

THOMAS BERRY: A BIOGRAPHY

by

Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal
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Review by Jules Cashford

Thomas Berry (1914-2009) was one of those rare and wonderful people who completely change the vision of their time.

Two people whose lives he changed – Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim – have joined up with Andrew Angyal - Professor Emeritus of English and Environmental Studies at Elon University - to create a biography of Thomas Berry, which offers not only a mesmerising insight into the essence of Thomas's own story, but also an outstanding example of how to write about a life.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim had many relationships with Thomas: they were his devoted and lifelong students, they edited his books, taught his philosophy, and cared for him when he finally retired – sharing with him the loss of his library and organizing where his precious books could find another home – and they now act as his literary executors and managing trustees of the Thomas Berry Foundation. They teach at Yale Divinity School, directing the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, and also at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. With Brian Thomas Swimme, they have made a DVD *Journey of the Universe*.

What is so inspiring about this biography is that it shows us Thomas's personal story continually evolving - deepening and expanding with each new endeavour - until it becomes at one with the evolving Story of the Universe. As they write: 'Thomas had to transform his identity at every stage of his life. He moved gradually but steadily from his small self to his great self...always moving toward becoming a cosmic person.' (pp. 262-3) And, as he would often say with a twinkle in his spell-binding talks, this was all because he fell in love with a meadow: 'good is what is good for the meadow.'

Thomas was born in Greensboro, North Carolina, and entered a monastery of the Passionist Order where he was later ordained. and before long opened out his studies of theology into a study of history, which in turn soon became not just Western history but also Asian history and the history of Indigenous Peoples. Whatever was missing from a particular dimension of thought, he sought to explore and include, and so to reach for a wider, more comprehensive, whole.

To go beyond American culture he went to study in China and then served with the army in Europe, and was hoping to teach at university when he returned. His passionate enthusiasm to transcend boundaries was not without its difficulties in his relation to his Church: he was for a while forbidden to teach, and was not allowed to go to Japan to study their religion to complete his studies in China. But his firm, courteous (and undoubtedly unflinching) persistence won through eventually. He taught at St. John's University, and then at Fordham

University where in 1970 he initiated a unique program in History of Religions, and finally achieved an integration of his brilliant scholarship with his cosmological vision: This was the founding of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research. As his biographers say: ‘Here he placed human and Earth history within a universe story.’ It was during this time that he was also President of the American Teilhard de Chardin Association.

The Riverdale Center was where he wrote his later monumental books: *The Dream of the Earth* (1988); *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era - A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (written with Brian Swimme); *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (1999); *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community* (1999); *The Sacred Universe* (2009); *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* (2009).

Of special interest for readers of *Resurgence* may be his talk given as the 23rd Annual E.F. Schumacher Lectures, called *Every Being has Rights*, where he explored the idea that ‘the natural rights of natural beings come from the same source as human rights: from the universe that brought us, that brought all things, into being... the right to be, the right to habitat, and the right to fulfill one’s role in the great community of existence’ (further developed in *Evening Thoughts*). It followed from this that existing human-oriented laws had to be transformed to include the whole Earth Community of which humans are only a part. He called this Earth Jurisprudence. By now he was calling himself not a Theologian, but a Geologian, pointing to the ‘grand liturgy of the universe’ as sacred in itself, beyond any and all categories of faith. His poems, which he recited out of doors with upraised arms, he would dedicate to ‘All the Children of the Universe.’

This is the first biography of Thomas Berry, and will presumably be the first of many, but it is hard to believe that there will ever be another one quite like it – so full of understanding and love. Anyone who knew Thomas would instantly recognize him, and delight in the photos of his face smiling through the pages. Quite frankly, it is the best biography I have ever read.