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CEP Conversations:

Thad Holcomb

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March 2008

Thad Holcomb, a native of rural Oklahoma, has run the [Ecumenical Christian Ministries \(ECM\)](#) at the University of Kansas for decades. In 2005, ECM won the Campus Ministry of the Year award for the South Central Region, by the National Campus Ministry Association.

Thad has long been interested in the issue of religion and the environment. He was raised Presbyterian and attended seminary at San Francisco Theological. He holds degrees in biblical studies and social ethics, as well as in clinical psychology and theology.

Maril Hazlett, CEP: Why don't you start out by telling us a little about yourself, and how you got interested in these issues.

Thad Holcomb: I was brought up in rural Oklahoma - the cross-timber area of north-central Oklahoma. That was a sacred spot in my life. It influenced who I am and what I think and feel, and it moved me, really, into a religious understanding of life. Probably first from a mystical point of view. Then that broadened out into spirituality. That formed into faith, and then my faith turned into identity with a religious tradition.

MH: Was there any major turning point for you?

TH: I had a really profound experience when I was an adolescent, as far as nature and my connection to the larger powers. What was going on in our church at that time gave me a way to understand it - I was attending church in a small Presbyterian church. The pastor was a graduate of Princeton. More than anything, he emphasized the connections between religion and storytelling - narrative. I look back now and I see how he realized that narrative is so important in the biblical tradition. Just by telling a story, people can really identify with the characters and their situations and choices - they make up stories about others, they join in other stories...

That was my really important formulation of who I really was. My peers and I, we knew we were different. We didn't identify with people in the city.

MH: Well, what is your story?

TH: I was probably fourteen or fifteen. On the ranch I would go out birdwatching a lot, particularly during the fall and spring, to see bird migrations. Sunrise or sunset was best. I'd

go out to a farm pond, a large dam pond of ours, with my binoculars. I'd just curl up and watch wildlife.

One evening - it was fall - I was there watching ducks. Right before my eyes just an incredible explosion of wings occurred. I didn't know what happened. Then I looked over - something was rustling in the shrubs. It was a bobcat. It had a duck by the neck. The bobcat went up to the top of a hill, it sat and it turned around. I thought it was looking right at me. Of course it wasn't, but... Blood coming was dripping down, a little bit, from the duck. And then the bobcat just faded away, just faded away -

That affected me in a way that I had to... well, I think at any age we have questions about suffering. Watching the bobcat, I think it took away all the romanticism I had about nature. Instead, it put me into nature in a profound and spiritual way. I was no longer an observer. That day I somehow became a participant.

Because I said to myself - that is suffering. The suffering of another species, of the wild.

So that is a question that I took into kind of my faith journey. I was trying to understand that, that question.

MH: So that experience shaped the path you took later, in combining religion and the environment.

TH: Well, I started at Oklahoma State as an aggie (MH: ag studies) with an interest in wildlife management.

MH: I didn't know that.

TH: I was going to be an ornithologist. Then I discovered that I really wanted to go beyond that scientific understanding to what you might say was a more poetic understanding of life. So I turned to studying philosophy. Then religion.

MH: It's interesting what you say about stories being key to understanding one's connections with the environment. In the Christian tradition, when people go to scripture to understand more about - whatever we want to call it - earth ethics, creation care... where are some of the places they go?

TH: Well, I don't know. That is hard to generalize.

MH: I would guess that for a lot of people it starts with Genesis, that bit of giving man dominion over the Earth - and then discussions about what dominion means. Does it mean stewardship, does it mean domination...

TH: Scripture is important, but those interpretations are also going to vary by whatever faith tradition you look at - what I also think matters is that people who connect religion and environment, they usually do so first by having a strong, intuitive experience. Then they get it. It is not a scientific experience, it is an intuitive experience - that moment of understanding that I am connected with all. I am a part of all that there is.

If they go looking at scripture after that, then it helps to understand narrative and storytelling - in the parable and stories of Jesus, he is speaking out of an agrarian-peasant mentality speaks to that connectedness.

The species, the humans that he is talking about - those issues that were oppressing then are the same one that are oppressing them today. That's what matters in terms of integrity, regarding Earth, the creation, the respect for the web.

MH: How is all this connected to what we are seeing in the last few years - the recent rise of the creation care movement? It is such a diverse movement, it is hard to pin it down...

TH: I like to say care for creation. When you say creation, it is not trying be scientific - although it's not adverse to science - it just says that as humans we need a metaphor to understanding our web, our place. "Creation" pretty much covers that. You could also say earth ethics - I have trouble now with saying "environmental" ethics because the term environment has become kind of mundane.

MH: It lacks mystery.

TH: It lacks mystery. You could say that. So how do we characterize care for creation... Well, it certainly is ecumenical. And what I mean by ecumenical - it spreads across faiths, and it is joined with those who identify with no faith. It starts on one level, being intuitive or mystical or whatever joins that, and then it evolves.

MH: First there is a leap of faith.

TH: There is a leap of faith. Then it moves to certain traditions and faith-based perspectives that are influenced by the stories or theological positions.

Some traditions have a real struggle with care for creation, though. We are also seeing that.

MH: Part of it seems to be - well, religion has always had to balance love on one hand, and justice on the other. Those are often hard streams of being to link together. How do you do both, or how do you honor both imperatives?

TH: Well, the really strong ingredient of love is compassion. Compassion is the ability to empathize and suffer, really, with others. And justice is compassion writ large in a public sphere. It is a systemic expression of compassion.

MH: So that links the two?

TH: And frankly, I think people are really saying this now as they look at the whole gospel and particularly the Christian tradition of Jesus. Jesus never went about asking people to become a Jew. He asked for people to be concerned about the condition of others. And in doing so I think he really, in stories that he spun, he always raises the big question that is always going to be there - what is it that continues to oppress these people? The pharaohs of the past have not left us, they are still here. Some of them are religious, some of them are...

MH: Economic.

TH: Economic. Political. It is so intertwined. The challenge is to shun the system and address those evils, instead of avoiding them by emphasizing our individuality. Which we love in our American culture. Salvation means becoming whole out of broken parts and I think that is what the Christian faith is talking about, making whole what is broken.

MH: And so what is broken? Are you saying that certain cultural interpretations of individualism have led to people severing their connections with nature - with the whole?

TH: Yes, yes, that is it. Individualism - I mean, I know it well. I was raised in it. I was raised in rural, rugged individualism. I think our whole culture is. To get out of that mindset is sticky. We need help, we need communities of support - we can't do this solo.

MH: Networks. If you change human interactions with the environment, you have to change human interactions with other humans too.

TH: Change is always inevitable. But the vitality of that change really comes when we become accountable to what we have learned, not only intuitively, but also scientifically. That is where intuitive level and scientific level are joined, in accountability.

We have to be partners and figure out how do we best sustain life for future generations to come. For all species, not just us.

MH: If I am tracking this correctly - on some level, the root of Creation Care is - well, I'm very strongly touched by what you said about the moment of mystery and intuition, almost a leap of faith, coming first. Like your experience with the bobcat.

And then this feeling moves on, through compassion, to connect with the people and other living things around you, and also... At some point there might come a connection between faith and reason, or what you are calling the scientific side of our knowing. You know - being grounded in faith as part of how you reach out to reason.

TH: I guess faith is never... Faith is devoid of... well, sometimes spiritualism can become a feel good - and that is not to put down when people say, I feel spiritual. But I myself always want to talk about, well, what is that spiritual feeling *like*.

I think there is sometimes a temptation to say, well, it feels good, so that is my spiritual life. When in fact, if that individual feeling is hooked up to a larger sense of the world, spirit is not about people feeling good. It is a matter of intuitive understanding and compassion for the suffering of others.

MH: It can get pretty complicated.

TH: It is complicated. One of the problems in our culture is that we are so caught up in being busy - we never take time to stop and talk about these things, and to figure out how to change.

I can write a new story. I can change, if I have time to think about it. But if you don't have time to do that you just go along with the past. And I'm not talking about years of retreat, either. It's the small moments of reflection that matter.

MH: What are some of the barriers people face in changing their story - or how they approach the environment?

TH: That is a good question. The overwhelming message in our culture about what it means to be a good and caring person runs contrary to what different generations may have thought it meant.

There is one agenda that says growth is essential, bigger is better. Our culture also says seek status, not learning. Seek material acquisitions of some sort or another. And that is not really what the good life is about if you look at creation care.

MH: How would you define the good life? Maybe define it for you personally, don't feel like you are trying to define it for the world.

TH: Well, it is a community of people that you could be honest with. Those may be many communities. They may be groups of two or three, they may be groups of hundreds - but for me, anyway, it means having conversations in person.

I also think the most important thing about having a community - it keeps you accountable. Also, we should look at our past, try to understand the present day through the voices of others, and add ours to it. I think the prophets today, some of them are poets. Not all, but some of them. They can speak to life.

The good life for me today, too, is to help the university - if I can - be more true to its vocation. I'm afraid is very difficult, given the pressures on the university. It gets caught up in the economic system. It does have voices in certain disciplines that speak out for sustainability, speak out for care of creation. But they are often thwarted when you look at the hierarchy within the university, which reflects the hierarchy in our greater culture.

I don't think the Creation movement can play 'poor me' and go the route of martyrdom. I think they just have to say, that is the way it is, and speak up - and continue to identify with one another and not get caught in the trivializations that break us apart.

There are differences within care for creation, but we need to be in collegiality - covenant. Covenant, really.

MH: Aspects of the creation care movement may be different in religious background, but on some level there is a unity of faith - that individual, intuitive, inner moment of - "hey, this matters. Now what steps do I take?"

TH: I think so. I think those moments are discovered through different doors. Some people come to it through the hunger door. The root of hunger is disparity.

Some have come to this moment through the evolution issue, too. Which is interesting - no wonder some people are frightened of evolution. If they buy into it, they really will have to say - we are a part of the web. They won't be at the top of a pyramid.

It can become frightening to understand yourself as part of the web, because it might seem like you lose your status. Because if the world is a web than you are vulnerable to what people do in a different way than if you are on top.

MH: If you are on top, you can see the threats coming at you. Like in a video game. A war game. But there is no higher ground in a web.

Also, on some level, whether it is a pyramid or web or dominion or however you understand it - the connections between humans and nature - I think what is most interesting is whether people see that connection, whatever it is, as flowing both ways.

You've mentioned sustainability a couple of times. Do you have a definition of that word?

TH: Sustainability means - how can we live a life that doesn't leave that big of a footprint. What we put in, and what we take out, they have to balance, whether that is in food, economics, energy, whatever. When we get closer to sustainable lifestyles, hopefully we also won't be producing toxins like we are now.

Human actions that lead to climate change - that is not sustainable, because it destroys the balance of the system. But it is happening because the human species in its arrogance has not yet stopped doing it.

MH: We kind of forgot that emergency brake when we parked on the hill.

TH: But it ain't just us in North America. Australia, Canada, the US, China and India - and we're all debating who's going to go first.

MH: Ack. On one level this is where faith is very helpful because if you stick just with reason - well, the world is looking pretty dire. So I think faith is a link to hope.

TH: Well... yes... You have got to have hope. You have got to have humor, you've got to be patient and you've got to appreciate the small things.

But you know, damnit, I want to see some big things happen. I think there is a fine line between cynicism and pessimism. Cynicism is a loss of all hope. Pessimism is like - well, that is the way things are. And maybe hope keeps us from going over that line.

I don't want to denigrate hope, but sometimes hope is too easily hoisted as "Let's all have hope."

You know - let's don't all have hope. Let's go speak at the state legislature. Are we hopeful people? Well, I don't know. We need more than a hopeful people.

MH: We need a "get off your rear" people.

TH: That is right.

MH: If hope is not getting you off your rear, then there is a limit to hope.

TH: That is right, that is right. But the ideological filters we live with, in this state and otherwise - sometimes people want to strike out first. They care whether someone is liberal or conservative, rather than whether they are acting in a way that is sustainable and caring for the creation.

MH: Creation is bigger than politics.

TH: Liberal or conservative - that is not the issue. But we are in a polarity, an ideology, that won't let us get past that.

MH: I want to tie this up by asking - twenty years from now, where would you like to see the Midwest? In terms of energy, environment, community... In twenty years, what would you like to see happen?

TH: Well, in terms of practical matters, I'd like us to look back and say we addressed the scarcity of water in this state. That we addressed our reliance on the automobile. I hope that we would be able to look at our cities as places that would build more community. What I mean by that, there would be affordable housing, and an equitable, progressive, tax system. It's tough - we seem to be constantly confronting a regressive sales tax - so politically there a lot of systemic things that need to be addressed.

The same goes with energy. How do we get the private sector to see the benefit of diversifying energy sources? I think in twenty years we will have some sort of transition through coal.

MH: Now the hardest question of the entire interview. You'll have to think really hard. Thad, what is your favorite country music song?

TH: Oh! I don't have one.

MH: You don't?

TH: I don't think I do.

MH: But - Hank - Waylon -

TH: Actually, I never really liked country... (then he starts laughing. Probably at MH's expression)