

Book Review



Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, *Thomas Berry: A Biography*.
New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. (PB) 360 pp. \$22.00. ISBN 978-0-231-17698-9.

This biography of Thomas Berry, appearing ten years after his passing, has been awaited by many. It fulfils expectations and even exceeds them. As the book traces the arc of his life it integrates a vivid account of his personal journey with an encompassing, thoroughly researched and insightful intellectual history. The seamless presentation of many different aspects of Thomas's life demonstrates the remarkable teamwork of the three co-authors: Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, his students and co-founders and co-directors of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, and Andrew Angyal, Professor Emeritus of English and Environmental Studies at Elon University. For those familiar with the work of Thomas Berry, this book will serve as an indispensable reference which is likely to remain definitive for the foreseeable future. For those starting to learn about him, it will be a wonderfully informative and inspiring introduction to this uniquely creative scholar and teacher.

Thomas Berry is regarded as a shifter of paradigms, a thinker who offers a new and viable worldview when such a vision is desperately needed. The philosopher Joseph Prabhu has said, "Thomas Berry is one of the great prophets of our time ... in urging us to what he called The Great Work—the transformation of our hitherto mistaken goals and priorities as a human species alienated from the very universe that sustains us, to forging a new, mutually-enhancing partnership with the Earth" ("Memorial Tribute by Joseph Prabhu," <https://thomasberry.org/life-and-thought/berry-award-and-memorial-service/tribute-s-photos-and-obituaries-1>). More than forty years ago Thomas committed himself to raising consciousness of the environmental crisis to a new level, so that its actuality as a crisis and as a turning point in the self-concept of the human could both be grasped. He articulated an urgent, compelling sense that fundamental value—what is fully "life-giving"—is located in the natural world,

stating irrefutably that the human species neither exists nor can be understood apart from Earth and the universe. He called for an end to delusions of technological mastery that are destroying the life-systems of Earth and for “reinventing the human at the species level” with the birth of the Ecozoic Era (Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, 199).

Thomas Berry was born in 1914 in Greensboro, North Carolina, and raised in a large Catholic family. He was troubled by the environmental damage being wrought by early phases of the industrialization of the South. From childhood on he experienced the Sacred and the numinous in nature, and has said, “This presence to the natural world has been the saving dimension of my life” (18). Discerning a vocation to religious life, he entered the Passionist Congregation as a seminarian in 1933. The biography describes the intensity, breadth and rigor of his studies of Western philosophy, theology, other subjects and eventually Chinese classics and the Upanishads. In the monastery he was also formed by the cycle of prayer corresponding to the times of night and day and the seasons of the year, and “the age-old effort of humans to bring human life into accord with the great liturgy of the universe. That the universe itself was the primary liturgy just as it was the primary scripture, I never doubted” (36).

He was ordained as a Passionist priest in 1942 and completed his doctorate at Catholic University in 1948. Always seeking an ever more comprehensive context for pondering the meaning of the human condition, he shifted from philosophy and theology to history, wanting to enlarge the narrative of humankind to a world synthesis. After defending his dissertation on Giambattista Vico, he immediately set out for China as part of a Passionist mission. On the boat across the Pacific he met William Theodore de Bary, who became a lifelong friend as well as a leading scholar of Confucianism in the West. While posted to Germany as an Army chaplain in 1951–1954, Thomas continued historical studies in a European setting. After he returned to the United States, his religious order was reluctant to allow him to teach, but after a period of tension he joined the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at Seton Hall University, and then the Institute for Asian Studies at St. John’s University.

In 1966 Thomas became a professor at Fordham University, where he established the program in History of Religions and advocated in his essays for a “pluralist world humanism” (Berry, “Oriental Philosophy and World Humanism,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1.1 [February 1961]: 32). He held that “A total human experience of reality belongs to no one society but to the world community itself” and that a world philosophy must be founded on knowledge of all traditions, including not only the West and Asia, but also Indigenous cultures and natural science (ibid., 25–26). Fordham was already a center for study of the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which provided a bridge between

religion and science and its views of evolution. In 1970 Thomas founded the Riverdale Center for Religious Research in a house overlooking the Hudson River, where he lived for 25 years until retiring, had his extensive library and countless lectures, seminars, conferences and other programs were held.

His conviction now became clear that the central ethical and spiritual issue of our time is “human-Earth relations” (Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, 119). In 1978 he published his now well-known essay “The New Story,” proposing that the narrative context for human life in all its dimensions and practices must be the cosmic-Earth journey. As he put it one year later, “Today we are in a new position where we can appreciate the historical and the cosmic as a single process” (Berry, “The Spirituality of the Earth” (1979), in *The Sacred Universe*, edited and with a Foreword by Mary Evelyn Tucker [New York: Columbia University Press, 2009], 75).

While natural science had not inquired into interiority and the numinous, traditional religions had not incorporated the findings of science that the universe and life on Earth are a story unfolding over vast periods of time. He developed this perspective in the years to come, notably collaborating with physicist Brian Thomas Swimme, with whom he wrote *The Universe Story*. Its influence became a catalyst for a cosmological turn in ecotheology and ethics. This perspective also nourishes spirituality and enhances ecojustice; in an integral approach, the human and nature are taken together as one indivisible reality and value. This approach is expressed today, one may argue, in such a major work as the encyclical of Pope Francis *Laudato Si'* and its teaching of integral ecology.

An important achievement of this book is its closing four chapters, which come after the end of the biography as such. They give a detailed exposition and reflective interpretation of the four main sources for Thomas's work: “Narratives of Time,” Teilhard, Confucianism, and Indigenous traditions, mainly Native American. No comparably rich, complete, and perceptive overview of Thomas's thought is to my knowledge available anywhere else. Overall, *Thomas Berry: A Biography* is most welcome and indeed necessary for all with an interest in religion and ecology. It also makes abundantly evident the reasons for Thomas's wide and still-growing influence.

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