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BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL

At the Edge of History:
A Conversation with William Irwin Thompson

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(Tease.)

WILLIAM IRWIN THOMPSON: I remember one of my brightest students at MIT, who was arrested for raiding the president's office and was a really heavy radical, and she was saying, "All right, lock me up, throw me in jail. These jails won't exist in two years. All your institutions are going to come tumbling down." You know. "I want my revolution and I want it now." And when that didn't happen, and they didn't have the guts and the stick-to-it-iveness to work on a longer vision, then they became demoralized and they said, "Oh, hell, if nothing's going to change, let's go back to law school and join the system." So that's the opposite of idealism, is compromise and bitterness and selling out. So you've got to watch that kind of polarity; we have wild optimism turning into its opposite three years later. I'm much more interested in a kind of long-term vision, working very slowly for a steady kind of change, and, almost in a Buddhist sense of reincarnation, you just keep coming back and coming back and coming back till it's fixed and it works and -- you know, you have a decent civilization finally.

BILL MOYERS: Tonight, William Irwin Thompson talks about the vision of a new planetary culture, and the problems of getting there. I'm Bill Moyers.

(BMJ opening.)

MOYERS (over shots of Lindisfarne): You have a hard time pinning Bill Thompson's life to a resume. Cultural historian, educator, essayist, metaphysician -- all are apt, and inadequate. Someone called him a silver thrush among pterodactyls, which to his friends says everything if to strangers little. He has taught at Cornell University, at MIT, and at York University in Toronto. But those were way stations on a journey through contemporary culture into the reaches of his own mind...a pilgrimage, if you will, toward a humane environment where science, religion and art merge in harmony, for life's sake. If not everyone can glimpse that vision -- above all the itinerant and prosaic journalist -- well, Bill Thompson is a patient man who will plant the seeds of ideas and wait.

(Over stills of Lindisfarne): Six years ago he founded an experimental educational association called Lindisfarne, a community of scholars, students and artists named after an Irish monastery that existed off the coast of England in the seventh century. Lindisfarne was destroyed by the Dark Ages it hoped to enlighten. But Bill Thompson believes the idea transcends history and can transform it. So here, in a converted Episcopal church in Manhattan, he and his friends have found a new home for an old idea. It is the center of a small network of people groping for a new form of education -- men and women who claim that science and faith can speak to each other; that mysticism need not deny the world, or materialism destroy it.

(Over Thompson and Moyers entering Lindisfarne): They come here to

share and debate their ideas, and through seminars, lectures and publications to spread them. The heart of Lindisfarne is the experience and mind of William Irwin Thompson, expressed in such books as At the Edge of History; Passages About Earth; Darkness and Scattered Light; Evil and World Order.

(Over scene in Lindisfarne library): For Bill Thompson, even the most visionary future of a planetary culture begins with life as it is today; so it was natural, as we met to talk, to start with the '70s.

(In library with Thompson): You once thought the '70s would be a turning point -- as important a passage as the passage from feudalism to the nation-states 500 years ago. Well, here we are in 1979, the last of your '70s. What happened? Were they a turning point?

THOMPSON: I think yes, but not in the way that I thought. There's a way sometimes that the big changes are really invisible, and you looked for one thing to happen and quite something else happened. I think the '60s were such an incredible period of creative expansion into new space, new consciousness, that everybody thought that the world wouldn't stay intact, that it was just a complete millennial shift. And then the '70s were its opposite, it was more, if the '60s went like this, then the '70s went like this; they were like consolidation into form. And they had much more of a solidity than anyone would ever have imagined, and so a lot of the '60s experiments almost tried specific kind of incarnations into strategies like the Fairlawns Institute in California, which was an appropriate-technology place; Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which was sort of a Buddhist meditative university; the New Alchemy Institute in Massachusetts, which was a study of appropriate technology and a new approach to science and nature; and then Lindisfarne in New York. And these were very specific things that were definite and concrete and not so wild, Woodstocky, you know, Big Sur/Haight-Ashbury, or the revolutionary movements. What was going on with the mass consciousness as a whole was very much an exercise in solidity. We had thousands of cases of terrorist bombing, and we had major instabilities and we had the whole Watergate thing, and America came right to the edge of a civil war, and then, I think, partly through the good use of television, saw its negative image on the screen, with the deaths at Kent State, and backed away. Some people said yes, let's have a civil war, let's shoot more students, and other people said no, America's not going to be Spain or some other country; it can't happen here. And they stopped it.

So I think we came very close and yet, in coming to the edge, revealed just how really strong we are as a country, and I think America never realized it had that inner kind of strength. We always thought we were new and young and brash and, you know, mercurial, volatile.

MOYERS: Are you saying that we endured all of that with resiliency ...maturity?

THOMPSON: Well, I think something approaching maturity. I think we did really show that we could have a constitutional crisis, we could have an economic crisis, a fuel crisis; and things that would cause the tumbling of governments elsewhere and would cause civil wars in other countries around the world did not cause them here. And that, I think, both is a surprise and a delight. The larger shifts that I was talking about in terms of what you say, the shift from the medieval to the modern hasn't stopped, but those are kind of changes that I really didn't look to see in the '70s. If I looked at the '70s in the '60s, I looked and was afraid of, my personal nightmare was, an American civil war. Because I was writing a book on the Irish revolution, and I was seeing Watts,

Detroit, Newark -- you know, all the scenarios, the extreme polarization between left and right, and it had all the ingredients for civil war, so I was very frightened. And there was the assassination of Martin Luther King, the assassination of Senator Kennedy; Ronald Laing refused to come to California to join with me in a seminar at Esalen because he said the San Francisco Airport is going to be struck by terrorist bombers, and he didn't want to come to America in the middle of a civil war. So those nightmares were very strong around '68, '69, the period of Altamont.

MOYERS: Those were the agonies that you referred to earlier.

THOMPSON: Right.

MOYERS: The agonies of the '60s and '70s.

THOMPSON: And so there I looked to see if I were projecting a private scenario of nightmare or history as a nightmare from which I'm trying to awaken, it would be civil war. Not so much that larger shift. That larger shift is really the whole end of this century, the whole shift from the twentieth into the twenty-first century; and those larger things can't really occur just within a decade, they're too large a scale of change. So I don't think anything, in that sense, has stopped or been reversed.

MOYERS: This has been called a self-centered, me-first decade that has transformed the activism of the '60s into, frankly, a narcissistic culture. Do you agree with that analysis? Are we self-centered, narcissistic?

THOMPSON: Well, any caricature has only a certain validity, you know, you can do a quick line stroke and show that De Gaulle had a large nose, and it isn't really De Gaulle; and yet in another way it catches the essence of it. So that in Tom Wolfe, in talking about the "me" generation, is also in a sense -- as any writer does -- projecting much of himself into it. So he is a man concerned with style and flair and textures and surfaces and clothes, and so when he looks to a society he looks at trailer camps in Southern California, or he looks to art styles and painting styles in galleries in New York. And so as he looks at EST and ARICA and all of these things he quickly sees a narcissism, a "me" kind of generation. And so there's a certain lack of depth in that perception. At the same time, there is a validity of the cartoonist, that it's quite true that the '70s are a period of consciousness raising, concern with one's own personality rather than one's family, so the woman wants to have liberation and let her children find another way to raise themselves. And there's a movement into these workshops. But I think every decade and every generation is almost the reversal of the other one. The ancient Chinese said that reversal is the movement of the Tao. So you have the '60s, and what happens? The '70s, and all the kids go back and want to go to Harvard Law School and Harvard Med School, and they become as un-radical as they could possibly be, and all the predictions from the '60s don't pan out.

I think now, as we head into the '80s, which I feel is going to be a period in which events are not internal, not "me", not narcissistic, they are going to be wholly "other", it's going to be the outside. What's coming is the test of the validity of all that consciousness raising: how real was that '60s, how real were those '70s?

MOYERS: Make that concrete. What do you mean, a test from the outside?

THOMPSON: The crisis of the industrial nation-state system, the crisis of the world economy. I agree with Heilbroner's projections and fears that we're probably headed for a massive collapse of currencies and the whole economic system of the world as it clunks into some new, appropriate planetary form is going to play out all the contradictions and inadequacies of the old nation-state system.

MOYERS: What will that call forth from us? What will it require? What will it be testing?

THOMPSON: The ability -- similar to some of the values of the Depression -- the ability to deal with limits, with shortages, the ability to have communities of caring and sharing rather than communities of consumption, not having neighborhoods defined solely in terms of patterns of affluence and cars and shopping centers; a testing of religious values in a period of, really, disorientation.

MOYERS: Herman Kahn says that many Americans are pessimistic because they've been seriously undermined by a new class of highly sophisticated doomsayers.

THOMPSON: Um.

MOYERS: Are you one of those?

THOMPSON: A highly sophisticated doomsayer. Well, in some ways, yes, but I think it depends on how you look at doom; you know, if you consider the rise of environmental cancer, the rise of emphysema, the incredible amount of rise of suicide, the rise of illiteracy, all the things -- you can say that the dreadful has already happened but that we have a way of ignoring it that no one can perceive the description. And so in order for people to see the invisible, to see what's really happening, they have to raise their voice or they have to caricature, just as I was saying that Wolfe has to caricature; and so they present an apocalyptic image. And there's some validity to those things if one takes a solid look at what's happening to us.

The opposite is true for Herman Kahn. I find him to be something like a snake oil salesman saying, you know, this'll cure this and cure that and cure cancer and cure corns, and that everything is fine and we're all going to have twenty billion people on the planet and we're all going to earn \$20,000 a year, and he goes around telling the corporations what he wants to hear, that the Los Angelization of the planet is going to go on without a stop. And I think that's a lot of fanciful, wishful thinking and that he's a highly sophisticated peddler of the millenium.

MOYERS: But he does have some very convincing arguments to make, that productivity, wealth and affluence will increase; that the population will stabilize at a manageable total; that extreme poverty as we know it will be alleviated. And in fact he goes on to say that the post-industrial society may well approach a humanistic utopia. And you discount that, you don't believe that.

THOMPSON: Well, in 1967 he wrote about the year 2000, and he had nothing to say about the energy crisis and nothing to say about pollution. Pollution became a national issue in 1968, and the energy crisis in '73. So he couldn't even be one year ahead of himself in a book he was writing on the year 2000. So that I don't think his track record is very good in making predictions. Years ago people said we were going to farm the oceans

and we would live undersea and we would produce food off pellets and things of this sort; now people come along like Jacques Cousteau and say the oceans are becoming polluted like Lake Erie and we're not going to be able to feed people from the oceans because we're damaging the oceans. Other people say that we have a greenhouse effect and we're changing the ionosphere and the atmosphere of the planet and we're bringing on a global weather change and that we're headed into something that we don't even begin to understand. So you pays your money-and you takes your choice. You believe what you want to believe: you either believe Herman Kahn or you believe the ecologists of doom and gloom; they're both probably right, and that'll be the peculiar thing about the contradictions of society. So you know, history is so complex, with a million things going on, that what you see is what you are. You know, you're like a magnet going over the ground, and what you pick up is there, but the structure and the organization and the whole arrangement is you. So Herman Kahn sees Herman Kahn; he looks in the mirror when he looks at society. You do the same thing, I do the same thing. The difficulty then is to try and get out of one's limits, out of one's ego and say, "What is wholly other to myself? What is not just simply disguised autobiography?" Herman Kahn grew up in Los Angeles, worked for the Rand Corporation, is part of that whole boom psychology of the '60s. He's a product of his time. I think his time is ending. He thinks my time is ending, you know?

MOYERS: What about Bill Thompson? Where did you come from and what is your time?

THOMPSON: Well, I certainly came from Los Angeles, although I was born in Chicago, and I think I've had the luck -- or maybe a little bit of luck and hunches -- to be at the right place at the right time. I was in Los Angeles as that was happening in the '50s and '60s, and saw the whole growth of the megalopolis and saw the growth of what was to become the model for the world, so that Melbourne or Tehran or, you know, Caracas, all these cities wanted to become Los Angeles. And I could see the ways in which Los Angeles didn't work. And then I went backward and tried to go to Boston or to Dublin and, you know, involve myself with the search for real history and roots and connectiveness, and saw that that doesn't work either, that you can't go backwards, that history is an irreversible kind of flow. And then I was teaching humanities at MIT and found myself right in the place where all the contradictions of the technological society were visible and that the way in which the humanities were losing their vision and losing their power and collapsing as a valid form of education was very apparent, because the humanities were becoming colonized by the forces of technocracy at MIT. So the best place to be to understand, say, the decline of the humanities and the rise of the behavioral sciences was at MIT in the '60s.

And then left MIT to go to Canada, and again tried to see, are there other places one can go to escape the crisis of our time, and again found that no, that America is being imitated, that if you go anywhere around the world everybody wants America and that the only place to really work for a global change, then, is right in the heart, back in this country, because we're the kind of crucible of the world where it all comes together.

MOYERS: Well, that brings us right here to Lindisfarne. I know that originally, 1,300 years ago, it was a monastery founded by Celtic monks who were either appalled by what they saw as the confusion of the Dark Ages and trying to salvage what they could of Greco-Roman culture,

or were trying to convert the Dark Ages. Tell me what you can about the original Lindisfarne.

THOMPSON: Well, more than just a salvage operation, they were more creative than that, in the sense that the monks had an understanding that one world was ending, and that the Roman Empire was over. And so they took the best of, say, Greek knowledge and scholarship and Roman knowledge and scholarship, and then they compressed the old civilization of Greece and Rome into a curriculum. It was a kind of active miniaturization. And then making that curriculum as part of the basis of knowledge, the way they could store knowledge in an age of transition, they surrounded it with a kind of new invisible culture that would later on become Christendom. So that the strategy which they created, which I think is the right one, is not to throw the past away but to miniaturize it in such a way that it becomes an artifact in a new civilization of consciousness. So that no one at the time of the monks could even see Christendom; that wasn't going to be visible until the time of Canterbury and Oxford and Cambridge. I don't think anyone now really sees the planetization of mankind, really understands what new global world order is emerging through all this period of strain and pain and contradiction. So more than ever we need to have internal sense of navigation, we have to have an inner, meditative sense of who we are, where we are, what our values are; and we can't look to the external world to define them because the external world is really changing. So that the interesting thing about mysticism is it's a way of humanizing technology. Because what I found at MIT was that if you don't have that kind of inner, contemplative sense in order to humanize the machine, then the machine technologizes you. And then you get the shift where orange juice is turned into Tang and people are turned into androids, and the behavioral scientists arise and say, We've had enough of democracy, we've had enough of the common citizen, we have to let the experts rule, we have to design a behavioral state. And you get apologists for tyranny of the kind of Brzezinski or B.F. Skinner or E.O. Wilson's sociobiology...

MOYERS: Brzezinski as an apologist for tyranny?

THOMPSON: Yes, even as early as 1965, in a meeting with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he said -- in that august, elitist group that was almost a dress rehearsal for the Trilateral Commission -- he said the trouble with democracy is its post-crisis management. If we're really going to make it in the future we're going to have to shift from post-crisis management to pre-crisis management. So what his vision is of a technotronic society is not the representational balance of forces of citizen and larger groups but an executive directorship in which the manager has the informed opinion of computers and skilled scientists. And so his whole vision is of a future that's just nuclear power, the Los Angelization of the planet, more and more Houstons, more and more multinational corporations coming together to create progress, affluence, wealth and control. It's a vision of power. And I'm much more interested in the opposite, the vision not of the city but of the desert, the wilderness, the vision of a change in culture in which being small is valid. There are times in history when a cork floats and a battleship sinks, and that's my vision of the '80s.

MOYERS: But Lindisfarne, the original Lindisfarne....

THOMPSON: Was tiny and small and was just a dozen monks. And it changed Christendom.

MOYERS: And was overrun by Viking predators.

THOMPSON: Right. But after it had been effective. You know, these little things -- if you look at history, we've falsified it a bit in school. We always talk about the rise of this and the rise of that and talk about big things. We neglect these very tiny, small, insignificant things like Pythagoras' academy in Crotona; like Ficino's academy in the Renaissance which created the Renaissance, in a way, in Florence; like the Lindisfarne-monasteries. And sometimes these little things are like enzymes. Now, an enzyme is infinitesimal in your body and insignificant by size, and yet try doing without them. The whole way in which an enzyme deals with information is critical to your survival as a huge organism. So I think small groups, whether they're Yeats in the Abbey Theatre in revolutionary Ireland, or whatever, or the monks in the Dark Ages -- small groups of a dozen people re-explaining the world, having a different vision, and taking a risk in a long-shot chance that, I think the world is going this way and not this way, can be really critically important.

For example, when I was down in Washington and walking through the kind of smog and haze and looking at all the buildings and the new museums going up, for a minute it's like I blinked and it was Washington at the time of Jefferson and Washington, and realizing how just in an instant -- (snaps fingers) -- this whole thing had happened, in historical time in 200 years. Well, in an instant -- (snaps fingers) -- that can change, too. The first thing one has to understand about history is how to look at time. And most people go out and they look at the past, they don't see the present. If you were to look up at the stars, you wouldn't be seeing what's going on now, you would see an imprint of stuff that was light years in the past. So it's the same thing: you look at New York and you're seeing the past, you're not seeing the present. So I'm well aware that as I go out the door -- and that's the value of living here; I can't let my mystical way of looking at things get too far out of touch with reality, I go out and I hear the noisy trucks or people get mugged on the doorstep, or things of this sort -- so I'm aware that it's 1978, you know, and that it's not the millenium and it's not yet the apocalypse. And yet in another way, all of these things are going on, and to understand them one first has to know how to blink one's eyes and see things that are happening in the corners or the side or at a different time rate. And then, if you see these different time rates, then you really begin to be a good historian.

MOYERS: What about Lindisfarne? Why did you take the name Lindisfarne for your contemporary experiment?

THOMPSON: Well, because I believe that the way -- there were two things we needed to do. I tried to do Lindisfarne first when I was teaching at MIT, and I felt when I was teaching the engineers there that the roots of the ecological crisis were in the miseducation of engineers, who looked upon nature as a machine of interchangeable parts; if something broke down, you fixed it, you know. If your heart didn't work you took it out and threw it away and you put in another part. And I felt that they really didn't understand that there was a mystical tradition to science. So I wanted to go back to show that Whitehead, that Einstein, that Heisenberg, Faraday, Descartes, Pascal, Kepler -- that many of the great geniuses of the Western scientific tradition had their roots in a mystical tradition that derived from Pythagoras. So that was a kind of rescue operation to change education.

The other was to try and go back to the roots of Christendom that had lost its sense of the esoteric and that had lost its contemplative

values, to go back and resurrect the mystical traditions of Christianity so that we didn't necessarily have to go to India or Tibet to learn how to meditate. So that's why I was interested in Celtic Christianity, the esoteric Christianity that was identified as the church of John and not the church of Peter in the center of the city of cities in Rome. And that was a wild kind of decentralized, very mystical form of Christianity, very Irish. And so I was trying to touch the point, because I felt that if the mystical roots of Christianity and the mystical roots of science were fully understood, then the nature of our industrial society and its impact on the biosphere would be radically altered. Because I believe ideas really externalize as machines, you know, twenty or thirty years later. So as we think, we create a culture, we create a world. And I tried to do it at MIT, but MIT said no, they were more interested in politics, economics and society and training their engineers to go to Washington; and so MIT became the MIT of Samuelson rather than some sort of mystical Lindisfarne.

The other reason I named it Lindisfarne is that none of the monks lived to see the impact of their work. They worked on what became British civilization, and out of it came Oxford and Cambridge. But they all died before that came about, and I certainly don't think that I'm going to live to see the full implications of my work. I don't have the sense that my radical colleagues had in the '60s, "I want it, and I want it now." I'm much more interested in a kind of long-term vision, working very slowly for a steady kind of change, and, almost in a Buddhist sense of reincarnation, you just keep coming back and coming back and coming back till it's fixed and it works and, you know, you have a decent civilization finally.

MOYERS: When you opened Lindisfarne, on the eastern end of Long Island, who came?

THOMPSON: Young students sort of disaffected with universities, for the most part. They were sort of dropouts...people who had been to Oberlin, Antioch, Tufts, Vassar; some from Texas and some from California. Mainly university students.

MOYERS: Why did they come, and what were you trying to do with them?

THOMPSON: They came because what they were looking for in a university they hadn't found. They found the university of large courses of 300, and knowledge homogenized into textbooks, and sort of a process of -- the meaning had been lost from it. And they were Searchers with a capital S, you know, looking for the meaning of it all. And so they came, trying to see what Lindisfarne would be all about. And the teachers, I think, were also searchers. And we tried various sorts of experiments back and forth between a community approach to education and a more intellectual emphasis on world and global culture. There was always a tendency in the early years to be too introverted and not to be concerned with what was happening with the world as a whole; and so every August we would bring together people from all over the world, like E.F. Schumacher, Gregory Bateson, and people who were concerned with politics, economics, society. And I think that had an educating influence on the students, that they could see, with a really profound, visionary man like E.F. Schumacher, that there's a way...

MOYERS: The author of Small is Beautiful.

THOMPSON: Right; right. That there's a way that you can be involved with economics and still be a scholar and still be a contemplative. He

was a profound student of world's religions, he wasn't just an economist. And so he had an enormous influence on everyone in the place, including me.

MOYERS: Don't all things quiet finally get drowned in the noise and change of our society?

THOMPSON: Well, sometimes the opposite happens, that if they become successful they get co-opted. I was disturbed at MIT between the marriage of Harvard and Washington, and felt that we were creating a new mandarinism where there would be new Cro-Magnons and the old humanity would be simply the old Neanderthals. And I was very much afraid of a political change that I felt was really highly authoritarian. So I wanted to, in a sense, pull apart that wedding of Cambridge and Washington by going off in the direction of saying, Let's get back to the pureness of the humanities, let's get back to meditation, a sense of meaning, a sense of sacred language and sacred literature; and went off in the direction of almost the monastery. And then what happened is, because of the people like Rusty Schweikart and E.F. Schumacher and Gary Snyder and Gregory Bateson all in different ways ending up working for Jerry Brown, that it almost began to look that our generation would just grow up and become another kind of best and brightest. And so I became much more afraid of the powers of success, rather than getting drowned. It was not that Lindsfarne was small and insignificant but that people were listening, and would they listen in the right way and would the people be able to deal with success without, you know, co-optation or corruption -- you know, power corrupting. And so I don't feel that we're being drowned. I think for a tiny group of people we've had a fair sense of respect and attention. I feel the only thing that's been a difficulty is that because, I think perhaps, of television that people, especially the young, have the sense that culture doesn't need to be created, that culture can be observed; and that you will always go to the television and turn a switch and culture will be there. And...

MOYERS: Well, is that the only problem, though, because you...

THOMPSON: No, there are personality problems, too.

MOYERS: You feared success. A lot of your people were perhaps seeing you as the prophet and...

THOMPSON: Not if they live with me; they knew better. (Laughing.)

MOYERS: You as the priest and Jerry Brown as the prophet. And they ran to Jerry Brown, and he seemed for a while to be embracing many of the ideas you're discussing. Then in the last year we've seen Jerry Brown release his grip and return, as Herman Kahn might say, to more straight, square values.

THOMPSON: Right.

MOYERS: Did you feel let down?

THOMPSON: Oh, well, no, in the sense because I was so astonished to find any politician at all interested in these ideas, because my image of politicians is that they're not leaders, they're collective representations thrown up by the mass, that they simply tell the people what they want to hear, that it has nothing to do with politics; that the only time you get political leaders is in a period of revolutionary change. Then

you get a Thomas Jefferson. But when you're running the shop in Main Street, you just get people, you know -- whether it's Reagan or Jerry Brown. Reagan expressed the post-industrial sensibility of Los Angeles and the wedding of government-corporation and the rise of that whole... that whole boom period of nouveau-riche rugged capitalism. And Jerry Brown represented the next generation of the informational class of, say, Zen and computer chips. And he was just as much an expression of the California landscape as Reagan was; he wasn't any accident. But I was surprised to actually see him quoting Bateson and Illich, and I...

MOYERS: Schumacher.

THOMPSON: Schumacher. I couldn't understand how anybody could run on that. And so when I talked to him and said, "Hey, are you a Thomas Jefferson, have you really figured it all out for the planetary constitutional convention of the '80s or '90s?" And "You know how Bateson relates to Schumacher to John Todd." And he hadn't, and it was pretty clear that he had a good sense of smell and he was interested in new things, but he wasn't able to take the bits and pieces and put them into a vision of polity. And so he wasn't the politician that I was, you know, looking for. I think we need a Thomas Jefferson, frankly.

MOYERS: But I think if Thomas Jefferson came back, Bill, he'd get clobbered in the primaries, and he'd probably get clobbered in the primaries by Jerry Brown.

THOMPSON: Yeah. But that's because those were -- now it's an un-revolutionary time. Things have to get worse before they're going to get better. As long as the structure remains intact, people will say, "I want affluence; I don't care about the biosphere of the planet, I want a big car. I don't care about nuclear reactors, I want a job. So if you will promise me a job, I will gladly build a nuclear reactor." That's the world we have now. And that isn't going to change with a general, easy, gradual change of industrial society. It's going to take a wrenching dislocation. Now, I think we're headed for a wrenching dislocation. Therefore I think we're going to have to revision and rethink the whole nature of politics, economics and society. We're going to need a planetary constitutional convention.

MOYERS: Let me mention a few politicians, and you tell me what you think, as a cultural historian, that they represent culturally. Jimmy Carter.

THOMPSON: I think -- well, he's very complex because he's very split, as any human being is split. But on the one hand Carter is the moral vision of the South, where some of the tissue of human community was still intact in ways that it wasn't in, say, my Los Angeles; where neighbors and caring and a sense of the sacred were still there and they hadn't just turned into a consumer society of divorce every two years, changing your home every two years, not knowing your neighbors, that whole kind of world. The difficulty is that in bringing that moral vision into power, he had to dance with his opposite, the New York banks, the Trilateral Commission, David Rockefeller, Brzezinski at Columbia; and I guess because he was from a small village in the South he looked upon those people as the best and the brightest who really understood the way the world worked. He said at one point that thanks to the Trilateral Commission, they really taught me a lot; the Council on Foreign Affairs. That ended up turning the vision around, and so now

what's happening, of course, is that the South is going to get Los Angelesized and Atlanta will become a new Los Angeles, and from Orlando and the trailer camps of Orlando straight across the sunbelt to San Fernando Valley you're going to have just a landscape of shopping centers and subdivisions and consumerism, and everything that I grew up with in Los Angeles is going to happen to you people down there. And so the whole moral vision will be lost and the anomie is going to be tremendous.

MOYERS: So Jimmy Carter, in a sentence, represents...?

THOMPSON: Us. We get what we deserve. Our politicians are expressions of us. And so he's a classic example of the shift from the North and the East to the South. Now, in that sense, when Nelson Rockefeller realized that he couldn't become elected and that one reason is the South, the Ronald Reagan consciousness, really hates all that that East Coast money, establishment, old rich represents. So in the struggle between the old rich and the new rich, between New York City and Houston, there was a whole change in which it was very clear that Nelson Rockefeller couldn't get elected. So that the Critical Choice Commission failed, the energy went into the Democratic Party and the Trilateral Commission, and then came behind Jimmy Carter. So it's the same invisible government; it doesn't have anything to do with left and right. We get what we deserve.

MOYERS: You keep bringing up the Trilateral Commission, which is a group of some three or four dozen businessmen, bankers, statesmen, public figures from Europe, America and Japan, as if they constituted some conspiracy, as if they were an invisible or an obscure force pulling the strings of society. I don't see them that way.

THOMPSON: No, I don't think -- no; no no no, no. Conspiracies don't have to be silent whisperings in the corridors, they can be simply a tacit consciousness of what people assume is the nature of reality. Whitehead...

MOYERS: Say that...

THOMPSON: Well, unconscious assumptions about what the nature of reality is. Whitehead has said that our science sometimes is hindered not by what we think but what we take for granted and what our unconscious assumptions are. Now, in this Old Boy network, they don't have to have a conspiracy, they just, in the way in which they share a sense of the gross national product and multinational corporate enterprise and the role of elites and the limitations of democracy. They don't have to meet and whisper in corridors to constitute any kind of conspiracy. Why I identify things like that or the Club of Rome is because it seems to me the major drift of advanced industrial society is toward an authoritarian system in which large labor unions join with large multinational corporations with large government to create a system in which the citizen becomes the subject, and all of that is worked out and administered by an intelligentsia coming from the universities who helped bring behavioral modification into the grammar schools and Skinnerian psychology into the graduate schools. And so that's what I fear is the major drift of our times. The humanities used to be the moral voice to check that, and the humanities had a memory of the past and a memory of civilization and tried, in the words of Matthew Arnold, to remember what was the best that had been thought and done.

MOYERS: I guess where my skepticism comes in about your characterization of them is that when I see some of them, whether it's Brzezinski

or Harrington or Huntington or the President in my work as a journalist, they all think they're building a better world.

THOMPSON: Have you ever seen anyone consciously, willfully commit evil? I mean, very rarely does the Devil come on stage and say, "Hiss! I'm evil, I offer you unspeakable -- you know -- terror; will you do it?"

MOYERS: Wait a minute, wait a minute.

THOMPSON: Well, let's go back to history...

MOYERS: But you don't say that...

THOMPSON: No, I'm not saying the Trilateral Commission are Nazis; they're not.

MOYERS: Are committing evil.

THOMPSON: (Pause.) I think there is a fascination with power that is in its roots evil; that there is not an understanding of the limitations of power, because the sacred check that used to be upon that has now been cut with the whole rise of rationalism and secularism, so...

MOYERS: The sacred check?

THOMPSON: The sacred check on power and the vision of power. That when you have a civilization that's based on a religious vision, you still get Cardinal Richelieu and you still get all kinds of contradictions. Nevertheless, there's a moral force and a moral consensus that holds a rein on certain things that are not tolerable. When you move into a technocratic society that cuts its moorings with that, then you're in a very different situation.

MOYERS: So Jimmy Carter is us. What about Jerry Brown?

THOMPSON: He's different because he's more the hip scene of California, and he's more of the landscape of a society that's not so much industrial but post-industrial. He represents a society that doesn't produce objects that you ship from Detroit, but the movement of information in computer chips. So he's perhaps the most truly post-industrial politician. The sensibility of Ford, Reagan and Carter is industrial. So if you want to talk about a new post-industrial politics, Jerry Brown is one of the few who represents it. And that's why I was fascinated with him and wanted to see if it would go in a new moral direction, if he could really embody Schumacher's ideas. And unfortunately, he couldn't.

MOYERS: You then leave a very barren political landscape.

THOMPSON: Well, I said, politicians are like celebrities, they are creatures that we create, they're collective representations; and so they are us and they represent where we have been. They don't represent our future, and so...

MOYERS: Who does?

THOMPSON: Right now it's the Sri Aurobindos and the Teilhard de Chardins, the...

MOYERS: Describe those so that we know...

THOMPSON: SriAurobindo was an Indian philosopher of human evolution who talked about the next stage of human consciousness. Teilhard de Chardin was a Jesuit philosopher of evolution who talked about the planetization of mankind. So that I think these visionary prophets really understand the future. And then the people who next understand them are the artists, the people like Gary Snyder, the poet in California, or Doris Lessing, the novelist in London, or the composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen. Because it's the artist who first understands the mystic prophet; then he writes his book and a larger audience reads the book. In this sense I'm more artist than cultural historian, because I'm translating the ideas of the prophet into books that are read by a larger audience than might, you know, read SriAurobindo. And then the people who read those works, in the last stage of the change, are the politicians. I don't think we've yet seen the Thomas Jeffersons of the planetary constitutional convention. I think human society is going to need them if we're going to survive the next twenty-five years.

MOYERS: What do you mean, planetary constitutional convention?

THOMPSON: I mean a gathering of humanity to try and understand the proper relationship of the soul to the body and consciousness to matter and civilization to nature, to work out a civilization that's not just based on affluence and industrial values but of survival. I would imagine it would probably, as H.G. Wells imagined, have to come, as the phoenix does, out of the ashes, that we'll probably continue our stampede over the cliff until that becomes so painful that we draw back and say, Now what can we do? It may be too late, you know, when we do.

MOYERS: The gravity seems to me to be running the other direction, on the world scene toward nationalism, within nations toward fragmentation -- right here in our own country.

THOMPSON: Right. But that's a very different kind of thing, because if you live in a planet and you finally have identification with the biosphere because you can see the planet on television and you can watch the astronauts walk on the moon, then it doesn't mean anything to be Canadian or American, your emotional roots come from being from Kentucky or from Quebec. So the kind of nationalisms we're seeing rise up are emotional, artistic, sentimental nationalisms: the Welsh, the Bretons, the Basques, the Québécois, Ulster, Southern Ireland. I think the future landscape is going to be very much one of the planetary biosphere as a whole, with some kind of complex polity expressing that, and then regional polities; it would be probably good for America to break up into the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest, it doesn't have to be this nation-state built on the railroads. The railroads are long gone.

MOYERS: Well, how do you get from here to a coherent planetary culture?

THOMPSON: I think what we need really is a religious, spiritual awakening before we can have politics. If we try to have politics now we'll just get the same old politics of corruption -- you know, you scratch my back, I'll scratch your back, you know; you get me this constituency, I'll deliver this. That's the old game, and I think before we can get out of that we have to have our consciousness change.

MOYERS: But you know, there are religious awakenings and there are religious awakenings.

THOMPSON: Yes, and some of them aren't so good.

MOYERS: What are you talking about?

THOMPSON: I'm talking about a spiritual awakening. If you look...

MOYERS: In which what happens?

THOMPSON: In which a different vision of culture comes about. Look at the sixth century B.C. You had the Old Testament prophets, you had Buddha, you had Lao-tsu, you had Mahāvīra in India, you had Pythagoras in Greece. From one end of the world -- from, say, Italy to China, there came a group of individuals who saw the moral decay of civilization and created these larger visions that were universal religions. The Second Isaiah's vision isn't of a tribal Israel, it's a vision of all mankind, it's a vision of Jerusalem as a holy planetary city. Probably we should make Jerusalem a world city and take it away from nation-states and have it belong to the U.N., parenthetically. But that kind of vision has prepared history for what happened, the emergence of these larger civilizations: you know, Buddhism going out from India all the way to China and Japan; Islam going across Africa; Christendom going across Europe. Now we're going to need a kind of global spiritual change, and the first change has to be a profound transformation of consciousness, a whole new spirituality that isn't just organized religion but that is a higher stage of consciousness; which is why I point to people like Aurobindo as the prophets of that shift. If you have religion as a business and you get a prophet and a sect and followers, you have the same old thing. That's religion as business, you know; we've seen a lot of that in the 1970s. I'm not pointing to that.

MOYERS: It sounds very utopian to me. It sounds utopian and unrealistic in the sense that we are not that built for spiritual visions of such grand a nature, that we are parochial, personal, private, we belong to families, tribes, states, nations; and the whole experience, even from the sixth century B.C., has been toward what is today and not what you think ought to be.

THOMPSON: But look at all the changes nevertheless. You know, if we were having this conversation two million years ago, you would say -- three million years ago -- "Let's stay in the trees, it's too dangerous out on the savannahs. Let's swing, and not pick up rocks." And I'll say, "No, let's go out on the savannah and pick up some rocks." And then we change the argument and we're now hunters and gatherers and I'm saying -- and I would be a woman in this case, because women created agriculture -- "Why don't we collect these wild grasses instead of roaming around and hunting?" And you say, "No, hunting is great." And so we change the scene again and you're saying, "Why don't we stay living in villages," and I say, "No, why don't we move into cities?" And then we have the argument in the Old Testament and you're saying, "We should have the tribes and we should have no Israel. I don't want a Samuel, I don't want a King David." And I'm saying, "Well, why don't we try an Israel?" So that it's amazing that history's ever changed. Nothing is more unbelievable and incredible than history. I mean, I couldn't in my life have come up fifty years ago with anything resembling the Second World War and atom bombs and the United Nations. History is far more incredible than any fantasy, nightmare or dream. So that it does change, and we're not having the same argument we would have three million years ago, and we're on the edge of something else; and I begin to think that

only the utopian imagination really is an actual, valid, realistic description of what is really going on out there, and that everybody else is caught inside a Titanic locked in their cabins looking at the television set and not really having a sense of what the world outside is really like.

MOYERS: You'll be sixty-two in the year 2000, I'll be sixty-six.

THOMPSON: Okay.

MOYERS: If we met here then, what would we be talking about, and what would America look like?

THOMPSON: (Pause.) Unfortunately, I think, there would have been a war. And probably one shouldn't even say that on television because that gives almost an image energy. But I think there would have been a war; if we're lucky it would have been a small one of maybe one nuclear-powered dictatorship against another one and the horror of that enabled the moral conscience of humanity to be awakened and to try and revision government and polity in a new way. I think we would see the world much more radically decentralized in that as we move toward a global form of authority and knowledge and science and planetary ecological stewardship, where with NASA kind of instruments we can really monitor what's happening in the Sahel or what's happening with the rice crop in Southeast Asia, that as we move toward that scientific, technocratic expertise, the whole best and brightest, that there was a compensatory religious and prophetic awakening with the rise of the humanities. I'm projecting a scenario in which Lindisfarne works, in other words...

MOYERS: (Laughs.)

THOMPSON: ...that there is a reawakening of the humanities and the humanities don't go into extinction and lay down and die in front of the behavioral sciences and that Skinner doesn't triumph without, you know, a good hard fight. So I'm assuming that the kind of thing I'm doing and the kind of thing that C.S. Lewis was doing before me actually has some effective voice within the change -- doesn't dominate it and doesn't become a mass movement and doesn't become another sect, but just has a valid voice, that it's there being heard along with the other things -- and that the structure of polity is changed dramatically in that we will have created regional polities where the Pacific Northwest, the South, New England, areas like that, are almost self-autonomous, governing entities similar to Quebec and similar to the devolution of Scotland. I think Quebec and Scotland are working out the local structures of politics for the future. So I don't think America as an industrial nation-state will be intact in the year 2000, in the way that it's intact now.

MOYERS: Since I'm a journalist dealing with bits and fragments of the present and don't see the future, I'll just have to let it rest there. But let me, as we come to a close...

THOMPSON: Remember, though, that I was wrong about the civil war in the '70s, so I'm not a prophet, and I'm a lousy predictor.

MOYERS: (Laughing.) Let me close with some personal questions. Someone described you as a word freak.

THOMPSON: (Laughs.)

MOYERS: One critic said that the problem with Thompson is that he's

enamored of the total explanation. I see you differently. I see you as representative of a restless, rootless generation that through the '60s and the '70s has been searching for an alternative civilization. So I'd like to ask you about that odyssey, the odyssey of a middle-class...

THOMPSON: Lower middle-class.

MOYERS: Lower middle-class, Irish...

THOMPSON: Actually, probably even lower than that.

MOYERS: (Laughs.) A low-class Irish-American...

THOMPSON: Right.

MOYERS: ...who goes from Chicago to California, back to New York, to Ireland, to California, back to New York...

THOMPSON: Canada in between.

MOYERS: Canada in between, and now sits in a small plot of ground in the midst of Manhattan leading a tiny group of people who reject most of the assumptions of the society around them. Fair game?

THOMPSON: Okay.

MOYERS: What are you looking for?

THOMPSON: Well, I think you probably weren't wrong when you said searching for an alternative culture. When you become unsatisfied with the Catholic Church as a young person, you know that if you're going to leave the Church you're risking and wagering your immortal soul, and therefore if you decide to go ahead with it, then taking risks begin to be the nature of growth. And so at each point of your life you hear a voice saying, "Settle in, accept the way things are." You know, it's like the lines of Faust, "Remain a while, You are so sweet." And that's when you sell out to the Devil. And the other voice says, "No, keep pushing on, keep changing the horizons," that none of these places has been the perfect place, that it's almost like the archetype of the search for the Holy Grail, you know, the ultimate integration that brings the fragments together. And so I have been looking. But in all the places the places I've been I've learned, even from the things that I've eventually rejected. I mean, if anything has formed me, it's MIT. And so everything that I am now doing and thinking in the relationship of mysticism to science and politics comes from that experience of being in the Vatican of engineering, at MIT. So that I decided that everyone said that this was it. My boss said, "Look, you've made it, you're a success, this is Cambridge, this is the intellectual capital of the world, why are you restless, stay here, we'll promote you, don't go off to Canada." And I said, "No. This is Ur, and I'm going to go into the land that He will show me." And so I went off to Canada; and at every point of my life someone has said, "Things aren't so bad, relax." And that's just not the way I am. I'm a chaser of horizons. And the chasing of horizons and the living of myth is a delight, you know, that the pursuit and the journey itself is its own reward; that ultimately you realize that the thing you're looking for at the end of the horizon, this Valhalla or whatever, has been with you all along. And

in the actual search for something of ultimate value, the search for the Grail, you discover that the Grail happens when, you know, two or three gather in His name. And so I'm in this sense, now that I'm over forty, a little mellower about the restlessness, but I'm still going to change and move, and Lindisfarne probably won't stay in Manhattan, that we'll try another strategy and we'll keep moving and changing.

MOYERS: The head of your department at MIT said you ruined a brilliant career by departing academia. Did you?

THOMPSON: No. As a matter of fact, I was a very good teacher, a very popular teacher, and I was, you know, by all the standards successful; I was promoted every single year I was there. But in many ways I had more impact on MIT by quitting and writing the chapter on MIT in At the Edge of History than anything I did as a good boy inside. And I think I've done a real service to my colleagues in universities, because the dream -- if you talk to any professor and ask him his dream, it's to quit the university and open up a community of scholars and do things the right way. And each professor has a vision of what the true community of scholars, the noble search for ultimate meaning would really be. And so the fact that I quit the university and did it, and I'm still here five years after doing it is to them a great source of hope. And I know when I've traveled to universities they've taken hope from it. So I've proved that there are other lives for the intellectual than being a civil servant in a bureaucracy.

MOYERS: After you left MIT you went to California. You went for a visit to Esalen -- this time, you said, to find "a charismatic institution that was free of the routines that had entangled the university." But what you found -- and I'm quoting -- "was only another human institution full of flaws and contradictions."

THOMPSON: Right.

MOYERS: Isn't that true of every human institution...

THOMPSON: And especially of Lindisfarne. (Laughs.)

MOYERS: (Laughing.) That it is full of flaws and contradictions?

THOMPSON: Yes; yes. I think that's quite true. But how do you live with flaws? I mean, the fact that I may have limits doesn't stop me, say if I were a dancer, from wanting to dance. So that the human nature is how you play out your limitations against a straining reach for perfection. You know you're never going to achieve perfection; well, if you give up perfection, then you dehumanize yourself because there is more that you can be than what you are. So in order to be more than what you are you always have to hold something else out there. So of course Lindisfarne is full of contradictions; it's no better than Esalen or MIT. But it has taught me and, I think, some of the people with me more than we were learning in other places, and therefore it's a valuable form of human growth.

MOYERS: It's a long journey you've been on. Your father's folks fled the catastrophes of seventeenth-century Ireland to come to the farmlands of Pennsylvania. Your mother's folks fled the catastrophe of nineteenth-century Ireland to come to Chicago. You left Chicago to find freedom from the containment of an urban Irish ghetto. You didn't

find what you were looking for in California; it wasn't home. You went back to Ireland; it wasn't home. Long Island wasn't home. Boston -- Cambridge -- wasn't home. Canada wasn't home. Do you think this scion of the Thompsons...

THOMPSON: (Laughs.)

MOYERS: ...this troubled Irish Catholic refugee, will ever find home?

THOMPSON: I think yes, but you begin to identify with the planet as a whole and with a very small group of people as the most immediate embodiment of it. For me, I was always a loner, and I remember when I had been doing yoga and meditating by myself when I was a professor at York University in Canada, and I came to Lindisfarne and people felt it would be good to meditate together, I was very suspicious of that and I thought, "Ah, that's that groupy, folksy stuff. I'd rather not have that, I'd rather have the purity of the yogi in his cave." And then one morning I discovered that, as we were all in a circle meditating together, that the room changed and -- it's a very fundamentalist Baptist thing, you know, it's sort of like a descent of the spirit -- and all of a sudden I discovered that this was the Grail; that when people come together and create this circle, then the circle really becomes a vehicle where this other Christic energy can descend, and that the search for the Grail in the Himalayas or in Ireland is a futile search, that there is an actuality of experiencing this right where you are, in the here and now. So that I don't have a home in the way that you're identifying it. I'm certainly not a New Yorker, though I'm living in New York.

At another point the identification with the earth as a whole is, I think, something we're all going to have to go through. If we're going to really truly live with one another, then we're not Southerners or Northerners. I mean, look what's going on in the world. The Christians against the Moslems in Lebanon; the Protestants against the Catholics in Ireland; the Pakistani Moslems against the Hindus in India. I mean, tribalism is rearing its ugly head. I mean, that's not the kind of home attachment that we're going to need for our survival. I think more of us are going to have to identify with the planet as a whole, but that's so big and so visionary -- and you're quite right -- that we need something that's concrete and that's specific and that's definite; and that's why having Lindisfarne small, where two or three are gathered in His name, is more important than some fantasy of the white picket fence and the good old girl from back home and security. You have to give up security if you're going to risk evolution and change and growth, and I accept that.

MOYERS: From Lindisfarne in New York City, this has been a conversation with William Irwin Thompson. I'm Bill Moyers.