

The Burning Bush and Environmental Awareness

By Brian Coman

The title I have chosen here will very likely summon up images of the fire season in Victoria but I have in mind a very different sort of burning bush. In the third chapter of Exodus we have that extraordinary account of God appearing to Moses in the desert and speaking out of the heart of a burning bush. Moses asks God what name he should give him when he recounts the message to the Israelites. The answer that God gives has been variously translated. The Jerusalem Bible has "I am He who is" while the Douay Rheims has 'I am who am'. There are various other translations but all along the same general line. What do the words mean here? Now I am most certainly not a Bible scholar, but I do know that, traditionally, this was taken to be a reference to God as the author or source of all that is.

We can get a better sense of this by going back to a very early translation of the Bible into Greek. This translation has the name *Septuagint*, a reference to the total of seventy learned scholars who, we are told, carried out the translation. The words that God utters in the Greek are given as Ego Eimi HO ON. A literal translation into English would read "I am myself THE BEING". In other words, God holds all being in existence and is thus both the source and the exemplar of *Being*. We tend to completely overlook the astounding fact of *Being* and take it all for granted. But, as many famous philosophers have said, 'why should there be something rather than nothing'?

I want to suggest that this particular understanding is of huge contemporary significance, because it allows us to put a real, intrinsic value on the natural world around us at a time when such awareness is acutely needed. By 'intrinsic value' I mean valuing nature FOR ITSELF, not for what it can give us. This sort of value has been in short supply in our world since the time of the industrial revolution. We tend to see things in nature as being valuable TO US - food resources, timber resources, mineral resources, even National Parks, which we value because they give us certain pleasures or peace of mind, etc.. But if we can value something simply because it exists as a part of God's Will, then we are beginning to see nature as the great Christian mystics and theologians have seen it over the centuries. Every blade of grass speaks of God. This is not merely some pious contrivance. It is absolutely real because its referent is Reality itself –THE BEING. Etienne Gilson, the respected historian of Medieval Christianity, puts it this way:

For St. Augustine, as for St. Thomas [Aquinas], *coeli enarrant gloriam Dei* [the heavens declare the glory of God], and if the heavens declare His glory it is because they bear His likeness; only with St. Thomas, the divine likeness sinks for the first time into the heart of nature, goes down beyond order, number and beauty, reaches and saturates the very physical structure, and touches the very efficacy of causality.

This is most emphatically not the same as seeing the world as God (i.e. pantheism). God is the author of nature and it is wholly dependent upon him for its continued

existence, but God is more than the totality of nature. Nor is the being of things in this world to be construed as merely part of God's Being. St. Thomas Aquinas was at great pains to make this distinction. Theologians use the word *transcendent* to describe how God is infinitely greater than the merely material cosmos about us. Nonetheless all that is derives its existence from God.

A final reflection. If you study some of those famous icon paintings depicting the Blessed Virgin, you will see some strange letters imbedded in the halo of the infant Jesus. Look more closely and you will see that they give (in Greek) that same message I have mentioned above – *I am the Being*. Here, we might say, Creation Spirituality comes together with Redemption Spirituality! And these two ways of understanding our existence in this world are hugely important in these times of heightened ecological awareness. That's the thing about Christianity – it never goes out of date! We have, in the Revealed Word of God, the necessary resources to tackle the problems of every age.

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