

Thoughts and Dreams of an Old Theologian

LEONARDO BOFF

*Translated by
Francis McDonagh*



ORBIS BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York

“I Have a Dream”

These words of Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), spoken some years before he was assassinated, come to my mind at this moment when I reach the age of eighty and have spent more than fifty years as a theologian. My eyes are fixed on my past, which I will be describing in this book, but my thoughts are directed at young people and my mind on eternity.

The Importance of Dreams

I attach great importance to dreams, those dreamed with closed eyes at night and with open eyes by day. The arguments of psychoanalysis, especially those of C. G. Jung, attach enormous importance to dreams, because they come from the deepest part of ourselves. A dream is the voice of the personal and collective unconscious, particularly the great dreams that have to do with our most radical identity and our life’s destiny.

In the First and Second Testaments of the Bible, dreams are a way in which God communicates with his people, with the judges and the prophets. The patriarchs receive messages in dreams (Gen 15:12–21; 20:3–6; 28:11–22; 37:5–11; 46:4). The judges, who were popular leaders (Judg 2:16–19) and the kings (1 Kgs 3), and especially the prophets (1 Sam 3:2; 2 Sam 7:4–17; Zech 6:25; Dan 2:7; Joel 2:28), also received divine messages in dreams. I feel included in the words of the prophet Joel: “afterward your old men shall dream dreams, and your

2 *Thoughts and Dreams of an Old Theologian*

young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:14-17). I hope very much that the young people who read this book will have hopeful visions for the future of life and of our Mother Earth, seriously threatened by aggression of all sorts caused by the irrationality of our civilization, which knows no limits and has no respect for any living creature.

In the Second Testament, Joseph, the husband of Mary and social father of Jesus, never uttered a word, but just had dreams (Matt 1-2). As a worker, he spoke with his calloused hands. Because of this he is the patron of anonymous workers, those who never get any publicity but live by gospel values. He was fundamental as a caring father and provider for the Holy Family: he protected his son from Herod's bloody plan by taking him into exile in Egypt. Saint Paul had dreams at night that showed him the way he should go (Acts 16:9-10; 18:9; 23:11; 27:23).

Israel's great dream was to possess a land flowing with milk and honey (Exod 3:15-18). No one less than the prophet Isaiah, in the second century BCE, launched a supreme dream:

For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it,
or the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;

for one who dies at a hundred years will be
considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be
considered accursed.
They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat;
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my
people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their
hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well.
Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain. (Isa 65:17-25)

This dream is undying and, like any dream or utopia, in some way it anticipates the future that is to come.

Jesus's Undying Dream

The greatest dream of all is Jesus's, the Kingdom of God already present among us. The signs of its presence are the liberating acts of Jesus: healing the sick, cleansing a sufferer from Hansen's disease, restoring sight to the blind, raising his friend Lazarus from the dead, multiplying loaves and fishes for a starving crowd, calming the stormy waters of Lake Gennesaret and forgiving sins (Matt 8:3-27; Luke 7:48-

49). After this there will be release for captives and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19), and a world will come in which the poor, the hungry and thirsty, those who weep and suffer, will be happy (Luke 6:20–21). Finally there will be “a new heaven and a new earth, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev 21:1, 3–4).

Dreams as Nightmares

All peoples have their dreams that inspire them to work to make them come true. In modern times we have had and still have the dream of capitalism, of a society of plenty. It worked for a small group at the expense of two perverse injustices: the social injustice that left millions and millions poor and abandoned and the ecological disaster that has devastated nature. This dream, though it continues, is threatening the physiochemical and ecological underpinnings of life. The utopia of socialism wanted to create an equal society, but one imposed from above that erased each individual's identity. This dream cost the lives of millions and disappeared in history. But we have to nurture dreams if we are not to stagnate and get bogged down in the swamp created by the interests of powerful minorities that dominate the great mass of the people. Most of these huge dreams ended in a nightmare, that is to say, in dreams with bad consequences, especially for the poor and marginalized. Any nightmare comes from the unconscious, with images of tragic events, people attacking us, or life-threatening situations, frightening us and creating anxiety. Nightmares make us wake up with a start. An example is Pilate's wife during Jesus's trial. She said to Pilate: “Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him” (Matt 27:19).

Good, Promising Dreams

The great dream of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was to announce a new historical era, the noosphere, a human race united in mind and heart, inhabiting the same planet. He emphasized that "The time of nations has passed; what is important is to build the Earth."

Pope Francis said jokingly to young people in Palermo in September 2018: "Better to be good dreamers than lazy realists, better to be Don Quixote than Sancho Panza," in other words, give priority to dreams rather than Sancho Panza's immobilizing calm. What is the dream of liberation theology? It is that all, beginning with the poorest and most oppressed, will be able to free themselves from the many oppressions, external and internal, and live as brothers and sisters in justice and solidarity, respectful of nature and Mother Earth, sharing one great table and enjoying, with moderation on the part of all, the good fruits of our great, generous Mother Earth. For trying to make this dream come true, many in Latin America were persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. But the dream that is true and good never dies. Hope assures us that it will come true one day.

What is Pope Francis's great dream, also shared by the Earth Charter and by so many ecologists? It is well expressed in his extraordinary encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (June 2015), and can be summed up in this sentence: "Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother River, and Mother Earth" (§92).

Either we care for Mother Earth, our Common Home, and we join hands to work together and in solidarity, or we form the procession of those headed for their own funeral. Here we see the importance and the urgency of nurturing good

6 *Thoughts and Dreams of an Old Theologian*

dreams that lead us to transformational activities and constantly nourish our hope.

This is the dream I want to pass on, as my life moves toward its end, to the young people who will come after us. It is their task to take forward the dream of Jesus, of Pope Francis, of liberation theology at its broadest, and of so many others who also nurture dreams of a better humanity. These young people will have to be the leaders in shaping a better future for us, for nature, and for Mother Earth.