

Is Eco-theologian Thomas Berry a Thomist?

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Abstract. I examine the views of the renowned Catholic environmentalist, Thomas Berry, C.P., by comparing them with those of Thomas Aquinas, an author Berry frequently references. I intend to show that while the two share a number of views in common (e.g., both hold that non-rational creatures have their own inherent goodness), ultimately the two diverge on many foundational issues, resulting in differing conclusions as to how we should regard and treat the environment. Aquinas upholds divine transcendence, whereas Berry regards the notion of divine transcendence to lead to the exploitation of creation and locates the divine in the universe itself. Berry accordingly thinks that we should revere all natural things, whereas Aquinas thinks we should revere God and creatures in God's image. Aquinas maintains that the human soul is created by God and is in God's image. He sees our rational soul as placing us above other natural things, and from it follows our responsibility to care for nature. Berry, to the contrary, sees this affirmation of discontinuity between humans and the rest of nature to be the root of our environmental woes, as providing a justification for human exploitation of nature. For Berry, humans have no special status, but are one member alongside others in the earth community. Rather than being created by God, "humans have nothing but what they receive from the universe." By highlighting both the similarities and differences between these authors, I hope to contribute to the project of formulating a sound environmental ethics.

Keywords: Aquinas; care of creation; ecotheology; environmental ethics.

Introduction

The year 2019 marks the tenth year anniversary of the death of Fr. Thomas Berry, C.P. (1914–2009) who is considered by many to be the most renowned Catholic environmentalist, aside from the recent popes.¹ Berry authored eight books on environmentalism, some of which have been translated into other languages, and he also wrote quite a few essays. A recipient of numerous awards,² he has been listed as one of the top fifteen “green religious leaders,”³ and has an entry in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*.⁴ There is a foundation that bears his name and the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale also promotes his work.⁵ An Emmy award winning PBS film, “The Journey of the Universe,” is based in large part on his environmental vision.

It behooves a Thomist to evaluate Berry’s environmental thought, given its widespread influence.⁶ And all the more so, since Daniel P. Scheid, in a chapter in *Green Discipleship* entitled “Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Thomistic Tradition, and the Cosmic Common Good,” singles out Berry as someone who has “taken up aspects of his [Aquinas’s] work or expanded into new directions to address ecological concerns” (Scheid 2011, 144–45). My goal in this essay is to examine how Berry’s environmental thought compares to Thomas’s, and to show that the “new directions” Berry has taken lead him to conclusions that are diametrically opposed to those of Aquinas concerning God, the universe, human nature, the relationship of

¹ Articles on Berry’s thought appear in both theological and environmental journals; see, for example, Ellard 2012 and Chapple 2011.

² See “Thomas Berry: Biography—Awards.” In Thomas Berry Foundation, access November 12, 2018, <http://thomasberry.org/life-and-thought/honorary-degrees-awards>.

³ See Grist staff, 2007. “15 Green Religious Leaders,” access November 12, 2018, <http://grist.org/article/religious/>.

⁴ Grim 2011, 87–89.

⁵ See Thomas Berry Foundation: “The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale builds on the innovative work of Thomas [Berry] in the history of world religions through a joint degree program in religion and ecology as well as through conferences, publications, and a website.” In Thomas Berry Foundation, access November 12, 2018, <http://thomasberry.org/thomas-berry-foundation>.

⁶ It is only in the last thirty years that Thomists have investigated how Aquinas’s thought bears on environmentalism. See George 2012, 74–75 for an overview of Thomistic literature up until 2012. For more recent Thomistic reflections see Thompson, 2012.

humans to other earthly creatures, what is sacred and to be revered, and what is *the* story humanity needs to hear.⁷ I do not intend to render a judgment on who is correct, but simply to show that Berry diverges from Aquinas on issues of importance for the formulation of a sound environmental ethics.

1. Overview of Berry's thought

Thomas Berry proposes that what has fostered the significant environmental destruction of his day is a mentality of regarding natural things as existing simply for our use. The corrective he offers consists in an alternative way of viewing them. He praises indigenous peoples for their sense of connection to the universe as to a whole of which they are but part. He regards science as offering modern man a “new revelation” of our interconnectedness with natural things, especially in regard to how our existence depends upon the developmental processes that have taken place in the universe over time. In addition to enlisting science to discredit the notion that there is a discontinuity between humans and non-rational beings, he also seeks to eradicate any radical discontinuity by attributing spiritual characteristics to the material universe. Accordingly, Berry advocates that we regard natural things with reverence, rather than as mere tools for our use.

2. Differences of views concerning human beings

Central to Berry's thought is the notion that: “The materialism of science or the spiritualizing tendencies of religion that refuse the continuity of the human and all our capacities with the natural world ends up with a radical disassociation of the human from the universe about us” (Berry, 2006, 56).

Aquinas in many places argues that both the human intellect and the human soul (of which the intellect is a power) are immaterial, and in this

⁷ Space does not allow for a treatment of all of the significant differences in view. Berry's notion of “Gaia” probably tops the list of untreated major differences, along with what he has to say about wonder and awe.

respect, he sees there to be a discontinuity between us and the material universe.⁸

The above disagreement leads a further disagreement: Aquinas insists that a human soul cannot originate from physical causes, but must be created by God, whereas Berry maintains:

Just as the human body took its shape through some fourteen billion years of effort on the part of the universe and through some four and a half billion years of earth existence, so the human psychic structure and our spirituality have been taking shape over all these billions of years, beginning with the primordial atomic particles which held within themselves the destinies of all that has followed, even the spiritual shaping of the human. (Berry 1988, 117)⁹

And elsewhere Berry says: “Certainly humans have nothing but what they receive from the universe” (Berry 2006, 121).¹⁰ Aquinas, to the contrary, holds that the human soul is produced in being through creation:

The rational soul is a subsistent form. Whence, it belongs properly to it both to be and to become. And because it cannot become from some underlying matter, neither corporeal (for then it would be of a corporeal nature) nor spiritual (for in this manner spiritual substances would be changed one into another); it is necessary to say that it does not become except through creation. (*ST I*, q. 90, a. 2)¹¹

Aquinas then goes on to deny the possibility that the human soul can be produced by anything other than God, on the grounds that “God alone can create” (*ST I*, q. 90, a. 3). Aquinas thus would hold that in the following Berry is attributing to the universe what can only be attributed to God: “It

⁸ See *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 75, a. 2 (hereafter cited as *ST*) and *Disputed Question de Anima*, a. 1 and a. 14. All translations of Aquinas are my own.

⁹ See also, Berry 2006, 55 and Berry 2000, 25.

¹⁰ See also, Berry 2006, 114: “If there is such a thing as human intelligence, then it has emerged out of the universe.”

¹¹ Note that in *Befriending the Earth*, Berry acknowledges that Western Christian thought maintains that human souls are specially created by God. However, he does not himself acknowledge it, and proceeds to state that such a belief “contributes to our sense of alienation from the natural world” (Berry 1991, 115).

is most significant for the human to experience itself as brought into being, sustained in being, and fulfilled through the comprehensive universe. This coming forth from a physical and nurturing source requires also our return to the universe as our final destiny” (Berry 2009b, 46). Aquinas disagrees with Berry’s last statement as well. Our ultimate destiny is our return to God, and not to the universe.¹²

Even in the case of other living creatures, whose souls are not created, Aquinas would find it objectionable to say that non-rational living things have nothing but what they receive from the universe, for while the souls or substantial forms of these beings are not the result of a special act of creation by God,¹³ the existence of these beings depends on his continual presence to them:

Since God is his very being through his essence, it is necessary that the created thing be his proper effect. ... This effect, however, God causes in things, not only when they first begin to be, but so long as they are preserved in being; just as light is caused in the air by the sun so long as the air remains illuminated. Therefore, so long as a thing has being, so long must God be present to it, according to the mode of being it has. (*ST I*, q. 8, a. 1)

3. Consequences of the differences in view as to the interrelations of beings in the universe

Although Aquinas never entertained notions such as that we are made of star dust, he held that humans are bodily creatures, rejecting the notion that the soul is the whole person.¹⁴ But again, he holds that we are not just bodily creatures; unlike other earthly creatures, we possess the immaterial faculties of intelligence and free will, rooted in our immaterial soul.¹⁵ Therein lies a fundamental discontinuity between humans and non-rational creatures.

¹² See *ST I*, q. 1, a. 7: “God is the ultimate end of man and of all other things.”

¹³ See *ST I*, q. 45, a. 8.

¹⁴ See *Quaestio disputata de anima*, unicus, a. 1.

¹⁵ See *ST I*, q. 91, aa. 1–3.

Berry on the other hand maintains:

One of the most fundamental sources of our pathology is our adherence to a discontinuity between the nonhuman and the human.... This discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman breaks the covenant of the universe, the covenant whereby every being exists and has its value in relation to the great universe community. (Berry 2009b, 138)

For Berry, a consequence of the mistaken affirmation of a discontinuity between humans and non-rational creatures is that “it gives all the inherent values and all the controlling rights to the human. The only inherent value recognized in the nonhuman world is its utility to the human” (Berry 2009b, 138).

The discontinuity between humans and non-rational creatures that Aquinas signals does not lead him to affirm that the only end to which the latter are ordered is human utility:

Thus, therefore, also in the parts of the universe, each and every creature is for the sake of its proper act and perfection.

Secondly, however, the less noble creatures are for the sake of the more noble ones, as the creatures that are below man are for the sake of man.

Further, however, individual creatures are for the sake of the perfection of the whole universe.

Further, moreover, the whole universe, with its individual parts, are ordered to God as to an end, insofar as divine goodness is represented in them by means of a certain imitation, to the glory of God; although rational creatures have God as their end in a certain special mode beyond this, whom they can attain by their own operation, by knowing and loving [him]. And thus it is manifest that divine goodness is the end of all corporeal beings. (*ST I*, q. 65, a. 2)

Berry himself approvingly notes that Aquinas holds that non-rational creatures have their own inherent goodness.¹⁶ Berry also accurately notes that Aquinas maintains¹⁷ that non-rational creatures and humans are parts

¹⁶ See Berry, 1988, 81: “Saint Thomas dedicated his efforts in great part to defending the reality and goodness and efficacy intrinsic to the natural world.”

¹⁷ See Berry 1991, 17: “As St. Thomas Aquinas...says in Part I, Question 47, Article One, of the *Summa Theologica*, the reason there are so many different things in the world is because God cannot ... communicate God’s self totally to any one being, and so creates this

ordered to the perfection of the whole universe, a view he himself shares.¹⁸ Aquinas does maintain, however, that non-rational creatures contribute to the perfection of the universe more by serving us than by simply continuing to exist and act. He reasons that there is no conflict between a lower part being ordered to the perfection of the whole and to serving a higher part:

All of the parts are thus ordered to the perfection of the whole insofar as one serves another. As in the human body, it is apparent that the lungs belong to the perfection of the body because they serve the heart: whence it is not contrary for the lungs to be for the sake of the heart, and for the sake of the whole animal. And similarly it is not contrary for other natures to exist for the sake of intellectual beings and for the sake of the perfection of the universe: for if those things which the perfection of the intellectual substance require were lacking, the universe would not be complete. (*ScG* III, c. 112)¹⁹

Aquinas thus disagrees with Berry who maintains that: “The ecological community is not subordinate to the human community” (Berry 2000, 105).

Also, while Berry accurately quotes Aquinas as holding that: “The order of the universe is the ultimate and noblest perfection of things” (Berry 2000, 77), he fails to note that Aquinas also holds that: “The universe is more perfect in goodness than the intellectual creature extensively and diffusively. But intensively and collectively the likeness of divine perfection is found rather in the intellectual creature, who is capable of holding the highest good” (*ST* I, q. 93, a. 2, ad 3). Indeed Aquinas holds that “the good

array of beings so that the perfection lacking in one would be supplied by the other, and the total universe of things would manifest and participate in the divine more than any single being.”

¹⁸ See Berry 2006, 41: “We might think of ourselves as recovering from the pervasive attitude of Western civilization, which designates the human as a superior mode of being and use as our primary relation with the world about us. We have only begun to realize that we are, precisely in our human mode of being, a single if also immensely significant component in the great community of existence.”

¹⁹ Berry maintains that: “The second cause [of humans being a destructive force on the planet] is our sense of Earth as primarily a natural resource for the unlimited use of humans” (Berry 2009b, 166). To say that the earth is primarily a resource for humans is not the same thing as to say that it is a resource to be used in any manner we please.

of the grace belonging to one individual is greater than the good of nature belonging to the entire universe” (*ST* I–II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2).²⁰

Aquinas does sometimes speak as if non-rational beings serve a merely instrumental function in the universe.²¹ However, the reason that he does not speak of us being responsible for taking care of these beings is because he is unaware that we can play any significant role in safeguarding the order of nature. He has no idea that we could cause the extinction of a species or disrupt nature in other major ways and he also does not think that human beings have sufficient intelligence to oversee material creation. Aquinas explicitly affirms that care of material creation rightly falls to intelligent beings and he attributes this role to the angels.²² Thus, were Aquinas to realize that we can disrupt nature in serious ways, and that we can make life-style choices and develop technologies that would diminish such disruption, he would maintain that we ought to do so.

For Aquinas, then, the discontinuity between humans and non-rational creatures not only justifies our use of the latter in order to live and flourish as humans, but it also provides a reason for us to care for them insofar as they are parts of the universe, a universe ultimately ordered to God’s glory, granted he himself did not make the latter application. Berry, to the contrary, thinks that affirming such a discontinuity legitimates treating non-rational beings as mere instruments.

4. Differences in view concerning the nature of the universe consequent upon differences in views concerning the beings that constitute it

Berry frequently asserts that “the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (Berry 2006, 17).²³ He thinks that natural

²⁰ See also, *ScG* IV, c. 55: “there is nothing greater in created things than the salvation of rational beings.”

²¹ See *II Sent.*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3 and *ST* I, q. 20, a. 2 and ad 3.

²² See *De Veritate*, q. 5, a. 8 and *ScG* III, c. 78.

²³ See also, Berry 2009b, 152. See also, Berry 2000, x, xi and 16.

things' inherent goodness and intrinsic spontaneity²⁴ justifies calling them "subjects," to which he contrasts "objects to be used."²⁵

[I] is also important that we develop a sense of the reality and nobility of the natural world in itself. Saint Thomas dedicated his efforts in great part to defending the reality and goodness and efficacy intrinsic to the natural world. The natural world is not simply object, not simply usable thing, not an inert mode of being awaiting its destiny to be manipulated by the divine or exploited by the human. (Berry 1988, 81)²⁶

As noted earlier, Aquinas indeed thinks that non-rational creatures are not mere instruments, but have their own inherent goodness, a reflection of God's infinite goodness. However, he still distinguishes persons (subjects) from things (objects).²⁷ Thus, he would regard Berry's distinction between mere instruments and subjects as false dichotomy; a non-rational creature is neither a person, nor a mere instrument.

The discontinuity Aquinas sees between rational and non-rational creatures has as a consequence that rational creatures can enter into friendship with each other, but not with non-rational creatures:

Friendship cannot be had except with rational creatures, in whom there happens to be a mutual return of love and a sharing in the works of life, and for whom it happens that things occur well or badly, according to fortune and happiness; as also there is benevolence properly speaking towards them. Irrational creatures are not able to reach so far as to love God, nor as to share in the intellectual and happy life by which God lives. (*ST I*, q. 20, a. 2 and ad 3)²⁸

²⁴ See Berry 2009b, 88.

²⁵ See Berry 2006, 18. See also Berry 1988, 45, where Berry speaks of subjects in terms of interiority. However, he never fully or coherently works out what he means by it.

²⁶ See also Berry 2009b, 152: "...we need to reflect on earlier times, when the human community was experienced within a universe of subjects to be communed with, not of objects to be exploited."

²⁷ Aquinas defines "person" as an individual substance possessing a rational nature; see *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1.

²⁸ See also *ST II-II*, q. 25, a. 3. Berry endorses Aldo Leopold's assertion that "a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from a conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for

Berry on the other hand laments that: “We no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an ‘it’ rather than a ‘thou’” (Berry 2000, 17). Berry calls us to commune with the earth²⁹ and with bees and falcons.³⁰ Berry roots this appeal in his understanding of unity of the parts of the universe:

The other thing so important in this process is the relationship of origin. Everything in the universe is genetically cousin to everything else. There is literally one family, one bonding, in the universe, because everything is descended from the same universe, because everything is descended from the same source. ... We are literally born as a community; the trees, the birds, and all living creatures are bonded together in a single community of life. (Berry 1991, 14–15)

Berry never distinguishes human communities which involve sharing the life of reason from non-human communities which do not. For him “we form a single sacred society with every other member of the Earth community, with the mountains and rivers...with all the creatures that move over the land...or swim through the sea” (Berry 2009b, 85). In addition, Berry never articulates a point of momentous importance for Aquinas, namely, that humans have been called by God to friendship with him. Our immaterial intellect renders us capable of being raised to share in God’s own life, something purely material beings are incapable of:³¹

Therefore, it is manifest that from any love on the part of God follows some good caused in creatures; nevertheless sometimes not [a good] coeternal to his eternal

the community as such” (Berry 2006, 36). For Aquinas, beavers and rocks may be parts of a land-community, but they cannot be citizens, except by metaphor, since they lack reason.

²⁹ See Berry 1988, 97.

³⁰ See Berry 2009b, 173. See Berry 1991, 71: “a person is carrying on a conversation with the trees or with the clouds or with the winds, that person is in contact with an ultimate power principle.” Aquinas would think it nonsense to talk to a tree; the beauty of a tree, and of creation in general, should lead us to talk to God.

³¹ See *ST I*, q. 12, a. 4, ad 3.

love. And according to the difference of the sort of good is discerned a differing love of God for the creature. One [love] indeed is common, according to which “he loves all things that exist,” as is said in Wis. 11:25; namely, according as he bestows natural being on created things. Another love, however, is special, according to which he draws the rational creature above the condition of nature to a sharing in the divine good. And according to this love something is said to be loved simply speaking, because according to this love God wants simply speaking the eternal good that is himself for the creature. (*STI–II*, q. 110, a. 1)

It is through grace that God “draws the rational creature above the condition of nature.”³² Thus, for Aquinas, humans are capable of union with God through grace (and ultimately through glory), as well as of union with other rational beings who are united with God, which he refers to as the communion of saints.³³ Berry speaks of none of these things, and indeed finds the notion that humans alone belong to the spiritual community to be problematic, in keeping with his denial of a discontinuity between humans and other earthly creatures.³⁴

5. What is sacred and to be revered?

For Aquinas, the words “sacred” and “holy” (“sacer” and “sanctus”³⁵ respectively) are more or less synonyms. Aquinas says the following about holiness:

Since the good loved has the notion of an end, and the motion of the will is rendered good or bad from the end, thus it is necessary that the love by which the highest good is loved, which is God, obtain a certain eminent goodness, which

³² See *STh I–II*, q. 110, a. 2. Berry has a very different concept of grace. For him “a moment of grace” is on at which “great transformations of the universe occur,” e.g., when life began on earth; see Berry 2000, c. 17, “Moments of Grace,” 197–201.

³³ See *In Symbolum Apostolorum*, a. 10.

³⁴ See Berry 2006, 51: “The continuity between the human community and the natural world was altered by identifying the human as a spiritual being in contrast to all other beings. Only the human really belonged to the sacred community of the redeemed.”

³⁵ Both “sacer” and “sanctus” have the same root: “SA, whence sancio, sanus, Gr. *sáos*” (Marchant 1953); sancio means “to make sacred or inviolable by a religious act” (*ibid.*) and *sáos* means “safe.”

is expressed by the name of holiness (*sanctitatis*), for according to the Greeks “holy”⁵⁶ means, as it were, “pure,” for the purest goodness, immune from any defect, is in God; or according to Latin speakers, what is called “holy” is “firm,” for unchangeable goodness is in God, on account of which all things that are ordained to God are called holy (*sancta*), such as the temple and the vessels of the temple, and all things that have been handed over for divine worship. It is therefore fitting that the spirit by which the love with which God loves himself is introduced in us is called the Holy Spirit. (*Compendium theologiae*, I, c. 47)⁵⁷

The word “holy” in both Greek and Latin first had reference to persons and things devoted or consecrated to God, and then was transferred to name God’s perfect and unchanging goodness; it is to the latter that the name most properly applies, the holiness of things consecrated to God possessing a derivative form of holiness. Human beings in the state grace can also be called “holy” because they are made so by divine indwelling.⁵⁸ While Aquinas holds that God is present to all creatures, sustaining them in existence, he denies that this presence makes the creatures themselves divine. It is only God’s presence in certain rational creatures through grace and glory that results in their divinization.⁵⁹

Aquinas maintains that reverence consists in desiring to show attentive service to the one who is revered and in fearing to do anything that might offend him. For Aquinas, God is the primary object of reverence,⁴⁰ and the reverence that is to be shown to God alone, has a special name, “latria.”⁴¹ Creatures created in the image of God who remain open to God⁴² are also rightfully shown reverence, though of a lesser form: “*Dulia* conveys the reverence and honor that can be shown to a creature. Since, however, honor

⁵⁶ The Greek equivalent of the Latin “sacer,” is “hagios” which means “devoted to the gods, pious, pure” (Liddell 1948).

⁵⁷ Compare to *ST II-II*, q. 99 a. 1 where Aquinas uses the word “sacrum” in place of “sanctum.”

⁵⁸ See *Compendium theologiae*, I, c. 47.

⁵⁹ See *ST I*, q. 12, a. 5, ad 3 and *II Sent.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 4, ad 3.

⁴⁰ See *ST II-II*, q. 121, a.1 ad 3 and *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 2.

⁴¹ See *ST II-II*, q. 81, a. 4, ad 3 and *ST II-II*, q. 103, a. 3.

⁴² Fallen angels are intelligent beings who are incapable of loving God, and so are not to be revered; see *III Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5.

is not owed except to divine things, as the Philosopher says in Bk. I of the *Ethics*, it is not owed properly and directly except to the one possessing grace and virtue which makes [one] divine” (III *Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3).

Living human beings who are bad people are not to be revered as the individuals they are, but only to the extent that they have a human nature which makes them capable of becoming virtuous.⁴³ As for non-rational creatures, no reverence is owed them because they are not themselves divine; they are incapable of acquiring virtue⁴⁴ (as they lack free will) and they cannot be recipients of grace.⁴⁵

Berry, unlike Aquinas, does not attribute sacredness primarily to God: “The universe is the primary sacred reality” (Berry 2000, 49). Berry seems to realize that if God is a separate being from creation, there would be no reason to claim that natural things themselves are sacred. For this reason, he criticizes the notion of divine transcendence:

How and why did our present devastation of the Earth happen? ...The first thing that makes us vulnerable is a *transcendent, personal, monotheistic creative deity*. The constellation of the divine in a personal transcendent order tends to desacralize the phenomenal world. (Berry 2006, 25)⁴⁶

[The notion of a transcendent deity has] led us to treat the phenomenal world with something less than the reverence paid it by those cultures in which there is a sacred dimension to trees, to rivers, and to the whole of creation. (Berry 2006, 25)

⁴³ See III *Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3.

⁴⁴ See III *Sent.*, d. 9, q. 2, a. 3, ad 6: “*Dulia* [the type of reverence which can be shown to a creature] is not owed the likeness of a vestige, as it is owed the likeness of an image, because it has no aptitude for virtue.”

⁴⁵ See *ST I-II*, q. 110, a. 2.

⁴⁶ See also, Berry 1991, 114: “The divine, once perceived as a pervasive divine presence throughout the phenomenal world, was constellated in the Bible in a transcendent, monotheistic deity, a creator of the world.... But what is more important is that we appear to give up that primordial, inherent relationship between the human and the divine within the natural order of things.... The Genesis creation narrative states that each part of creation is good. At the end of the narrative, it is declared ‘very good.’ But this is different from having a sacred natural world with an all-pervasive divine presence. This is the context of desacralization that we have.” See also, Berry 2006, 51.

Berry wants the divine and the sacred to reside in the universe itself. He affirms that: “Every existence is a mode of divine presence” (Berry 1991, 19).⁴⁷ Here he differs radically from Aquinas, who maintains: “each thing is said to be good by divine goodness, as a first principle, exemplar, efficient cause, and final cause of all goodness. Nevertheless each thing is called good by a *likeness* of divine goodness inhering in it, which is *formally its own goodness* denominating itself” (*ST I*, q. 6, a. 4; emphasis added).

This passage speaks in terms of goodness. However, for Aquinas being is convertible with goodness,⁴⁸ so similarly each being formally has its own being. Thus, for Aquinas no created substance is a “mode of divine presence.” Aquinas thinks that God must always be present to created things if they are to exist. However, he further holds: “Nevertheless it is not to be thought that he [God] is in things as if mixed in them, for it has been shown that neither matter nor form is [something] of him, but he is in his works through the mode of an agent cause” (*ScG III*, c. 68). God is in created things in the mode of an agent cause of their existence, but their existence is not a “mode of divine existence,” but something that belongs to them as beings other than God. God is separate from the world, but not separated from it; God’s very transcendence as Creator goes hand-in-hand with him being intimately present to creatures.⁴⁹ God’s presence to non-rational creatures does not make the creatures themselves divine.

Berry thinks that the only way to get humans to cease treating natural things as pure instruments is to get them to see natural things as sacred and to be revered; in order to secure this vision, Berry, again, locates divinity in creatures themselves and not in a God transcending them. Accordingly, Berry often conflates the universe with God. Especially in his later works, Berry attributes to the universe what Aquinas sees as belonging properly to God. For instance, Berry affirms that the universe is “the ultimate self-referent

⁴⁷ See also, Berry 2009a, 86 where Berry approvingly quotes Scotus Eriugena: “It follows that we ought not to understand God and the creature as two things distinct from one another, but as one and the same.” See also, *ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁸ See *ST I*, q. 5, a. 1: “good and being are the same in reality (*secundum re*), and only differ according to reason.”

⁴⁹ See *ST I*, q. 8, a. 1.

mode of being in the phenomenal world” and for this reason “it constitutes the norm of all reality and value” (Berry 2006, 23).⁵⁰ For Aquinas, the universe is a universe of creatures, and creatures have a necessary reference to the Creator who while present to all of them is not part of them. Therefore, nothing in the phenomenal world, even the entire universe itself, is self-referent. God alone has no necessary relation to anything outside himself.⁵¹ Aquinas also maintains that what is good and bad in human action is determined according to natural law.⁵² Natural law, however, is derived from God’s eternal law,⁵³ and not simply from nature or the universe.

As Berry and Aquinas disagree as to what is sacred and divine, they accordingly also disagree as to what should be revered. Berry maintains:

As heirs to the biblical tradition, we believed that the planet belonged to us. ... We still do not feel ...that we should revere every living creature—from the lowliest insect to the great eagle in the sky. We fail to recognize our obligation to bow before the majesty of the mountains and rivers, the forests, the grassland, the deserts, the coastlands. (Berry 2009b, 173)

Given Berry’s position concerning the sacredness of creatures, it is not surprising he expresses puzzlement regarding idolatry: “Why were the pagans seen as idolatrous? The divine always appears in some embodiment; no one ever worshiped matter as matter” (Berry 1991, 19). Aquinas, while not holding that people worshiped matter insofar as it is a principle of change and corruption, holds that some worshiped material beings because of perfections they possess, such as beauty or power:

A third reason [for idolatry] is on account of ignorance of the true God whose excellence men were not considering; and they gave divine worship to certain

⁵⁰ See also, Berry 2009b, 138: “In the phenomenal world, only the universe is self-referent.”

⁵¹ See *ST I*, q. 13, a. 7: “Therefore, since God is outside the whole order of the creature, and all creatures are ordered to him, and not vice versa, it is manifest that creatures are really referred to God himself; but in God there is no some real relation to creatures, but only in reason, insofar as creatures are referred to him.”

⁵² See *ST I–II*, q. 94, a. 3.

⁵³ See *ibid.*

creatures on account of their beauty or power. Whence it is said in the book of Wisdom, “people, while applying their minds to the works, failed to acknowledge who the Artificer was, and they thought rather that fire or wind or the swift air or the circuit of the stars or the immense body of water or the sun or the moon were the gods that were rulers of the earth. (*ST* II–II, q. 94, a. 4)

In other words, these idolaters took God’s works for divine beings, when instead, by reflection on these works, they should have come to know God, the Artificer. Accordingly, what Berry praises here, Aquinas regards as idolatry:

With regard to time and season, rituals were established to create a consciousness of the moments of cosmological change: the dawn and dusk of the daily sequence of sunlight and dark, the increase and decline in the phases of the moon, the winter solstice.... These moments of change were the moments when the shining forth of the phenomenal world was most evident. Such moments were moments of grace, moments when the sacred world communicated itself with special clarity to the world of the human.

This intimacy with the universe can be seen in the initiation ceremony of the Omaha Indians. When an infant is born, the child is taken out under the invocation ‘O Ye Sun, Moon, Stars, All Ye that move in the heavens, I bid you hear me. Into your midst has come a new life. Consent Ye, we implore, make its path smooth that it may move beyond the first hill.’ (Berry 2006, 115)⁵⁴

For Aquinas, non-rational creatures themselves are not to be honored or revered; rather our consideration of them is meant to lead us to know and to revere God.⁵⁵ Berry rarely mentions God,⁵⁶ and generally does not speak of natural things as apt to lead our minds and hearts *to God*. Berry far more frequently speaks of natural things as things that we should be communing

⁵⁴ The same thought is also articulated in Berry 1991, 48 and in Berry 1988, 13–14 and 131. See also Berry 2009b, 171 and 176 for other instances of what Berry praises, but Aquinas would regard as idolatry.

⁵⁵ See *ScG*, Bk. II, c. 2.

⁵⁶ Now and again, and especially in Berry’s earlier works, he does make reference to God, albeit rarely using the word “God.” For example, Berry says in his earlier work: “We bear the universe in our being as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged” (Berry 1988, 132). See also, Berry 2009a, 64.

with individually and as a way of connecting with the universe as ultimate sacred community. Again, the two thinkers plainly differ as to what they regard as primarily sacred; for Aquinas it is God, whereas for Berry, it is the universe. They also differ as to what makes humans holy; for Aquinas it is due to God dwelling in them through grace, whereas for Berry: “The earth is a very special sacred community. Humans become sacred by participating in this larger sacred community. ... We must be integrated into the religious dimension of the earth” (Berry 1991, 43).⁵⁷ For Aquinas, what is divine and to be revered is God and rational beings open to God, whereas for Berry it is the natural things that make up the sacred community of the universe.

6. What is *the story we need to know*

According to Berry, the story that modern people above all need to know is the story of the development of the natural world:

If this sense of the sacred character of the natural world as our primary revelation of the divine is our first need, our second need is to diminish our emphasis on redemption experience in favor of greater emphasis on creation processes. Creation, however, must now be experienced as the emergence of the universe as a psychic-spiritual as well as a material-physical reality from the beginning. We need to see ourselves as integral with the emergent process as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself. (Berry 1988, 81)⁵⁸

Aquinas maintains that *the story* we need to know is the Gospel. The reason for this is that Aquinas holds that human beings, as rational animals, have as their ultimate end knowledge of God. Eternal life does not consist in knowledge of creation, but in “knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ

⁵⁷ Berry goes on to say: “we have in the Christian tradition the idea that the church is the sacred community, and that parishes are sacred communities—as indeed they are” (Berry 1991, 43). He never explains what makes the church a sacred community, and why there is a further need for people to be integrated into the sacred community of the earth in order to be sacred. See also, Berry 1988, 257 and Berry 2000, 49.

⁵⁸ See also, Berry 1988, 25.

whom he sent” (Jn. 17.3).⁵⁹ Aquinas holds that “faith is the habit of mind by which eternal life begins in us, making the intellect assent to things that are not apparent” (*Super Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, c. 11, lec. 1). By faith the Christian believes the truths of the Creed, one of the most central of which is the Redemption. Aquinas would thus disagree with Berry’s view that we need to “diminish our emphasis on redemption experience in favor of greater emphasis on creation processes” (Berry 1988, 81).⁶⁰ Aquinas resoundingly agrees with Peter’s words to Christ: “To whom, Lord, shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (Jn. 6:68).

Aquinas does agree up to a point with Berry that we should not neglect a consideration of material creatures. He maintains that “the consideration of creatures is useful for instruction in the faith,” and “in a certain manner meditation on things divinely made...is necessary” (*ScG II*, c. 2). As noted earlier, Aquinas affirms the role of creation in leading our minds to God and our hearts to reverence of God, and he does so frequently.⁶¹ He speaks of creation as “a certain book in which knowledge of God can be read” (*Super Romanos*, c. 1, lec. 6).⁶² And as Berry approvingly notes,⁶³ Aquinas maintains that “knowledge of creatures is valuable for destroying errors concerning God” (*ScG II*, c. 3).⁶⁴

Aquinas, however, is not advocating an in-depth study of creatures, but rather a general knowledge of creatures sufficient to avoid errors

⁵⁹ See *Super Ioannem*, c. 17, lec. 1, no. 3.

⁶⁰ See also, Berry 1991, 75, “I sometime think we worry too much about Jesus Christ. We have, to my mind, been overly concerned with salvation and the savior personality.”

⁶¹ See *ST I*, q. 2, a.2 and *ScG I*, c. 12.

⁶² Aquinas would agree with Berry that modern man’s tendency to ignore the book of nature is problematic. As Berry puts it: “We live in cities, in a world of concrete and steel, of wheels and wires, a world of unending work. We seldom see the stars at night or the planets or the moon. ... Ours is a world of highways, parking lots, shopping centers. ... We no longer read the Book of Nature” (Berry 2000, 15).

⁶³ See Berry 2009b, 7.

⁶⁴ See *ScG II*, c. 3: “In this manner, therefore, it is manifest that the opinion of certain people who were saying that it in nowise matters to the faith what someone might think about creatures, so long as they thought rightly about God...for error concerning creatures flows over into false knowledge of God, when it subjects them to certain other causes, and it leads the minds of men away from God, whom the faith strive to direct them to.”

that would lead one away from the faith. The specific errors he names are found on the part of “those who think that any body is God,” as is the case of those who think that things such as fire or the sun or stars are gods; secondly, those who “attribute the creation of things to causes other than God;” thirdly, “those who detract some things from the divine power that operates in creatures, as for example...do those who subtract some or all things from Divine Providence; lastly, those who due to ignorance of the natures of things, “are consequently ignorant of their rank in the order of the universe, and think themselves to be subject to other creatures to which they are superior, as is the case of those who believe that the will of men is subject to the stars” (ScG II, c. 3). (Aquinas would see Berry as guilty of a couple of these misunderstandings.)

Aquinas goes on to say that there are many truths about creatures which are of no concern to the religious believer:

What the philosopher considers about creatures is otherwise than what the theologian does. For the philosopher considers those things which belong to them according to their proper nature, such as that fire is born upward; the faith, however, considers only those things about creatures which belongs to them according as they are related to God, such as that they are created by God, that they are subject to God, and things of this sort. Whence it is not to be imputed to some imperfection of the doctrine of the faith, if it sets aside many properties of things, such as the structure of the heavens, the quality of motion.... (ScG II, c. 4)

Thus, for Aquinas, while the faithful need to have a sufficient knowledge of creatures to steer clear of astrology and other forms of idolatry, the knowledge of the details of natural causality which is proper to science is generally of no importance to them as believers. Berry, to the contrary, laments that: “Until recently, there has been a feeling in most religious traditions that spiritual persons were not concerned with any detailed understanding of the biological order of Earth” (Berry 2009b, 136). For him the “universe story” is the detailed story of the development of the universe as presented by science. He thinks that this story is of such overarching importance that:

Our scientific understanding of the universe becomes a wisdom tradition. We will finally appreciate that our new understanding of a universe that comes into being through a sequence of irreversible transformations has a revelatory dimension. This fresh understanding of the universe establishes a horizon under which all the traditions will hence forth need to function in their integral mode of self understanding. (Berry 2009b, 136–37)

Elsewhere Berry affirms: “We live in a world of irreversible, emergent process. If Christianity is to survive in any effective manner, it must bring about a reinterpretation of all its teachings within this context” (Berry 1991, 74).

The reason why Berry thinks that the story of the universe as science tells it is so important is because it reveals a universe in which things are far more connected than previously thought. While indigenous peoples had a mystical sense of connection with the universe, science gives us a rational understanding of our connectedness to the universe. The earth is no longer a stage on which humans are placed, but something from which they have evolved. The earth is not something that was created *ex nihilo* and placed in the universe, but is the product of developmental processes in the universe. Our existence is dependent not only on water, air, and other things that presently exist on earth; our existence is dependent on processes that occurred in the past, such as the formation of heavy elements in the stars. Berry sees as a crucial deficiency in the Christian worldview the failure to “present the world as a continuing process of emergence in which there is an inner organic bond of descent of each reality from an earlier reality” (Berry 1988, 129). It is the discontinuity between humans and the rest of the universe, affirmed by Aquinas, that Berry ultimately has in his sights: “Empirical inquiry into the universe reveals that from its beginning in the galactic system to its earthly expression in human consciousness the universe carries within itself a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension. Otherwise human consciousness emerges out of nowhere” (Berry 1988, 131).⁶⁵

⁶⁵ See also, Berry 2000, 192: “Because this story is a single story and the components of the universe are so intimately related, the story must account for human intelligence. If we consider that human intelligence is a psychic faculty, then the universe from the begin-

Aquinas would not see the new story of the universe as changing anything that is essential to the faith. God remains the Creator, who brings things into existence *ex nihilo* and who sustains all things in existence, and the Governor, moving all things to their ends. Christ remains the Redeemer. And no other article of the Creed would change. Moreover, although Aquinas lacked familiarity with the scientific method and with the scientific discoveries Berry has access to, he had already entertained the notion of a developmental universe, e.g., in examining the line in Genesis: “the earth put forth green plants” (*ST I*, q. 69, a. 2). He did not see the notion of a developing universe to require revision of any central truth of the faith. In addition, although Aquinas was unaware of the scientific account of the interconnection of the parts of the universe in both time and space, he maintains in many places that the parts of the universe form an interactive whole, ordered to God’s glory.⁶⁶ While he would be glad to learn of the details of the interconnection of the universe’s parts, it would not change his basic views on the unity of the universe, human discontinuity with other material beings, and God as Creator.

Aquinas acknowledges that certain specific interpretations of Scripture may need to be revisited in the light of new scientific knowledge that is well-established:

Whether the firmament was made on the second day? In questions of this sort two things are to be observed, as Augustine teaches. First, that the truth of Scripture is held as unshakable. Secondly, since the divine Scripture can be expounded in many ways, no one should inhere so decidedly to any exposition such that if it was established to be false by a reason that was certain, he would presume to assert that it was the meaning of Scripture; lest from his assertion

ning must be a psychic-producing process.” Scheid thinks that Berry follows in Aquinas’s footsteps by harmonizing faith with the *scientia* of his day (see Scheid 2011, 144). When it comes to the production of the human being, Aquinas would hold that Berry is not incorporating the science of his day into his understanding of the faith, but rather is engaging in scientism.

⁶⁶ See *In Duodecim Libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, Bk. 12, lec. 12 and *ST I*, q. 103, a. 4, ad 1.

Scripture be derided by unbelievers and lest it block for them the way to believing.
(ST I, q. 68, a. 1)

But again, Aquinas would deny that any needed reinterpretations of specific Scripture passages would affect the essentials of the faith, as they do not alter the fundamental relationship of creatures to their Creator and Redeemer.

Conclusion

Berry's works are liberally sprinkled with references to Aquinas, and the two hold a number of important views in common: 1) non-rational creatures have their own inherent goodness; 2) they are not just instruments at the service of humankind; 3) they and we are parts of a universe which reflects God in a more perfect way than if rational creatures alone made up the universe; 4) errors about the natural world can lead to errors about God. This gives the impression that Berry is a Thomist.

Further scrutiny, however, shows that the two part ways on crucial points. Berry wants the divine and the sacred to reside in the universe and in all the beings that constitute it, for he thinks that otherwise there would be no reason for us to care for non-rational creatures. Consequently, he regards the notion of a transcendent God that situates holiness in God, but not in the universe at large, to lead to the exploitation of creation. For him every being is sacred, and humans are not more or less so than other creatures, and so every being is owed reverence.

Aquinas, to the contrary, maintains God's transcendence which embraces God's unique ability to create *ex nihilo* and to sustain things in being; God is thus present to all creatures, without being part of them. Aquinas also holds that holiness belongs first and foremost to God who is wholly good, and then to rational creatures open to God, as these are created in the image of God, possessing as they do the immaterial faculties of intellect and free will. These latter creatures' goodness goes beyond their being and natural acts, because in virtue of possessing free will they are capable of additional forms of goodness, namely, virtue and grace. Accordingly, God and rational beings are holy and worthy of reverence, whereas non-rational beings are not.

Berry maintains that the universe is psycho-spiritual reality sufficient unto itself to bring human individuals into existence. He never refers to humans as the only creatures on earth created in the image of God. Berry regards any acknowledgement that humans are in some sense discontinuous with the rest of creation to justify our treating creation any way we please.

Aquinas, on the other hand, holds that God alone can produce the immaterial human soul. For Aquinas, the discontinuity and superiority of rational creatures over non-rational ones that accrues to them due to their immaterial soul both justifies human use of non-rational creatures and grounds a moral imperative to care for them.

Aquinas and Berry both agree that the universe as a whole is a greater good than any part of the universe. However, Aquinas attributes a primacy to the role of humans in the universe, one which Berry denies. Aquinas affirms that: “In the good of the universe, as what is principal, is the rational nature contained therein, which nature has the capacity for beatitude, [and] to which all other creatures are ordered; and according to this it belongs to God and to us to love with charity in the highest degree the good of the universe” (*De Virtutibus*, q. 2, a. 7, ad 5).

Aquinas accordingly sees the communion of saints, those who share in the divine good, as being the sacred community. And he thinks that *the* story people need to hear is the gospel, as this story is above all others conducive to entry into this sacred community. Although Aquinas sees it to be beneficial to gain knowledge of God through the book of nature, and indeed see certain errors concerning creatures as harmful to religious belief, for him, it is the words of the Incarnate Word that are first and foremost the words of eternal life.

Berry denies that the friendship of man with God and other persons united to God constitute *the* sacred community, holding rather that the universe is *the* sacred community. He thinks we should be communing with the powers of the non-human world around us, something that Aquinas regards as idolatry. Berry maintains that *the* story we need to hear is of the universe as told by science, since he thinks it supports his thesis of the absence of discontinuities in the universe. He recommends that “we might

give up the Bible for awhile, put it on the shelf for perhaps twenty years. ... Excessive concern with the historical Christ is presently just not that helpful” (Berry 1991, 75).

We have seen, then, that Berry’s thought diverges from Aquinas’s in numerous and significant ways. Thus, Berry, despite sharing a number of Aquinas’s views, cannot rightly be considered a Thomist. Those who seek to formulate a sound environmental ethics do well to carefully examine the issues where these two thinkers part ways.

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