

Review Essay



Thomas Berry

An Overview of His Work

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Thomas Berry. *The Dream of the Earth*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015. PB, 247 pp. \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1-61902-532-5. First published by Sierra Club Books, 1988. Foreword by Brian Swimme with a new preface by Terry Tempest Williams.

Thomas Berry. *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community*. Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2015. PB, 171 pp. \$16.95. ISBN: 978-1-61902-531-8. First published by Sierra Club Books & University of California Press, 2006.

Thomas Berry. *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community*. Selected with an Introduction by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014. PB, 200 pp. \$22.00. ISBN: 978-1-62698-095-2.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, editors. *Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to Journey of the Universe*. Foreword by Brian Thomas Swimme. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016. PB, \$30.00. ISBN: 978-1-62698-178-2.

Thomas Berry Foundation. *Thomas Berry and the Great Work*: <http://thomasberry.org>.

For three days from November 7–9, 2014, several hundred people gathered at Yale Divinity School to celebrate the hundredth birthday of Thomas Berry at a “Living Cosmology” conference put on in his honor. Organized by the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale, the dozens of papers, panel presentations, conversations and Earth-honoring rituals at the gathering reflected the enormous influence Berry’s teachings and writings have had in the field of religion and ecology, and on the practice of faith communities around the world. Most particularly, Berry’s work articulating “The New Story” now grounds creative and transformative thinking and practices around the globe as humanity moves from the Cenozoic into the newly dawning Ecozoic era. This new cosmology is centered in the twentieth century discovery that the Earth and her inhabitants participate in an evolving universe. First fully developed in Berry’s and Brian Swimme’s magisterial book, *The Universe Story*, more recently Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker present the story of an evolving Universe in the visually stunning Emmy Award winning documentary, *Journey of the Universe* (<http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org>). Several of the conference papers appear in a new collection edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim: *Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to Journey of the Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

Living Cosmology is just one of many tributes to the life and work of Thomas Berry that mark the hundredth anniversary of his birth. Recently Counterpoint Press released stunning new editions of two of his most important works. *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry’s landmark book published originally in 1988 by Sierra Club Books, is where he first laid out “a new intellectual-ethical framework for the human community by positing planetary well-being as the measure of all human activity.”¹ Berry developed this framework further in his 2006 collection of essays, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*. In 2014 Orbis Press published *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community* within its acclaimed Modern Spiritual Masters Series, putting Berry in the company of such spiritual teachers as Thich Nhat Hanh, Oscar Romero, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thomas Merton, the Dalai Lama, and Sister Joan Chittister. Most recently the Thomas Berry Foundation has completed *Thomas Berry and the Great Work* website, designed “to carry out the Great Work of Thomas in enhancing the flourishing of the Earth community” (<http://thomasberry.org>). The combination of these conferences, publications, film and events has made Berry’s work more widely available to academic and lay communities than ever before. With more evidence daily of cumulative human actions producing biological, ecological and geological impacts at a planetary scale, Berry’s work could not be timelier.

1 Quote from the jacket review on the Sierra Club Books edition.

For readers new to Berry's thought, the website provides an accessible introduction to Thomas Berry and his life, as well as the main features of his brilliant and original thought. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, students of Berry and co-directors of the Forum on Religion and Ecology, provide an affectionate biography of Berry through their own years of study and friendship with him.

Born and raised in North Carolina, Berry was the third of thirteen children. He entered the Passionist Order in high school, and following ordination took the name Thomas after Thomas Aquinas, whose writings he long admired. After completing his doctorate at Catholic University with a thesis on Giambattista Vico, Berry began a life-long fascination with the religions of Asia through a year of study in China during the critical year 1948–1949 that saw the triumph of Mao Tse-Tung and the Communist Party. Following teaching positions at Seton Hall University and St. John's University, in 1966 Berry moved to the Theology Department at Fordham University where he founded and directed the History of Religions program (where Tucker and Grim met each other in 1975). They note that, "Thomas was an anomaly in Fordham's Theology Department. He was neither a Jesuit, nor a theologian. Instead, he was trained in Western history and in the world's religions."²

It was this training in history that allowed Berry to discern the broad patterns in human history and the evolution of thought and culture that he would later integrate into the New Story. It also sensitized him to the power of story in human culture. While Berry's graduate students focused on historical and textual developments in the world's religions, he also encouraged them to explore the cosmology of religions as broad orienting stories within cultures. "With a story," Berry would say, "people can endure catastrophe. And with a story they can gather the energies to change their lot." Particularly important to the emerging field of religion and ecology was his growing connection of the study of history and evolutionary cosmology to the environmental issues of the day.

By the 1980s Berry's extension of his historical perspective to the emerging scientific story of the Earth set within an evolving universe coalesced in his designation of the current period of the Earth as the "Ecozoic Era." He recognized that the 65 million year Cenozoic Era that began with the extinction of the dinosaurs and led eventually to the spectacular biodiversity of the Earth from which the human journey emerged, had now ended. Why? Humans have become a planetary force altering the basic biological, geological and atmo-

2 <http://thomasberry.org/life-and-thought/about-thomas-berry/thomas-berry-as-scholar-and-mentor>.

spheric process that had produced and maintained such diversity of life. Berry meditated on what it means that humans are now precipitating the sixth great extinction event in Earth's history. He drew increasingly on the work of Teilhard de Chardin and the emerging, evolving universe, but focused on the intersection of cosmology and ecology.

Berry chose to name this new era the Ecozoic to emphasize what would need to transpire for both humankind and the planet to adapt to a new ecological arrangement where human influence would be ecologically sustainable rather than destructive. Tucker and Grim note, "rather than leaving his audience in despair, he used the term Ecozoic to name that emerging period in which humans would recover their creative orientation to the world."³

For Berry, the key to humans making a transition out of our current pattern of destruction was story. With his historical perspective on the role of world religions, he saw keenly how each religious tradition and culture was rooted in stories that oriented people's lives. But in the Western tradition, beginning with the biblical and Hellenistic traditions and culminating with the Enlightenment grounding for the Industrial Revolution, the dominant modern story has separated humans from the rest of the planet. He suggested that what is needed today is a recovery of the human story as integrated within and inseparable from the Earth's story, which in turn is one facet of the Universe story.

Berry articulated this vision early on in his 1978 essay, "The New Story," which appears as an essay in *The Dream of the Earth*:

It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story. The Old Story sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with a life purpose, energized action. It consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, guided education. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were ... Presently this traditional story is dysfunctional in its larger social dimensions, even though some believe it firmly and act according to its guidance ... A radical reassessment of the human situation is needed, especially concerning those basic values that give to life some satisfactory meaning ... We need a story that will educate us, a story that will heal, guide, and discipline us.

BERRY 2015a: 123–124

3 <http://thomasberry.org/life-and-thought/about-thomas-berry/the-ecozoic-era>.

And we also need a story that inspires. For Berry, the immensity of time and space that emerge from the Universe Story, combined with its ever-expanding creativity, beauty, and emerging novelty did just that. As we gain deeper knowledge of and intimacy with the story of the Universe, we recognize with Berry that “the universe, by definition, is a single gorgeous celebratory event” in which we participate (Berry 2015a: 5).

I first met Thomas Berry in 1989 when I was studying at Union Seminary in New York. Having come to theology by way of geology, I had started calling myself a “geologian,” unaware that Berry had coined this term several years earlier to see himself as “a human being who emerged out of eons of Earth’s geological and biological evolution and was now reflecting on our world” (thomasberry.org). I was struggling to make sense of the *Genesis* creation accounts’ themes of human dominion and stewardship in light of my geological understandings of Earth’s origins and my concerns for how dominion interpreted as domination had contributed to massive ecological degradation. Berry’s response to my questions startled me and reset my biblical hermeneutic. He said, “The way I read *Genesis*, the creation story in *Genesis* 1 is the story of the victory of the Heavenly Father God over the Mother Earth God. The first commandment, therefore, is “Thou shalt have no Mother Earth God.’”

After this conversation I picked up Berry’s *The Dream of the Earth*, published the year before in 1988. It excited and provoked me with the originality of its viewpoint. As a student of geology, I was well versed in the notions of deep time and the geological story of the Earth’s formation, but like most in the West, I had not integrated this in any meaningful way with the human story, and in particular with the *theological* stories I was studying as a seminarian. I remember trembling with excitement at Berry’s notion that humans are that part of the Universe that can now reflect back on itself—as far as we know, a unique feature of the Universe that has taken billions of years to evolve. The following Spring I put together a chapel service on “liberation geology,” looking at the rocks that make up the Union quad and chapel for the “creation stories” they tell, and asking that we re-imagine the Earth’s story as central to the sacred stories we tell. Citing Berry, I wrote:

Yet the earth—and her rocks—provides us with the resources and insights on how to reconnect to the earth as sacred story. Thomas Berry maintains that we need to begin not from the point of stewardship and dominion over the earth, but from *communion with* the earth, recognizing that we are but one part of nature, and begin to reflect again on what is our appropriate “niche” within nature. This insight of our connectedness—ashes to ashes, dust to dust—is a source of humility; for me it is also a deep

joy. I find it tremendously exciting to know that all things are connected—not only at this moment, but through all of time. Look around you. Everything you can see or touch, even the air we breathe, comes from rocks. What does it mean that you and I have within us pieces of dinosaurs that lived 120 million years ago, pieces of trees that grew 300 million years ago, pieces of volcanoes that erupted two billion years ago? Sometimes I look at my body and I am struck silent in awe by the assemblage of time and history it represents—oh, the stories these molecules could tell!

And yet, frankly, as a young seminarian, much of my first encounter with Berry in *The Dream of the Universe* puzzled me. It was so unlike my work in Christian ethics, systematic theology and biblical studies, that it was difficult to figure out how to integrate it into my academic framework. Years later, I realized that that was the problem: Berry's project challenges the core of the traditional theological and academic frameworks that I had inherited and worked within. I re-read with appreciation Brian Swimme's Foreword to *Dream of the Universe*: "I am trying to answer a question from an imaginary reader who picks up this book and asks, perhaps in confusion, perhaps in delight: 'What is this?'" (Berry 2015a: vii). Swimme's answer is to look to the story of the Earth itself to provide insight into Berry's essays. He asks the reader to imagine the Earth 600 million years ago, already teeming with life for billions of years, yet at that moment, for the first time, the eye appears:

We contemporary humans identify so strongly with our visual elements of consciousness that we have some initial difficulty conceiving of a time when life proceeded without any eyes at all, but so it did. And there were great struggles, magnificent strategies, and soaring feelings, all within a blind world. And nowhere was there a vision of waterfalls, nowhere the experience of the blue sky, or the desert colors awaking in their first rain.

Swimme goes on to note, "These essays of Thomas Berry are like the invention of the eye with which to see the Earth. They are the remodeling of the ear with which to hear the Earth" (Berry 2015a: vii). If we had been able to really *see* and *hear* the incredible magnificence of the Earth community of which we are a part, "we would not carry out this assault on the Earth. To the question, 'Why do we act so foolishly?' he answers, 'because we are blind and deaf.'"

The full reality of the Earth and Universe has escaped the narrow spectrum of sensitivity in our industrial eyes and ears. *These essays are the*

antidote; once assimilated they begin to rework one's visual, aural, intellectual, imaginative, emotional and spiritual orientation in the world. They are the genetic-cultural materials with which to create a new eye and ear.

BERRY 2015a: viii; emphasis added

To describe this more academically, what Berry's essays do is to create a new hermeneutic—a new interpretive filter through which to see and experience the world. They challenge to the core the dominant anthropocentric story and perspective of the West, now universalized through globalization that separates humans from and makes us superior to the rest of the planet. While at some level I had known this *geologically* prior to encountering Berry, it had not grasped me *existentially*. Once Berry's perspective on the Universe Story grasps one existentially and hermeneutically, there is no going back: one literally and figuratively sees the world and our place in it differently.

And that makes all the difference. In her eloquent preface to the new edition of *The Dream of the Earth*, Terry Tempest Williams describes this difference as follows: "*The Dream of the Earth* is a testament to paying attention. And never have we needed this new edition more than we do now as we move forward in the twenty-first century as part of the Earth Community ... I am paying attention" (Berry 2015a: ii).

Berry set *The Dream of the Earth* within the current context of a global ecological crisis. He observed that, how people tell the story of the universe and the human role within it serves as their primary way of orienting themselves. Yet,

... the deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation. Such, it seems to me, is the situation we must deal with in this late twentieth century. We are confused at present because our historical situation has changed so profoundly. Our story, too, has changed. We no longer know its meaning or how to benefit from its guidance.

BERRY 2015a: xi

The problems we encounter today are an order of magnitude more serious than that encountered by any previous peoples facing cultural breakdown, because they are planetary in scale. We have changed not simply how human society functions; "we have changed the topography and even the geological structure of the planet, structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions and even billions of years to bring into existence" (Berry 2015a: xiii). Yet our

human consciousness has been shaped by an earlier time and context, and still has not assimilated the magnitude of these changes for the Earth and our place in it.

The other factor that makes our current context qualitatively different than any time before, is that for the first time in human history, science has made available to us a comprehensive understanding of the Earth's history, set within the history of a transforming, evolving universe. The implications of this for the new story we must not only tell, but also assimilate into who we are and all that we do are staggering.

In her introduction to the new edition of *The Dream of the Earth*, Terry Tempest Williams summarizes Berry's seminal synthesis aptly:

We have science to thank for empirical knowledge.

We have religion to thank for offering us ways of understanding the ineffable.

But it will be our spiritual hunger for a larger story that moves us beyond both science and religion to the place of true cosmic insight.

What makes Thomas Berry so unique and essential to the twenty-first century and where we now find ourselves is that he merges the great disciplines of science, philosophy, and religion into a cosmology of peace—not the peace that is the cessation of war, but the peace that allows us to engage in an empathy with all life in all places for all time. This is “The Dream of the Earth” and it becomes sacred text, both a map and a compass in new territory.

We have never been here before.

BERRY 2015a: iii

Mary Evelyn Tucker argues, “Berry’s pathbreaking contribution in *The Dream of the Earth* is to suggest that we are between stories—namely, between a scientific description of evolution and a Biblical account of creation” (Berry 2015b: 10). This has continued the unfortunate Enlightenment rift between religion and science that deepened with Charles Darwin’s 1859 publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Yet as Williams notes, “We can dream the world differently. This is the journey we must undertake now. It can no longer be “the hero’s journey” but the collective journey of each of us, together” (Berry 2015a: v).

With his training in world religions, Berry was aware of how difficult it will be for religious traditions to heal this rift, reworking their origin stories and

narratives to cohere with the emerging Universe Story.⁴ This is one of the significant contributions he made in *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*. In *Evening Thoughts* (my personal favorite of Berry's several books), we see Berry applying his mature thinking to a range of contemporary issues and problems, from nationalism and jurisprudence to the petrochemical industry and global warming. Particularly poignant is the juxtaposition of his early essays, "The Place of the Human" and "Earth as Sacred Community" with "Loneliness and Presence" where he cited the famous speech attributed to Chief Seattle that when the last animals have perished, humans will die of loneliness. He related the history of many human communities' intimate relationships with animals, noting "such incidents as these remind us that the universe is composed of subjects to be communed with, not of objects to be exploited" (Berry 2015b: 38). This insight connects to Berry's broader claim that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" (Berry 2015b: 17). Hence the crisis of species extinction and biodiversity loss is not only a crisis of human material survival on a planet of diminished ecological resilience, but also an existential crisis of loneliness faced with the loss of our fellow Earth companions. Yet, guiding biblical narratives of dominion and subduing Earth on the one hand, and being redeemed off of Earth and away from our Earth companions on the other, only exacerbate this crisis.

Instead we need to integrate ourselves into a new orienting story to make possible an Ecozoic era of mutual flourishing. As Berry argued,

What is available to us is the emerging Ecozoic era, a period of the integral Earth community when humans become present to the powers of the Earth in a mutually enhancing manner. For humans to do this will require that we appreciate and honor the principle that the Earth is primary and that humans are derivative. In our economics, in our healing, in our legal and political practices, and in our religious sensitivities, we need to recognize the primacy of the Earth community. This interacting community

4 Space limitations in this review essay preclude me from further discussing the contents of *Living Cosmology: Christian Responses to Journey of the Universe* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016). It is an excellent example, however, of how many theologians and practitioners of Christianity are responding to Berry's thought and reworking Christian thinking, practices and theology in response. Another recent and important writing where echoes of Berry's thought can be found is the recent papal encyclical from Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*.

has remarkable capacities for self-renewal, but within limits. Already we have strained these limits.

BERRY 2015b: 97

Berry recognized that the scientific story of the universe could be challenging to traditional religious perspectives and societies, particularly when presented as simply a sequence of random events divorced from human meaning and purpose. Hence, the way the story is told is critical: “The burden of Western civilization is to integrate the creative aspects of this story and to develop it as our central orientation for the future course of the human venture” (Berry 2015b: 70). To do so, in one of the most insightful essays in *Evening Thoughts*, “Creative Continuity”, Berry recommended six principles or steps:

1. The universe must be understood as “the primary revelation of the divine, the primary scripture, the primary locus of divine-human communion.”
2. We must understand the unity of the universe as “an interacting community throughout its full extent in space and development in time.” Hence the harm or benefit of any part of Earth is experienced throughout the entire planet.
3. We humans need to see ourselves “as that being in whom the universe and especially the planet Earth becomes conscious of itself in a special mode of reflective self-awareness” as the most recent achievement of the evolutionary journey of the universe itself.
4. Hence we now see the Earth as “a self-emergent, self-educating, self-nourishing, self-governing, self-healing community;” any particular human activity must take its norm from the principles governing the total community of life.
5. Genetic coding expresses the creative genius of earlier life processes of the Earth; it guides the unfolding of the life process in the individual and the species. “Understanding creativity and freedom at this level is wonderfully instructive for appreciating expressions of freedom and creativity in the later phases of human development.”
6. The uniqueness of the human is in combining our genetic coding with cultural development: “The entire complex of human culture is genetically coded and further developed by additional cultural codings, which are the supreme expression of human genius” (Berry 2015b: 70–72).

Particularly insightful in this essay in *Evening Thoughts* is Berry’s historical perspective on the evolution of human cultures through four “macrophase

expressions” he identified as the tribal-shamanic phase; the classical religious-cultural phase; the scientific-technological-industrial phase; and the now the emerging ecological phase. Each of these phases has been oriented and grounded by a different story of Human-Earth-Cosmos relations, with the current scientific-technological-industrial phase informed by an anthropocentric arrogance with disastrous results. The emerging ecological phase requires a new story consistent with the ecological constraints of the planet (Berry 2015b: 70-72-74).

Few people are as qualified as his former students Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim to perform the Herculean task of sorting through all his writings and synthesizing the most important excerpts from them in one, small and accessible volume. Yet that is precisely what they have done in *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community*. In less than 200 pages, they have sifted through and selected gem after gem to illuminate Berry’s thought around the central themes of his life work. The chapter headings themselves provide an overview of the key themes in Berry, with the relevant nuances developed within each: 1: The Story of the Universe; 2: Spirituality of Earth; 3: Rejoining the Earth Community; 4: The Universe as Cosmic Liturgy; 5: Religions Awaken to the Universe; 6: Intercommunion of World Religions; 7: The Challenge to Christianity; 8: Ecozoic Era; 9: Moments of Grace; 10: The Role of the Human; 11: Alienation and Renewal; 12: Musings over a Life.

The spirit, depth and range of *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community* are captured well by two of the book’s reviewers. Mary E. Hunt, co-director of the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual, says of this book, “Thomas Berry offers big picture thinking, big-hearted love, and big screen imagination, both scientific and religious, about how the cosmos can thrive.” Larry Rasmussen, Reinhold Niebuhr Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Union Theological Seminary adds, “Nowhere else do we have the full scope of Thomas Berry’s writings. Consequently nowhere else do we have the full range of his prophetic insight. Put this book in your library and absorb it, page by page and piece by piece.”⁵

Thomas Berry invited all to discover and enter into the beauty and mystery of the Universe, as we know it most intimately through our Earth home. Perhaps this spirit and the lyricism of Berry’s writing is best captured in the wedding blessing he wrote for Paul Winter and Chez Liley, and included in the *Selected Writings*:

5 From the jacket of *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community*.

An Appalachian Wedding

Look up at the sky
 the heavens so blue
 the sun so radiant
 the clouds so playful
 the soaring raptors
 woodland creatures
 meadows in bloom
 rivers singing their
 way to the sea
 wolfsong on the land
 whalesong in the sea
 celebration everywhere
 wild, riotous
 immense as a monsoon
 lifting an ocean of joy
 then spilling down over
 the Appalachian landscape
 drenching us all
 in a deluge of delight
 as we open our arms and
 rush toward each other
 all of us moved by that vast
 compassionate curve
 that brings all things together
 in intimate celebration
 celebration that is
 the universe itself.

BERRY 2016: 197

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