotypes the native people as the guardians of the Earth and the, perhaps, saviours of humanity if only we would listen to them.

We do in fact need to listen to the native communities, but not for the reasons that Berry suggests. We need to listen because they are part of us. There are native communities who are signing mining or hydro development deals to create jobs for the members of their communities. Do we reject these communities because they are no longer “the protectors of the Earth”.

This is a specific example of the weakness of Berry’s book. He uses everything from extinct or endangered animals to aboriginal cultures as ‘types’. He then uses these types to argue that we are wreaking the worst damage on the earth that it has ever experienced. This is simply not true. It is a kind of hubris. We are destroying ourselves and taking a lot of the world with us. But the Earth will continue after we are gone. Just as it continued when plants poisoned the atmosphere with oxygen billions of years ago, when asteroids destroyed the ecology, when ice ages scraped the surface of the planet clean.
I don’t like the stereotyping of natives, nor the hubris of making us the worst beings in creation. There are books that deal with ecological theology in a much more positive and healthy manner.

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