



Chrysalis

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“In these opening years of the twenty-first century, as the human community experiences a rather difficult situation in its relation with the natural world, we might reflect that a fourfold wisdom is available to guide us into the future: the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions, and the wisdom of science. We need to consider these wisdom traditions in terms of their distinctive functioning, in the historical periods of their florescence, and in their common support for the emerging age when humans will be a mutually enhancing presence on the Earth.”

~ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*

Dear Reader,

Today, in this Spring 2020 issue of *Chrysalis*, we begin the first of a series of four issues devoted to this fourfold wisdom that is available to guide us into the future. For Thomas Berry, these wisdom traditions are aligned with the numinous dimension of the universe, immanent in every phenomenon of the natural world. Thomas felt that alignment with the numinous “is primary and necessary for every significant human endeavor.”²

He also knew that our present cultural forms “remain estranged from the deeper realms of consciousness.”³ In contrast, he felt that the wisdom traditions embodied and expressed an “intimacy of humans with the natural world in a single community of existence.”⁴

It became increasingly evident to Thomas, “that in our present situation no one of these traditions is sufficient. We need all the traditions. Each has its own distinctive achievements, limitations, distortions, its own special contribution toward an integral wisdom tradition that seems to be taking shape in the emerging twenty-first century. Each of the traditional modes of understanding seems to be experiencing a renewal.”⁵

¹Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way Into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 176.

²*Ibid.*, 39.

³*Ibid.*, 179.

⁴*Ibid.*, 193.

⁵ *Ibid.* 194.



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In this issue of *Chrysalis*, we take a look at the renewal of the classical wisdom of Dante and of Byzantine iconography in a new contemporary form.

Thomas Berry had a deep and abiding interest in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and held a study group on Dante over the course of many years. This peaked the interest of educator, mime and poet, Andrew Levitt, who knew Thomas personally during the period of time Andrew was teaching Dante's *Divine Comedy* to high school students from 2002-2009, the year of Thomas Berry's passing. Pondering the relationship between Thomas and Dante, Andrew offered a four-part program at the Center in 2013-2014, which culminated in a book entitled, *Thomas Berry and Dante's Divine Comedy: The Journey and the Vision*, published by the Center in 2015.

It also happens that Thomas Berry's sister, Dr. Margaret Berry, shared his interest in Dante, who she taught at the college level for forty years. After Thomas' passing, Andrew and Margaret shared many a conversation about Dante together, but Margaret was not able to read the book when it appeared shortly before her 97th birthday. And so it came to pass that Andrew was asked to give a talk on the subject of "Thomas Berry and Dante" at the Well-Spring Retirement Community that Margaret Berry called home. The talk was given on November 10, 2016, just three days before Margaret's 98th birthday, and is shared with you here.

Also in this issue, we bring you the contemporary iconography of Angela Manno, who was an informal student of Thomas Berry. Angela learned the technique of Byzantine icon painting, with its beautiful pigments made from ground stones and its glittering gold leaf, from Russian iconographer, Vladislav Andrejev. She has now taken this classical form to new expression in contemporary icons depicting the natural world as a mode of divine presence. Her favorite quote comes from St. Thomas Aquinas:

“Because the divine could not image itself forth in any one being, it created the great diversity of things so that what was lacking in one would be supplied by the others and the whole universe together would participate in and manifest the divine more than any single being.”⁶

Also in this issue is a poem written by Andrew Levitt for Margaret Berry shortly after her passing on August 13, 2019 at the age of 100.

In all that we bring to you this Spring, inspired by classical wisdom traditions and deep presence to a sacred universe, we hope you will feel the evolving spiritual life of humanity across the centuries and something of a renewed dream of the Earth. It was Thomas Berry’s hope that we might “come to some depth awareness of what has happened and begin to dream again, this time a more coherent dream of an integral community of the human and all those other-than-human members”⁷ of the Earth community.

With Love and Care,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peggy Whalen-Levitt". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Peggy Whalen-Levitt, Director

⁶Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.

⁷Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 47.

For Margaret Berry, November 13, 1918 – August 13, 2019

*She will be with us now within the world
that comes to meet us every day
for she is where she's always been –
within the universe*

The season of the Perseid showers
As summer's luscious green begins
its mottling and fading into fall
two days before the Sturgeon Moon
that first full moon of autumn that
initiates the harvest and reseeding time of year
a veteran box turtle browses on
a mushroom in the forest duff
Deer slip from shadows in the forest to
the shadow of the night
to graze in open meadow grass
A wild red fox alert and skittish darts
and stops on its nocturnal prowls Rabbits beware
A heron lifts and glides above the lake
with grace so effortless it makes
of air a buoyant medium
And in quiescence of hermetic life
ensconced in the concavity
where trunk and beech roots meet
a wise toad sits to meditate on nothing
and the meaning of what is

*At home surrounded by
her family in a gentle moment
Margaret breathed her final breath
and joined the fullness of creation
to become a part of what she understood
to be the great and wondrous symphony
In childhood in her family home
accustomed to expend the hour at her chores
she once became enraptured by
the music playing on the radio
and in ecstatic rapture she beheld*

*the fundamental principle of harmony
within the universe Then to herself she said
If music of such beauty fills the world like this
it is a blessing and a joy to be a part of it
That once had been enough for her to live
a century in gratitude and harmony*

As if as a memento of her life
there is a single small wild orchid
growing in the center of the forest trail
It is a modest humble flower yet
so delicately refined
and centered as it is within the way
it makes a strong assertion
to the travelers who come along

Andrew Levitt, 8/13/2019, 8/28/2019

Contemplating the Beautiful: Nature as Icon

by

Angela Manno

The primary task of the human is a recognition of the Beauty in which we find ourselves. — Thomas Berry

In one of our many conversations about my art, Thomas Berry once advised me: *follow what fascinates you.*

That principle of fascination is what has guided me to explore many different art media, both ancient and contemporary, and ultimately led me to a thirty-year immersion in the study and practice of traditional Byzantine-Russian iconography.

What first attracted me to the icons was their jewel-like beauty. The medium — egg tempera and gold leaf — consisted of all natural materials. Mixing pure pigments from the earth and ground up and sometimes semi-precious stones with an egg yolk carefully separated from the albumen, was actually a gorgeous, calming ritual.

In 1992 when I began the practice however, I immediately discovered that there was infinitely more than the icons' outer beauty; there was also a rich inner meaning that I never understood; the practice is deeply immersed in the mystical Christianity of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which, having grown up Catholic, I knew almost nothing about.

In Orthodox Christianity, the icon is considered a “window to the divine” and Scripture in images. It is integral to the Orthodox liturgy, which, if you've ever experienced one, is profoundly beautiful and transformative, engaging all the senses.

The icon is an expression in symbolic form of the teachings of the saints, ascetics and leaders in the Church throughout the centuries. It is meant to be contemplated, that is, to present oneself in a receptive stance before the divinely inspired image, so that the soul is conformed to a more perfect image of itself. This receptivity is represented in the icon of the Theotokos (God bearer) in *Our Lady of the Sign* (figure 1) denoting a process of emptying — *kenosis* — in order to be receptive to doing God's will, “Let it be done unto me according of thy word.”

The making of an icon is a spiritual discipline that is made up of many stages and layers;¹ it actually recapitulates the act of our own creation. Though there is not enough room to describe the entire process, this will give you a sense of the process: The wooden icon board itself represents the Tree of Life; the application of the thirteen layers of white gesso is a way to clear the mind, to enter

¹ An in-depth description of the entire process is contained in the article, Diaz, Eileen, “Icons: An Ancient Art of Transfiguration,” *The Crestone Eagle*, Volume 5, No 11, November 1994. <http://www.angelamanno.com/icon/images/Art%20of%20Transfiguration.pdf>

into a state of contemplation as God does before creating the world. The white of the board represents pure consciousness, and when we scribe the design into the gesso, the white on white represents an idea in the mind of God. Then comes color, which is the principle of life, as when invisible light passes through a prism and you get the multicolored rainbow, representing the beginnings of manifestation — the incarnation of an idea in the mind of God. The icon progresses from course, dark pigments, representing chaos, to more refined pigments that become lighter and brighter, representing the transformation towards more and more complexity and consciousness.



Our Lady of the Sign, 9" x 11" Egg tempera & gold leaf on wood, private collection

Around the same time that I began this practice, I enrolled in Genesis Farm's Earth Literacy Certificate program in Blirstown, NJ. My main objective was to get help in fully understanding the book, *The Universe Story* by Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, which had just been published. As I continued both creating traditional icons and studying the Universe Story, I started to detect parallels between the multiple stages of creating an icon and the great moments of transformation in New Story of the Universe. I also began to feel that the traditional form I was practicing was unfinished, that it needed to be expanded; although the material world is symbolized in the earliest

stages of creating an icon, in the entire image as a whole, nature is relegated to the backdrop for the human-divine drama.

All the while, Thomas' words that humans are *derivative* of the Earth kept resonating within me. For me to continue making just the images in the canon was beginning to feel inauthentic.

The tension between these two worldviews finally led to the creation of my first contemporary icon, *The Earthly Paradise, Icon of the Third Millennium* — just in time for the turn of the millennium. My desire in creating this icon was to celebrate what Thomas called the “Grand Liturgy of the Universe,” to consecrate this new “unspoiled time,”² and to offer a way to experience, through contemplation, a deep reverence for and identification with our beautiful planet, initiating a new, mutually-enhancing relationship with the Earth.

The conceptualization for this piece however, developed over five years:

I would use the same liturgical³ method and materials used to create traditional icons, and strive to see how far the parallels would stretch. I suspected that these two ways of knowing — the one ancient and intuitive, and the other, our new understanding based on the empirical work of science over the past 400 years — were struggling to grasp the same ultimate reality, and that there would be more parallels.

When I was ready to begin, it was clear that the continents would be executed as if I were doing flesh in traditional icons. Traditionally, the color of flesh always starts with a special mixture of green which symbolizes *anthropos*, the meeting place between matter (yellow) and spirit (blue). In “The Earthly Paradise,” this same green can be seen popping through the sandy color of the landmasses, and represents the flesh of all living beings, i.e., the biosphere.

I also knew that the space surrounding the orb of the Earth indicating empty space would not be black, as in the photographs taken by NASA probes and satellites, but the deep indigo blue used in traditional iconography to represent *Logos*, or as Thomas called it when I consulted with him, “the form-giving powers of the Universe.”

I also departed from the photographs of the planet by adding another dimension to the Earth, by encircling the fragile, physical envelope of the atmosphere with a gold halo, to portray the Earth as a bio-spiritual entity, and signify it as having reached its fulfillment in the Omega Point, “the revelation of God as the fullness of love, the dynamic center of love at the heart of all creation.”⁴ The gold halo in traditional iconography represents our divine nature. The small rays emanating

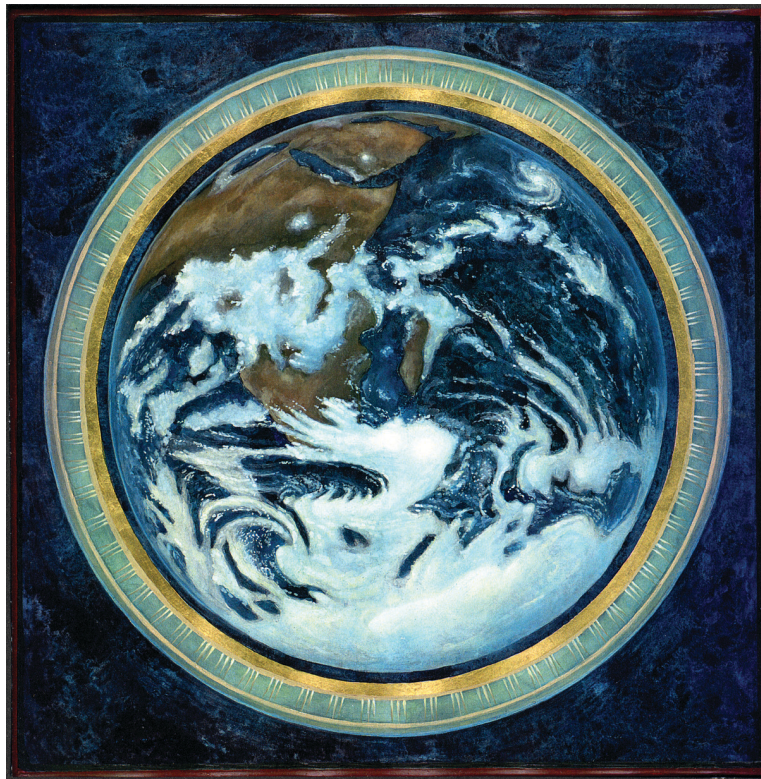
² From a speech by Desmond Tutu on the eve of the turn of the century. “In front of us stretches the unending vista of pristine days, unspoiled”

³ Liturgy, from the Greek *leitourgia* ‘common work’; worship. In his book, *For the Life of the World*, Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann also speaks of *living liturgically*. This notion has great implications for the Great Work.

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin's concept of “Omega,” is most simply conveyed in the description of the Omega Center on the American Teilhard Association website.
<http://teillarddechardin.org/index.php/the-omega-center>

from the gold halo are the marks signifying the Holy Spirit in traditional iconography, who is associated with the World Soul. This pattern also seemed fitting to bring into the creation of this new icon.

When I had much of the new icon conceptualized, in 1995, I paid a visit to Thomas, who at that time was still at the Riverdale Center. I wanted to confer with him and get his thoughts about what I was doing. He was delighted to see what I was attempting and after a long conversation gave it his blessing.⁵



The Earthly Paradise: Icon of the Third Millennium © Angela Manno 1999
13" x 13", Egg tempera & gold leaf on wood. Private collection.

It's been twenty years since I began creating these unconventional icons. Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, the threat to the natural world is all around us like an engulfing fire. Ecosystems are disappearing or being irrevocably polluted, and the rate of extinction of species is 10,000 — 100,000 per year — one thousand times the natural rate.

Thomas' words, "To wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice" again resounded within me. Thus began the logical continuation of my work: a series of icons of

⁵ A full accounting of this consultation is part of a longer treatment in progress entitled, "The Earth Icon: Theory and Practice."

threatened and endangered species with an aim to help transform our notion of what is sacred and to move from anthropocentrism to a biocentric norm of reference.⁶

It is most clear to me that the whole universe is in the image of God and that this notion fulfills the iconographic tradition that achieved its height in the monasteries of 14-16th century Russia. In the words of Thomas Aquinas,

“Because the divine could not image itself forth in any one being, it created the great diversity of things so that what was lacking in one would be supplied by the others and the whole universe together would participate in and manifest the divine more than any single being.”⁷



Apis, The Honey Bee © 2016 Angela Manno. 7” x 9” Egg tempera & gold leaf on wood. Private Collection.

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco, Sierra Club Books, 1988), Chapter 3, *Human Presence*.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*.

Recently, I initiated a program, “Sacred Icons of Threatened and Endangered Species,”⁸ where I have been donating half of the proceeds from the sale of these icons to the Center for Biological Diversity,⁹ an organization that is successfully protecting the integrity of the Endangered Species Act and securing a future for all species great and small, hovering on the brink of extinction. This, I perceive, is my life’s work.

Their first exhibition in New York City last December confirmed their power as objects of contemplation. In contemplating the icon of an Orangutan Mother and Child, a friend wrote to me:

“I feel as if I am actually developing a relationship with these creatures. The mother looks incredibly caring with an arm firmly but very gently pulling her baby close to her body. . . The baby looks totally unafraid and has that wise look very young children sometimes have. I’m sure I will continue to discover more in this icon.”

Through contemplation, we can become reunited with all species and all nature as one single sacred community. The icon, both artifact and living reality, is the face (*prosopon*), the “outward sign,” of our divine origins. It is the Beauty in which we live and move and have our being.

Angela Manno is an internationally exhibited artist and iconographer. To read more about Angela, please go to <http://www.angelamanno.com/sla/bio.php> To see more of her art go to her Homepage www.angelamanno.com

⁸ To see these works and learn more about my program to benefit the Center for Biological Diversity, visit <http://www.angelamanno.com/icon/endangered.php>

⁹ <https://www.biologicaldiversity.org>

Thomas Berry and Dante's *Divine Comedy*: The Journey and the Vision

A Talk by Andrew Levitt

November 10, 2016

Well-Spring Retirement Community Auditorium,
Greensboro, North Carolina

We need “a story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and roles that we play.”¹ We need “a story that will bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe.”² We need a story to reinvigorate the archetypal symbols of the psychic energy constellations deep in the human unconscious, particularly the symbols of the Journey, Death-Rebirth, the Sacred Center, the Great Mother, and the Tree of Life.³ So Thomas Berry told us. We need such a story to carry meaning for us in this time of crisis when the geobiological structure and functioning of our planet is in peril. For some force in the Western psyche has prevented us from accepting limitation in our effort to create a human-based wonderworld with technology developed with utilitarian values. As Thomas said, instead of a wonderworld, we have created a wasteworld.⁴ With a force reminiscent of Old Testament prophets, he declared, “The labor and care expended over some billions of years and untold billions of experiments to bring forth such a gorgeous Earth is all being negated within less than a century for what we consider ‘progress’ toward a better life in a better world.”⁵ We have become alienated from our home. We have separated ourselves from the other than human world. We have lost our intimacy with “the planet in its wonder and beauty.”⁶ We do not recognize our place in the universe. We do not hear the music of earth or the singing of the stars. We need a new story, Thomas told us, to help us reinvent the human at the species level.⁷

I want to tell you such a story today, a story that is both an old story and part of the New Story. It is a story about Dante Alighieri, the medieval poet living at the cusp of the 13th and 14th centuries, who wrote *The Divine Comedy*, the greatest poem in the Western tradition, that narrates the privileged journey of a living pilgrim through the three realms of the afterlife: Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. And it is a story about Thomas Berry, a contemporary cultural historian and

¹ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 171.

² *Ibid.*, 131.

³ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 106, 69 – 70.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

ecoth theologian, who held a study group on that poem for twenty years and frequently had a copy of *The Divine Comedy* with him through his life. It is a story woven in the communion of Dante and Thomas to be heard in the dialogue they sustained across the centuries. And make no mistake, it is also a story about you and me.

Thomas said that in this time when we are experiencing a crisis in our relation with the natural world, we can be guided into the future by a fourfold wisdom that includes the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the classical traditions and the wisdom of science. In the Western classical tradition, Thomas felt that the medieval period and particularly the great poem of Dante was of especial significance. For the medieval period held together tensions in human consciousness that have never been held together so successfully again. In an unpublished essay entitled, "Dante: The Age in Which He Lived," Thomas says,

These opposed forces evoked from each other a depth of expression of itself, which neither could have attained in isolation from the other. Certainly the greatest single decision made at this time was the decision to reject neither of those opposites, neither the natural nor the supernatural, neither faith nor reason, neither logic nor mysticism.⁸

Holding these opposing forces together inspired the Great Work of the medieval period. Dante more than anyone else gave full expression to the dynamism of the Great Work of his age.

Accepting the nature of the Great Work of the medieval period and Dante's expression of it, we might still question how the wisdom of the Great Work represented in the 14th century poem can provide contemporary life with guidance for the Great Work of our time, in which the challenges are so very different. For this is how Thomas defines the Great Work of our time:

The Great Work before us, the task of moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on the Earth to a more benign mode of presence, is not a role that we have chosen. It is a role given to us beyond any consultation with ourselves. We did not choose. We were chosen by some power beyond ourselves for this historical task...

Our own special role, which we will hand on to our children, is that of managing the arduous transition from the terminal Cenozoic to the Emerging Ecozoic Era, the period when humans will be present to the planet as participating members of the comprehensive Earth community. This is our Great Work and the work of our children, just as Europeans in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were given the role

⁸ Thomas Berry, "Dante: The Age in Which He Lived" (unpublished), 1. Quoted with the kind permission of Margaret Berry.

of bringing a new cultural age out of the difficulties and strife of that long period from the sixth through the eleventh centuries.⁹

To do this, a change must occur deep in our souls...¹⁰

In order to understand how the wisdom of the Western classical tradition represented in *The Divine Comedy* can guide us to understanding the Great Work of our time, if you will excuse me, I want to take you to the bottom of Hell.

Dante's *Inferno* is richly imagined. Once souls pass through the Gate that commands "Abandon all Hope ye who enter here," there are three primary groupings of sins represented in tiers that spiral down to the most heinous crimes of those who betrayed their benefactors. The first major grouping of sins are the sins of incontinence, which include the lustful, the gluttons, the avaricious and prodigal, and the wrathful and sullen. Below these are the sins of violence: heresy, murderers and war-makers, suicides, blasphemers, perverts and usurers. Lower Hell is reserved for the sins of fraud and malice. There are the crimes of simple fraud, such as seduction and pandering, flattery, Simony, which is the selling of ecclesiastical favor, fortune telling and divining, graft, hypocrisy, thievery, giving evil counsel, sowing discord, counterfeiting and alchemy. At the very bottom of the pit are the sins of compound fraud, which include treachery against kin, treachery against country, treachery against guests and hosts, and treachery against lords and benefactors. All punishment of sin in the *Inferno* is governed by the law of symbolic retribution according to which the punishment for a sin is comparable to the sin punished. For example, among the carnal sinners, Franchesca and her lover, Paolo, for their sin of adultery, are swept up in an infernal wind of passion so that they can never consummate their desire for each other in a single embrace.

When you hear the sins listed, perhaps you can feel a certain alluring interest in how each sin is punished. Then too just listening to the long list, you may feel exhausted and a bit dizzy and disgusted by the whole array of human weakness. There is also, I assure you, some grotesque buffoonery and humor, for this is after all a medieval work. All such responses reveal something about the disturbing experience of reading the *Inferno*. But today, we cannot linger with the pilgrim on his journey through the pit. As I said, our first destination is the very bottom of Hell, the frozen lake of Cocytus, where, in parody of the Trinity, Three-faced Satan holds in each one of his mouths one of the most treacherous of sinners who betrayed his master, namely Judas, who betrayed Jesus, and Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar. You can imagine how huge and terrifying a figure Satan is with humans in his mouths and his great wings fanning the lake to keep it frozen solid.

There confronted with this monstrous fallen angel, Virgil, Dante's guide who has promised to lead him into the angelic presence of Beatrice, commands Dante to hold on to him. Then with

⁹ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 7 – 8.

¹⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, edit. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 175.

Dante on his back, he leaps onto to the demon. John Ciardi translates the next moment, “then grappling matted hair and frozen crusts/ from one tuft to another, clambered down.”¹¹ (*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, ll. 74 – 75) Certainly a disgusting and terrifying moment. Then more terrifying still, Virgil reverses his movement on the body of Satan and seems to climb up toward the three-mouths, instead of down. The pilgrim reports, “I thought we moved toward Hell again.” (*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, l. 81) But Virgil reassures him that only in such a way can they rise above evil. (*Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, l. 84) Indeed in the next instant, they climb out of the realm of darkness onto the island of Purgatory lighted by the Sun and the Stars. After they have escaped the confines of Hell, Virgil explains to Dante that on Satan’s body they passed through the earth’s center of gravity. That explanation, however, does not clarify the geometry of the directional change the pilgrim observed. We must look elsewhere to understand what happened in the moment of reversal.

Although it is described as a physical inversion, we need to understand this inversion as a soul event. Often in moments of overwhelming fear and extreme peril, humans have a change of life direction and soul alignment. This is a gravitational change where the attractions governing one’s life choices shift and new choices are made according to the attraction of other forces. Often at such times, the ego surrenders in obedience to the guidance of a trusted superior or absolute authority. This is what happens for Dante in the moment of reversal on Satan’s body. During the descent into the pit, the pilgrim Dante, who undergoes transformation by experiencing the conditions of the souls he meets on his journey through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, felt gravitational attraction toward the ego-centered expression of the passions, desires and excesses of those souls. From among the sinners’ stories, Dante’s imagination of Ulysses and his last voyage serves as a classic example of the ego-centered self. In Dante’s imagination, Ulysses meets his end in a way different from the end Homer imagined for his hero at the end of the *Odyssey*. In Dante’s story, Ulysses sails into a storm beyond the Straits of Gibraltar while exhorting his loyal crew to strive forward to the next adventure: “Greeks! You were not born to live like brutes,/ but to press on toward manhood and recognition!” (*Inferno* XXVI, ll. 110 – 111) It is an image of masculine dominance over the natural elements.

With the reversal on Satan’s body comes an inversion of Ulysses’ willed striving and dominance. Will that was centered on the self is re-centered on the other, which is both the Incommensurate Otherness of the divine and by extension the immediate other at hand as the manifestation of the divine. A gravitational shift occurs by which the soul drawn down to the allurements and dark attractions of Earth is drawn upward from Earth toward the Sun, the Stars and the divine source beyond the sensory universe. This shift brings the pilgrim into alignment with the souls in Paradise, whom we must understand include the souls in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*. For although they have penance to pay for the sins they committed in life, the souls on the cornices of the mountain of Purgatory are, also, destined for Paradise because in life they recanted their ways, and in some cases, though not all, confessed and asked forgiveness. The inversion of the will that

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, Canto XXXIV, ll. 74 – 75, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 285. All references to *The Divine Comedy* are from the translation by John Ciardi.

occurs in this moment in *The Divine Comedy* can be expressed in the words of resignation Jesus speaks in Gethsemane when he foresees with human terror what the incarnation will mean for him in the days to come and speaks as Son to Father, “Not my will, but thine be done.” That this inversion of will occurs on the body of the most malevolent figure of betrayal signals that the inversion of the will is an act of obedience. In saying that, however, I emphasize that I use the term obedience in the sense that it is understood as one of the three monastic vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. In this sense, obedience is to be understood as active and should not be misunderstood as passive submission. This active quality of obedience has been felicitously designated by the spiritual psychologist, Robert Sardello, as “radical receptivity.”

Indeed, when they step onto the island of Purgatory, Dante and Virgil become open to reception of divine influence for they come into the light of Venus, the Sun and the Stars. Escaping from the lightless, claustrophobic realm of selfishness and evil, by the grace of heavenly illumination, the pilgrim stands in presence to the divine manifest in the cosmos. The light of Venus shines down from the starry realm to illuminate Earth with the light of love. The Sun shines the warm and luminous light of the Trinity on the pilgrim. The seven stars that Dante sees shining in the heavens above irradiate the earth where he stands with the Cardinal Virtues of Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance and the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love.

But not to forget, I have taken us to the bottom of Hell to make the connection between *The Divine Comedy* and the Great Work of our time. When Thomas said that to fulfill the Great Work of our time “a change must occur deep in our soul,” we might say he evoked such an inversion of the will as occurs for the pilgrim in the transition from the Inferno to Purgatory. In *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Thomas makes this clear. This is what he says:

To succeed in (the) task of shaping the future, the will of the more comprehensive self must be functioning. The individual will can function in this capacity only through an acknowledged union with the deeper structures of reality. Even beyond union with the human community must be union with the Earth, with the universe itself in the full wonder of its being. Only the Earth can adequately will the Earth. If we will the future effectively it will be because the guidance and the powers of the Earth have been communicated to us, not because we have determined the future of the Earth simply with some rational faculty.

Central to this process is our contact with the sacred and the vast range of Earth’s psychic dynamism...

We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation.¹²

¹² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 173, 175.

Of course, unlike Earth and earthly existence contrasted with Paradise and angelic nature in *The Divine Comedy*, for Thomas, Earth is the dimension of experience of the divine. We live in paradisaical presence here and now. Thomas says in *The Great Work* that activating the will of the comprehensive self means it is the sacred influence of the universe to which we must trust and become radically receptive. He writes,

We must feel that we are supported by that same power that brought the Earth into being, that power that spun the galaxies into space, that lit the sun and brought the moon into its orbit. That is the power by which living forms grew up out of the Earth and came to a special mode of reflexive consciousness in the human. This is the force that brought us through more than a million years of wandering as hunters and gatherers; this is that same vitality that led to the establishment of our cities and inspired the thinkers, artists, and poets of the ages. Those same forces are still present; indeed, we might feel their impact at this time and understand that we are not isolated in the chill of space with the burden of the future upon us and without the aid of any other power.¹³

Behind Thomas's words, we can sense that the Great Work of the medieval period given expression in Dante's poem and the Great Work of our time converge.

Of course, this is not the end of the pilgrim's journey in *The Divine Comedy*. And there is more to say about the convergence of Dante's poem and Thomas' work. From the moment of inversion in the Inferno, the pilgrim Dante must still make the arduous climb up the mountain of Purgatory before his will is finally and completely aligned with the will of the divine. He is still on the journey of transformation. The full translation of will into the will of the divine is the condition of Paradise beyond Purgatory. That full and complete state cannot be articulated until Dante enters the starry heavens. There in the Moon Sphere, Dante hears what it means for the will to be translated into the will of the divine from Piccarda, the only female soul in the poem, other than Beatrice, with whom Dante would have had sufficient intimacy in her earthly existence to recognize the quality of her soul. Piccarda tells him:

‘Brother, the power of love, which is our bliss,
calms all our will. What we desire, we have.
There is in us no other thirst than this.

Were we to wish for any higher sphere,
then our desires would not be in accord
with the high will of Him who wills us here,

And if love is our whole being, and if you weigh
love's nature well then you will see that discord

¹³ Ibid., 174.

can have no place among these circles. Nay,

the essence of this blessed state of being
is to hold all our will within His will,
whereby our wills are one and all-agreeing.

And so the posts we stand from sill to sill
throughout this realm, please all the realm as much
as they please Him who wills us to His will.

In His will is our peace. It is that sea
to which all moves, all that itself creates
and Nature bears through all Eternity.’

(*Paradiso*, Canto III, ll. 70 – 87)

What Piccarda speaks here articulates the great and central paradox of *The Divine Comedy*. In more prosaic terms than hers, we can recognize that this paradox is embodied in the understanding of the integral relation of Free Will and Love, that will is most free when in obedience to divine will. Yet only when we understand that the re-centering of will can only be affected by love will the paradox be resolved. For only through alignment with the love that emanates from the divine and through expression of that love is any individual fulfilled. Will that centers on the self for the purpose of pleasure or power is a distortion and impediment to fulfillment and ensnares the self in the narrow prison cell of its own creation. To jump ahead of myself for a moment, I will say that something like this same paradox is at the core of Thomas’ understanding of the Great Work for in a similar understanding Thomas recognizes that only through intimacy, reciprocity and communion with the sacred universe in its manifestation in the multiplicity of all being is the human fulfilled.

As I said, however, I jump ahead of myself for between the moment of inversion at the bottom of the Inferno and Piccarda’s expression of Love and Will in Paradise stands the mountain of Purgatory and the arduous climb that the pilgrim must take on his journey of full and complete transformation of the will. In our own soul lives, we can recognize the effort the pilgrim must exert. Certainly all of us in this room have experienced a moment of inversion when we were infused with a sense of grand purpose other than any purpose we had set for ourselves. How many different ways might we have encountered such a shift: a moment of awe when we looked out over the ocean or up at the stars in the night sky; a moment of grace in a meadow; the experience of the birth of a child; an inexpressible sense of joy that was different in kind than any experience of happiness, for instance, when enthralled by a great musical work; a brief interaction with another when attention unexpectedly went deeper than words or human feeling and seemed to enter into the dimension of the third in the exchange; a terrible illness or accident that forced one to surrender control and then remarkably, the liminal dimension of spirit opened; an irreconcilable grief when we sensed how thin the veil is between here and beyond; or even a tragic recognition that things we have done can never be recalled or retrieved. Dante recognized that for full translation of will into the will of the divine,

or as we might say, to achieve a more fully sustained sense of grace after any moment of grace, it is necessary to commit to a disciplined practice of prayer and meditation to make one susceptible to the will of the divine.

In *The Divine Comedy*, the middle realm of the seven levels or cornices on the mountain of Purgatory represents the nature and progression of such a disciplined practice directed to the transformation of the will into the will of the divine. Thomas did not speak or write about the nature and process of the disciplined practice that psychic change demands. In the *Purgatorio*, through portrayal of the nature and exploration of the process of the practice of transformation, Dante complements and completes what Thomas invoked.

The souls in Purgatory are on their way to redemption for in life, they admitted the error of their ways and began the transforming act of confession, though they did not follow all the way through to contrition of deeds. Since it comes after the great inversion in the lake of Cocytus, it should be no surprise that Purgatory is governed by the law of symbolic inversion according to which the punishment for sin symbolically represents an inversion of the sin punished. The gluttonous in Purgatory are a clear example of this. For their punishment, they suffer emaciation. Beyond the Gate of St. Peter are seven levels or cornices on the mountain where the Seven Deadly Sins are purged. As disciplined practice, the souls on each cornice are given negative images of the sin committed and positive images of transformation on which to meditate.

Although it is understood that the souls in Purgatory may be required to purge only one sin and not every soul will have to proceed from one cornice to the next, but may rise to redemption even from the lowest level, nevertheless, the order of the sins on the mountain is significant to understanding the sequential progression of transformation of the will into the will of the divine and the pilgrim experiences them all. Moving upward, the sequence of sins to be transformed are Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. The pilgrim experiences that transformation is hardest at the lowest level and grows easier near the top. We cannot, however, understand how this order represents a sequential progression of transformation of the will into the will of the divine unless we examine an aspect of the meditative practices on each cornice. For this we can look at one set of the many meditations offered on the cornices.

Souls on each cornice are offered one Beatitude on which to meditate. The sequence of the Beatitudes offered for meditation, rather than the order given in the Sermon on the Mount, is significant to the progressive transformation of will into the will of the divine. The first step in obedience to the divine is humility. Humility disposes the soul to be receptive to divine inspiration. In a state of impoverishment of spirit, in an inward gesture of letting go, the soul empties to receive. On the first cornice of Pride, therefore, the first Beatitude offered in the sequence of transformation is “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

On the second cornice, the cornice of Envy, are souls who in life wished to elevate themselves by diminishing the status of others. Appropriately, the Beatitude they are offered is “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Through meditation on the Beatitude the

attention they directed toward self-interest was to be redirected toward immediate others. Similarly, on the third cornice, the cornice of Wrath, on which souls transformed efforts to elevate themselves at the expense of others, the souls of the wrathful are offered: “Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God.” They are guided toward just regard for others in the human community.

The choice of Beatitude for the fourth cornice, the cornice of Sloth, requires some interpretation. How to understand the words of the Beatitude, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted,” as transformation of Sloth. Dorothy Sayers, the great English translator of Dante, who was both a medievalist and modern writer of detective stories, is helpful here. She noted in her translation that, for the medieval writer, sloth, or *acedia*, can be understood more broadly than mere idleness. In a broader sense, she says, “it is that whole poisoning of the will which, beginning with indifference and an attitude of ‘I couldn’t care less’, extends to the deliberate refusal of joy and culminates in morbid introspection.”¹⁴ With this broader understanding, we might acknowledge that grief held deeply causes one to reflect on questions regarding the meaning of life and death. Then, it is possible to recognize that mourning conditions souls poisoned by a sense of meaninglessness or absurdity for the infusion of spirit.

Dante divided a Beatitude to serve the fifth and sixth cornices. On the fifth cornice, the cornice of the Hoarders and Wasters, the Beatitude offered is, “Blessed are those who thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.” On the sixth cornice, the cornice of the Gluttons, the Beatitude offered is, “Blessed are those who hunger after righteousness, for they shall be filled.” Both versions of the Beatitude offer meditation on sacred service in the name of the divine, or, as the 23rd psalm has it, “in the paths of righteousness for his namesake.”

On the seventh and last cornice, the cornice of the Lustful, the Beatitude offered for meditation is “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” We might understand the Beatitude as a corrective meditation for philanderers. In terms of soul transformation, however, it is more appropriate to understand this most fundamental Beatitude theologically. Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century philosopher and existential theologian, gave theological interpretation to this Beatitude in one of his edifying discourses. The discourse develops the profound insight that “the purity of the heart is to will one thing.” Through the guidance of the discourse one comes to understand that that one thing those with pure hearts will is not just any one thing. The purity of the heart is to will one’s will into the will of the divine. The seventh cornice can then be understood as the cornice on which the transformation of the will into the will of the divine becomes complete.

If the punishments the souls endure on the mountain of Purgatory seem to work dialectically such that the extreme opposites of their sins are experienced by the penitent souls, the meditations on the cornices reveal more subtle understanding of the inner work of soul transformation in medieval consciousness. The Beatitude on each cornice is offered specifically for development of

¹⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy Sayers (London: Penguin Books, 1955), 209.

what was missing in the will development of the souls on the cornice. We can look at the whole sequence. If the meditations on the second and third cornices of Envy and Wrath emphasize mercy and justice as sacred service toward immediate others in life in the human community, the meditations on the fifth and sixth cornices of the Hoarders and Wasters and the Gluttons emphasize the quality of sacred service as participation in divine life. On the first, fourth and seventh cornices, the cornices of Pride, Sloth and Lust, the meditations are offerings for continual renewal of inner receptivity to divine will until individual will becomes absorbed in the will of the divine. Although I said that the sequence of the offering of the Beatitudes on the mountain is significant, ultimately we come to recognize transformation of the will does not quite develop in sequenced stages. In the greater insight of medieval consciousness, transformation of the will interweaves deepening inward receptivity to the divine through prayer and meditation with outwardly directed action as sacred service for the sake of community life and for the sake of participation in divine life.

Although I said that Thomas did not write or speak about the disciplined process of the transformation of the soul and Dante's insight in the *Purgatorio* complements and completes Thomas's work, Thomas did recognize that religion in the traditional period was able to provide this and may still offer this to modern humanity that exhibits extreme self-centeredness and "constant betrayal in favor of individual aggrandizement."¹⁵ He wrote in an essay entitled, "Traditional Religion in the Modern World," as early as 1972:

How to sustain the pain of existence..., how to give it meaning, then how to bring it under the influence of a transforming saving discipline: these are the basic challenges. Traditional religions consider that all the forces in heaven and Earth must contribute to this transforming process, to this new birth...

In the traditional period, there was general agreement that this new birth brought us into a higher, sacred, or spiritual order that radiates over the whole of life and gives sublime meaning to every least detail of human existence. The larger purpose of life is to bring this spiritual birth to its full expression. It is not just salvation from the human condition – it is the transformation of the human condition itself.¹⁶

At the end of the *Purgatorio* through experience of the transformations on each of the cornices, the pilgrim Dante is indeed reborn as he enters Earthly Paradise where human life began and he comes into the presence of Sanctifying Grace embodied in the presence of Beatrice, who was known to him in earthly life as the embodiment of sublimity and has been the angelic inspiration for his entire journey. Since he has gone through the disciplined practice of Purgatory and has fully translated his will into the will of the divine, in Earthly Paradise, Dante becomes possessed of an angelic nature and consciousness. When Dante enters Earthly Paradise and drinks first from the

¹⁵ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, edit. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

Lethe river, which erases his memory, and then from the Eunoe river, which strengthens only the good in him, his human consciousness is transformed to angelic consciousness. Understanding and will are conjoined in angelic consciousness. In angelic consciousness there is no hesitation between thought and deed nor is there separation between action and reflection. Possession of an angelic nature and consciousness allows Dante to ascend into Paradise. The journey of transformation is over. With the ascent into Paradise, the journey becomes the vision that has inspired the journey of transformation. In Paradise, what can be achieved on the journey in the dimension of time is fulfilled in spatial experience.

In the *Paradiso*, accompanied by Beatrice as his guide, the pilgrim moves upward from Earth through the heavenly spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the Fixed Stars or Zodiac to the Primum Mobile, which Beatrice tells Dante exists only in the mind of God and finally to the Empyrean where Dante beholds the Celestial Rose. In the Empyrean, the pilgrim also comes face-to-face with God as Triune Essence.

One of the great reassurances of Dante's Paradise is that one did not have to be perfect to merit a place among the holy. As Beatrice tells Dante, salvation makes allowance for the inefficacies of life circumstances of the righteous. For example, Dante meets Piccarda, one of his first informants in Paradise, in the first sphere of the Moon, which is reserved for those whose strength of will could not surmount the demands imposed externally. Piccarda had already taken vows in the convent of the order of St. Clara when she was forced against her will by her brother, Corso, to marry to establish a political alliance. Piccarda maintained her vows inwardly, but became ill and died after the marriage. For her inward fortitude, she merited her place in the Moon Sphere.

All of Paradise, then, is structured in relation to the Virtues. In the Moon Sphere are angelic souls who are inconstant in their vows, for whom the virtue of Fortitude is in some way deficient. In the Sphere of Mercury are those who maintained the virtue of Justice with some imperfection. These are ambitious in the active life. The souls of lovers comprises the third sphere, the Sphere of Venus. In some manner, they are souls who were deficient in their adherence to the virtue of Temperance. Then come the spheres of perfection of virtue. The Sun Sphere is reserved for theologians, teachers, historians, and others, known as the doctors of the Church. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, whose life stories are told by Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in this sphere, are the central examples of Prudence. In the Sphere of Mars are the Warriors, who in earthly existence displayed perfect Fortitude. Just rulers who were perfect in expression of Justice manifest in the Sphere of Jupiter. And Contemplatives, perfect in Temperance, manifest in the sphere of Saturn. Finally in the Sphere of the Fixed Stars are the angelic souls who represented divine wisdom. There Dante is examined on the Theological Virtues of Faith, Hope and Love by St. Peter, St. James and St. John. In the Primum Mobile are the special army of the angels, the Seraphim, who bring to all other angels the message of God's love and reflect divine love back to God. In the realm of the Empyrean, Dante, at last, beholds the Celestial Rose, where all the angelic souls of the saints, the martyrs and the redeemed that manifest in the other spheres have their true

heavenly places surrounding the heavenly presence of the Virgin Mary. Also in the Empyrean, possessed of an angelic nature, Dante is permitted to behold the Triune Essence.

As Beatrice tells Dante, we must understand that in Paradise “all is holy,” “that all things spring from Love in Paradise.” (Paradiso, Canto XXI, ll. 10 - 12) All of Paradise is a single experience of wholeness. If there appears to be an order in Paradise, nevertheless, no value or virtue has priority. As Piccarda told him, every angelic spirit Dante meets is a spirit being enveloped in divine love whose will has been fully translated into the will of the divine. As Dante and Beatrice travel through the spheres, Dante does not experience higher and higher powers; he experiences different qualities of expression of the will of the divine. If there is an increase in the intensity of light, it is in accord with greater proximity to the source, but is not necessarily in accord with the intensity radiating from the “star” power of the sphere. As a hierarchy of angels the spheres have different functions all of which are important within the divine and for what they transmit downward to earth. But they are also of equal importance in the whole vision. All equally bear the light of the divine and can be distinguished from each other only as lights within light. At every level, the vision shines as a dazzling opacity. Everything the pilgrim Dante encounters in Paradise and every way the writer Dante finds to communicate the vision of Paradise becomes an experience of the quality of Paradise. The experience of Paradise is unity in multiplicity. Throughout Paradise everything is related to everything else, each angelic spirit is related to all in reciprocity and communion or as Piccarda tells Dante, “if love is our whole being, and if you weigh/ love’s nature well, then you will see that discord/ can have no place among these circles.” (*Paradiso*, Canto III, ll. 76 – 78)

In Paradise, the paradox of free will as obedience is resolved in the context of the paradox of faith in a series of difficult Scholastic discourses delivered to Dante by Beatrice and the angelic spirits of Charles Martel and Peter Damiano. In the discourses, the paradox of free will as obedience is subsumed in broader theological understanding of hope without certitude, faithfulness without assurances and love as act and inspiration. The discourses enfold the meaning of the pilgrim’s journey, the journey of faith, in the story of Creation, which is the story of the creation, population and fruition of the Tree of Life. In the *Paradiso*, there are two primal acts of creation. The first is the act of creation of the Father that brings all, the cosmos and all within it, out of essence and potential. The second is the act of creation of the Son, initiated in the event at Golgotha, that created and continues to create redemption which populates the heavenly spheres and the Celestial Rose with angelic spirits. The paradox of the primary act of creation is revealed as an act of divine love emanating from the Father in such a way that the act as act and the manifestation of the act are both dynamic and simultaneous and both exhibit the same quality of divine love. The Creator sends forth divine love to the created universe and the created universe reflects back divine love to the Creator. Everything in creation has divine love as its primary referent. Everything in creation is bound by love. As Dante said his work presents the vision wherein he saw “all the scattered leaves of the universe bound by love in one volume.” In the final moment of Dante’s great poem, both the narrative of the pilgrim’s journey and the narrative of the story of Creation are fulfilled in the vision of the Triune Essence. As he beholds God face-to-face,

the pilgrim perceives that love as a reflexive verb is the essence of the Trinity. The vision of all creation as continual emanation of divine love and reflection of the love within the divine enfolds manifold being in the unity of the divine. The many are contained within unity and unity is manifest in the many, as there is unity without contradiction in the Triune Essence. In other words, the vision of the story of creation recognizes the primal expression of love, I-Thou, as the inward quality of the Triune Essence that is spoken into creation, I-Thou, and is reflected back in the echoing voices of created being, I-Thou.

It is remarkable that from the entrance of the pilgrim into Earthly Paradise and his ascent into Heavenly Paradise, there is a return to the confluence and consonance of *The Divine Comedy* and the work of Thomas Berry which we first noted in the Lake of Cocytus at the bottom of the Inferno. Although Dante's stable cosmos does not correspond to Thomas' emerging universe and Dante's story of divine creation assisted by angels does not correspond to the scientific and cultural/historical story of the universe emerging out of the great flaring forth, the formation of galaxies, the supernova event that created our solar system, the evolution of life forms on the earth and the development of the human through the rise and fall of civilizations, there is much in Dante's vision of Paradise and Thomas' vision of the Sacred Universe that is comparable. And not insignificantly, both weave all together in a wondrous story of Creation. Like Dante, Thomas knew we cannot have a vision of the human except within the context of the story of the emerging universe.

As in Dante's Paradise, in Thomas' vision of the universe everything is integral with everything else. In Dante's Paradise everything is a quality of the experience of Paradise. Similarly, Thomas says "In the phenomenal order, it is the universe that is self-referent. Every other mode of being is universe referent."¹⁷

Like Dante's, such a universe is self-reflexive. This can be seen if we consider that the first functional principle of the emerging universe that Thomas defined is differentiation. That is, "The universe articulate(s) itself in unique, identifiable, intelligible energy constellations, or patterns... Each articulation is unrepeatably and irreplaceable..."¹⁸ In all this diversity, the universe reveals itself to itself for "every being in the universe articulates some special quality of the universe in its entirety."¹⁹ And Thomas says of the human species, "The human might be described as that being in whom the universe reflects on and celebrates itself and the deep mysteries of existence in a special mode of conscious self-awareness."²⁰

We have seen that for Dante, the universe was a sacred universe bound by love. For Thomas as for Dante, the universe is a sacred universe. This he emphasized continually in saying

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁰ Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, edit. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 95.

that the universe is psychic-spiritual as well as physical-material from the beginning. If he did not quite say that it is a universe bound by love, he came close when he defined communion as the third of the three functional principles of the emerging universe. As the universe evolves toward greater and greater differentiation, Thomas said greater and greater complexity of relation increases as communion throughout the universe.

The sense that Thomas' vision of the sacred universe approaches Dante's vision of a universe bound by love is also apparent in his use of the middle term of the three functional principles of the emerging universe. This is the principle of subjectivity. Thomas said that everything in the universe has its own interiority or subjectivity. Accordingly, everything has its own compelling spontaneities. This interiority, however, does not drive individualities apart from each other in opposition to communion. In fact, Thomas often used the middle term, subjectivity, to emphasize reciprocity within communion in the universe. He was fond of saying in his writing and conversation that the universe and this earth in all its splendor and beauty as a special planet in the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.

In all this we have to remember, of course, what I said earlier, unlike Earth and earthly existence contrasted with Paradise and angelic nature in *The Divine Comedy*, for Thomas, Earth is the dimension of experience of the divine. We live in paradisaal presence here and now.

As I said at the beginning, we have followed the parallels in *The Divine Comedy* and Thomas Berry's work "to bring personal meaning together with the grandeur and meaning of the universe." We have followed the path of the transformation of the will into the will of the divine in *The Divine Comedy* to be guided in understanding the deep psychic change that is needed at this time. For Thomas says,

The natural world is... a mode of sacred presence primarily to be communed with in wonder and beauty and intimacy. In our present attitude the natural world remains a commodity to be bought and sold, not a sacred reality to be venerated. The deep psychic change needed to withdraw us from the fascination of the industrial world, and the deceptive gifts that it gives us, is too difficult for simply the avoidance of its difficulties or the attractions of its benefits. Eventually only our sense of the sacred will save us.²¹

For my part in the story heard in the dialogue Dante and Thomas held across the centuries, I hope what I have said today will in some way facilitate and encourage a shift in consciousness to a sense of the sacred. For Thomas said in 1975: "This art of comprehensive communion is a spiritual skill.

²¹ Thomas Berry, "Forward" in Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature by Thomas Merton*, edit. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), 18 – 19.

To develop such a skill, to teach such a discipline, are the primary tasks of contemporary spirituality.”²²

Thomas knew that despite the corruption that already threatened its coherence and integrity, Dante’s age was the last time in Western civilization that the human community lived life in a sacred universe. Only twenty-five years after Dante’s death and the publication of the last canticle of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante’s son when its last twenty cantos were found after Dante’s death, the plague of the Black Death would devastate Europe. An estimated one-third of the population would be killed off. Florence, the city of Dante’s birth and the city he inhabits in his imagination in exile, would lose nearly half its citizens in a three-month period. In response to the plague, people viewed life as tragic and the earth as a threat to the human community. The balance in the story of Creation of a sacred universe envisioned in the age of Dante as both an act of the Father and an act of the Son was no longer sustained in the religious community. The religious community turned its attention to the vision of Redemption from the tragic world. The other response to the plague was to find a way to control and dominate “the physical world to escape its pain and to increase its utility to human society.”²³ This would ultimately lead to all the scientific and technological innovations that have resulted in the devastation of Earth with which we are confronted today.

For seven hundred years now since the Black Death, we have eschewed our responsibility on the Tree of Life. During the last two hundred years of industrial development, our irresponsibility has caused thousands of species to disappear on the Tree. Our irresponsibility has threatened the vitality of the Tree of Life itself. It is our task now to return to community life lived in a sacred universe. To inspire us in this Great Work, we have a new sacred story, the story of an emerging universe in which great cosmic events, as well as major historical transitions and personal experiences of awe are all to be understood and celebrated as moments of grace in the sacred universe.

Now when you hear them, I hope you will hear anew the resonance and inspiration of the words with which Thomas began *The Dream of the Earth*,

We are returning to our native place after a long absence, meeting once again with our kin in the earth community. For too long we have been away somewhere, entranced with our industrial world of wires and wheels, concrete and steel, and our unending highways, where we race back and forth in continual frenzy.

The world of life, of spontaneity, the world of dawn and sunset and glittering stars in the dark night heavens, the world of wind and rain, of meadow flowers and flowing streams, of hickory and oak and maple and spruce and pineland forests, the world of

²² Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, edit. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 54.

²³ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 125.

desert sand and prairie grasses, and within all this the eagle and the hawk, the mockingbird and the chickadee, the deer and the wolf and the bear, the coyote, the raccoon, the whale and the seal, and the salmon returning upstream to spawn – all this, the wilderness world recently rediscovered with heightened emotional sensitivity, is an experience not far from that of Dante meeting Beatrice at the end of the *Purgatorio*, where she descends amid a cloud of blossoms. It was a long wait for Dante, so aware of his infidelities, yet struck anew and inwardly “pierced,” as when, hardly out of his childhood he had first seen Beatrice. The “ancient flame” was lit again in the depths of his being. In that meeting, Dante is describing not only a personal experience, but the experience of the entire human community at the moment of reconciliation with the divine after the long period of alienation and human wandering away from the true center.²⁴

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²⁴ Ibid., 1 – 2.



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