THOMAS BERRY
By Michael Colebrook

Of all the writers and thinkers to have shaped what we now call GreenSpirit (see GreenSpirit where this article was first published), by far the most influential was Thomas Berry.

Thomas Berry, C.P. (November 9, 1914 – June 1, 2009) was a Catholic priest of the Passionist order, cultural historian and ecotheologian (although cosmologist and geologian—or “Earth scholar”—were his preferred descriptors).

Among advocates of deep ecology and “ecosophistry” he is famous for proposing that a deep understanding of the history and functioning of the evolving universe is a necessary inspiration and guide for our own effective functioning as individuals and as a species. He is considered a leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin, as demonstrated in the Introduction to his book, The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth. Author Michael Colebrook describes two key elements in Thomas Berry’s thinking: “Firstly, the primary status of the universe. The universe is, ‘the only self-referential reality in the phenomenal world. It is the only text without context. Everything else has to be seen in the context of the universe.’ The second element is the significance of story, and in particular the universe as story. ‘The universe story is the quintessence of reality. We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. The winds tell the story, literally, not just imaginatively. The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything.’”

Here is what Michael Colebrook had to say about Thomas Berry in a presentation to a seminar held at the College of St Mark & St John, Plymouth, England, February 2001.

Let me start with a story:

One day in the early months of 1954, the fourteen-year-old Jean Houston was running along a street in New York when she ran into a frail old man. They picked themselves up and he asked her where she was going. She replied that she was going to take her dog for a walk in Central Park. ‘I will go with you’ he said, and after that, several times a week for about a year Jean and the old man, whom she called Mr. Tayer, would meet and walk together in Central Park.

Jean continues the story:
Old Mr. Tayer was truly diaphanous to every moment, and being with him was like being in attendance at God’s own party, a continuous celebration of life and its mysteries. But mostly Mr. Tayer was so full of vital sap and juice that he seemed to flow with everything. Always he saw the interconnections between things—the way that everything in the universe, from fox terriers to tree bark to somebody’s red hat to the mind of God, was related to everything else and was very, very good. He wasn’t merely a great appreciator, engaged by all his senses. He was truly penetrated by the reality that was yearning for him as much as he was yearning for it. He talked to the trees, to the wind, to the rocks as dear friends, as beloved even. “Ah, my friend, the mica schist layer, do you remember when . . .” And I would swear that the mica schist would begin to glitter back. I mean, mica schist will do that, but on a cloudy day? Everything was treated as personal, as sentient, as “thou” And everything that was thou was ensouled with being, and it thou-ed back to him. So when I walked with him, I felt as though a spotlight was following us, bringing radiance and light everywhere. And I was constantly seized by astonishment in the presence of this infinitely beautiful man, who radiated such sweetness, such kindness . . . .

The last time that I ever saw him was the Thursday before Easter Sunday, 1955. I brought him the shell of a snail. “Ah, escargot,” he exclaimed and then proceeded to wax ecstatic for the better part of an hour. Snail shells, and galaxies, and the convolutions in the brain, the whorl of flowers and the meanderings of rivers were taken up into a great hymn to the spiraling evolution of spirit and matter.

Several years later someone showed Jean Houston a copy of The Phenomenon of Man, and looking at the jacket she recognised the face and realised that old Mr. Tayer was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who had died just a few days after their last meeting.

If there is one man who has inherited the mantle of Teilhard de Chardin, it is Thomas Berry. A couple of years ago I asked Ursula King, who has written extensively about Teilhard, what she thought about Thomas Berry. She simply replied, ‘They even look alike,’ which they do.

Thomas Berry was born in 1914 in North Carolina, USA, one of a large family of 13 children. He was ordained a Passionist priest in 1942, and studied history at the Catholic University of America. His specialty was the cultural history of China and India. He has taught at a number of American Universities and in 1970 he founded the Centre for Religious Research at Riverdale, New York which has been his base ever since. In addition to his Asian studies he has also looked at the Native American cultures. As he has written, “I wished to get beyond the classical civilisations, back into the earlier Shamanic period of the human community. The more I gave to the study of the human venture, the more clearly I saw the need to go back into the dynamics of life itself. I was progressively led back to what I call the study of the Earth community, including its geological and biological as well as its human components. I call myself a geologian.”
Thomas Berry received his initiation as a geologist in a childhood encounter with a meadow. His family were moving into a new house on the edge of town:

The house, not yet finished, was situated on a slight incline. Down below was a small creek and there across the creek was a meadow. It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene.

The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. It was not something conscious that happened just then. I went on about my life as any young person might do.

Perhaps it was not simply this moment that made such a deep impression upon me. Perhaps it was a sensitivity that was developed throughout my childhood. Yet as the years pass this moment returns to me, and whenever I think about my basic life attitude and the whole trend of my mind and the causes to which I have given my efforts, I seem to come back to this moment and the impact it has had on my feeling for what is real and worthwhile in life.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion.

I have heard Tom Berry talk about his meadow and even well into his eighties he speaks as if the event happened just yesterday. He has elaborated his feelings about the meadow into a set of 12 principles “For Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe process.”¹ The first of these principles states: “The universe, the solar system, and planet earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.”

This represents what I believe are two key elements in Tom Berry’s thinking. Firstly, the primary status of the universe. The universe is, “the only self-referential reality in the phenomenal world. It is the only text without context. Everything else has to be seen in the

¹Editor’s Note: A copy of these 12 principles are available here. They are the 12 understandings that appeared as an appendix to Anne Lonergan and Carol Richards, eds., Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology (Mystic, CT: 23rd Publications, 1990), and is the preferred list for CES. That list of principles differs from the 12 principles that are an appendix to Thomas Berry, Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community, ed., Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006).
context of the universe.” The second element is the significance of story, and in particular the universe as story. ‘The universe story is the quintessence of reality. We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. The winds tell the story, literally, not just imaginatively. The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything.”

Here, Tom Berry displays his prime inheritance from Teilhard de Chardin who claimed that, “We do not live in a world which can be viewed as a complete and coherent mechanism, we live in a world that is still being created, still creating itself. And, by its very nature it doesn’t know precisely where it is going, it does not follow a determined path. In any truly creative activity the outcome is unpredictable and uncertain.” The story is not finished, it is still being written, by the birds and the trees and the wind and ourselves and none of us knows for certain what will happen next.

On one of the two unforgettable occasions when I met Tom Berry I put to him the problem of the unpredictability of the future, I quoted Whitehead, that “it is the business of the future to be dangerous” and I asked whether it was possible to reassure those who find this prospect frightening and disturbing. He replied without hesitation, “Tell them the story”—by which he meant the story of the universe. This story, at least as told by Brian Swimme and Tom Berry in their superb book, *The Universe Story*, is marvelous and beautiful and the element of reassurance lies in the probability that it will continue to be so. Although the future is unpredictable, when we look back at the story so far, there is a clear impression of inevitability. That what has happened had to happen somewhere, somewhere. Also the story so far covers a period of somewhere around 14 thousand million years and there is every prospect of it continuing for thousands of millions of years to come. This is all the reassurance that we should seek and can expect in a world that is still creating itself. We have the assurance that the universe has come from somewhere and is almost certainly going somewhere, even if the ‘where’ is unknowable.

Whitehead is clearly a major influence on Berry although he claims that of the two Teilhard was the more important, “Whitehead, unlike Teilhard, did not have a clear idea of realistic historical time. He understood process time . . . . He understood the universe as an organism, as holistic, as integral, as interacting, as a process, but he did not have it going anywhere. The story is missing in Whitehead. Teilhard had the story.” I think Berry is being rather hard on Whitehead who, I suggest, certainly believed that his processes were going somewhere. In *Science in the Modern World* he talks of evolution as, “the development of enduring harmonies of enduring shapes of value, which merge into higher attainments of things beyond themselves. Aesthetic attainment is interwoven in the texture of realisation.” And

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again, “All organisms modify their environment. Those organisms are successful which modify their environments so as to assist each other. This law is exemplified in nature on a vast scale.” This sounds to me very like a succinct version of Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, but anticipating it by about 60 years.

As far as I know neither Whitehead nor Teilhard de Chardin were aware of each other’s existence and yet they have so much in common. In Tom Berry they have come together and we can be grateful for this, especially as Berry’s writing is a lot easier to understand than that of either Whitehead or Teilhard.

In spite of Teilhard’s ecological sensibility and his awareness of the connectedness of all things, he was not completely able to transcend the anthropocentrism of his theological background. In an essay he suggested that “Llboriously, through and thanks to the activity of mankind, the new Earth is being formed and purified and is taking on definition and clarity.’ And elsewhere, “should the planet become uninhabitable before mankind has reached maturity; . . . then, there can be no doubt that it would mean the failure of life on Earth.” Teilhard accepted the Enlightenment idea of human progress; he saw the future of evolution in very human centred terms as leading toward unitary Mind through the development of a collective global consciousness. Tom Berry, on the other hand, sees the necessity of letting his meadow be itself, in its own ways and in its own time. As he has said on numerous occasions, the wellbeing of Earth is primary, the wellbeing of humanity is derivative and we can ensure the wellbeing of Earth only by letting it be. We cannot care for the Earth, because we don’t know how. In Tom Berry’s universe, the idea of stewardship betrays a level of presumption amounting to the ultimate sin of hubris.

Another of Berry’s legacies from Teilhard, which he acknowledges, is the realisation that the universe, from the beginning, has a spiritual dimension and that the universe story is a sacred story. Berry seldom speaks of God, he thinks that the word has been overused. But he claims that, “Peoples generally experience an awesome, stupendous presence that cannot be expressed adequately in human words . . . people often dance this experience, they express it in music, in art, in the presence of beauty throughout the whole of daily life, in the laughter of children, in the taste of bread, in the sweetness of an apple. At every moment we are experiencing the overwhelming mystery of existence. It is that simple but that ineffable.” Elsewhere he writes, “Saint Augustine says that God is more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. God is more intimate to everything. Every existence is a mode of divine presence. There is indeed a difference, a distinction, but if there were a difference in the sense of separation, the created world would not be . . . . There is always a mystery of things.”

In her latest book Sacred Gaia, AnnePrimavesi says that the confines within which we place and then describe God are all on our side of the horizon. She speaks of the need to “give God room: room to be God of the whole Earth system: enchanting and terrible, giver of life and death.” This is the God of the sacred story of the universe and its emergent unfolding over a period of some fourteen thousand million years. But, as Tom Berry emphasises, the universe
is not a puppet show, it is a reality, functioning from within its own spontaneity. It is so remarkable and so stupendous to come to understand this process. The divine enables the universe to function in this remarkable way. There is a capacity of self-articulation inherent in the universe, and the more we know about that, the more clear it is that we will gain a totally different sense of the universe than we had previously, and a different sense of how the divine functions in relation to the universe.

Thomas Berry has a lot to say about wildness. In his latest book, *The Great Work*, he has a chapter titled “The Wild and the Sacred.” These are not, as one might expect, treated as antithetical elements. Rather they are treated as identities. He quotes Thoreau, “In Wildness is the Preservation of the World.” And he goes on to claim that in saying this Thoreau made a statement of unsurpassed significance in human affairs. I know of no more comprehensive critique of civilisation, this immense effort that has been made over these past ten thousand years to bring the natural world under human control. . . . This we need to know: how to participate creatively in the wildness of the world about us. For it is out of the wild depths of the universe and of our being that the greater visions must come.

What a contrast with the efforts we are making to create comfortable and secure lives for ourselves! What a contrast with the whole thrust of the Biblical vision of the creative process which focuses on the emergence of order and intelligibility!

There is a delightful short story by Stephen Dunstone called “God’s First Draft,” which I think captures the idea of wildness. After three attempts to create a perfect world, all of which manifestly failed, God tried the idea of the level playing field . . . .

Time for the fourth attempt! Let there be light and – no hills or streams or woods or up or down, and let there be five hundred identical men and five hundred identical women; no birds or animals or insects in case they upset the balance, and no fish and no marrows or parsnips or any kind of vegetable, because there must be no hunger or cold or fear or any kind of desire [there]. And God looked at his creation; his blameless creatures who stood without blemish, motionless, on this flat featureless world, untouched by any breath of wind: Changeless – eternal. He looked at this world and saw that it was perfect. He sat in his heaven in contemplation of perfection; and no seed of discontent stirred in the timeless silence. No cries of anger or pain or joy pierced the harmony of stillness. He looked and looked, and watched and waited. But nothing came to disturb the world. It was indeed perfect, and would last forever. And God contemplated eternity. And he said to himself, “God, this is boring.” And it’s just as well that he did, because if he hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here today. With a contemptuous click of his fingers he consigned the perfect world to eternal non-existence. Gone. And not a trace of remorse or regret did he feel.
And God said ‘let there be light and dark and sun and moon and stars and dry land and hills and valleys and woods and streams and all manner of plants and insects and birds and animals and people; and let them fear and fight and feel pain but let them also feel desire and joy and love. Let the wind carry the sound of their suffering but let it carry the sound of their laughter too. Let them grow old but let them give birth, let them toil but let them dance, let there be sorrow but let there be ecstasy; let them work on the world, but let the world work on them. Let what may happen, happen. But above all let them learn from their mistakes.

Tom Berry seldom engages in theological discourse. However there is one book *Befriending the Earth*, which takes the form of a dialogue with a Jesuit, Thomas Clarke, in which he does address the main themes of Christianity. Although he does his best to voice his concerns as gently as he can, it is clear that his main criticism of mainstream Christianity is that it has not taken on board, or at least has not grasped the full implications of the concept of the time-developmental aspect of the universe. “That is why Christians are alienated people in their relationship to the present world. We cannot accept the story of an evolutionary universe as our sacred story. . . . This is possibly the most significant change in human consciousness since the beginning of human consciousness, the change in perception of the world as cosmos to its perception as cosmogenesis, from being to becoming.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson was among the first people to realise the fundamental significance of evolutionary theory, and this was before Darwin. In his essay on Nature published in 1844 he claimed that “we knew nothing properly for lack of perspective. And he asks, ‘Why should we not have a religion by revelation to us, and not of tradition?’”

Tom Berry issues the same challenge today. “We have to make a shift in our religious understanding. We cannot start with the written scriptures. . . . Why are we not getting our religious insight from our experience of the trees, our experience of the mountains, our experience of the rivers, of the sea and the winds? Why are we not responding religiously to these realities?” He sets the Book of Nature alongside the Book of Scripture and he leaves one in no doubt about which of the two is of greater relevance in today’s world.

The latest issue of the journal *Ecotheology* contains a review of a book by Calvin Beisner called *Where Garden Meets Wilderness: Evangelical Entry into the Environmental Debate*. The central argument of the book is that humanity is created to act as stewards of God’s creation. Humanity has legitimate authority to subdue and rule the Earth, progressively conforming it to human needs and the glory of God. “Creation does not abundantly yield blessed fruits, but it becomes abundantly fruitful only under the wise and resolute hand of man.” No possible reading of the Book of Nature as we now understand it could lead anyone to such a view. I

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sometimes wonder what the likes of Calvin Beisner think God was doing during the thirteen thousand, nine hundred and ninety eight million years it took to creation to produce humans.

It is true that the Book of Nature has been substantially re-written during the 20th century. A lot of what we now understand about the universe story has emerged during my lifetime. I was born in 1929, the year in which Edwin Hubble made the critical observations that led to the realisation of the expanding universe, that led to the Big Bang theory of the origin of the universe, that led to the realisation of an evolving universe. As far as Earth is concerned: the story of plate tectonics, of how the oceans and continents have moved around and evolved was in its infancy when I went to college. The story of life has changed dramatically with the realisation that bacteria existed for nearly two thousand million years before any more complex forms of life were able to evolve. Much of the story is still shrouded in the unknown and possibly the unknowable.

Tom Berry’s main contribution has been to look at the Book of Nature from the top down and to see the universe story as a coherent whole. He speaks of the force of gravity as the great compassionate curve in which the universe is enfolded. He speaks of the spirituality of carbon. We cannot know the reality of carbon until we see in their wholeness the things that carbon can do. It plays a key role in the fantastic diversity of living creatures including ourselves. It plays a part in our thinking and in our ability to contemplate the spirituality of carbon.

In *The Great Work*, Tom Berry focuses on the most recent pages of the story of the universe, the last 65 million years, which opened with a devastating catastrophe when a small comet or asteroid collided with Earth and landed in the sea off the Yucatan peninsula, Mexico. This caused a traumatic extinction event and marked the end of the age of the dinosaurs. Out of the ashes of this catastrophe arose a prodigious flowering of life. Evolution went into overdrive and produced a fantastic radiation of flowering plants and trees, also of birds, mammals and bony fish. On the back of this flowering of diversity, other groups, especially the insects took advantage of the new habitats and have flourished and diversified in their turn. The Cenozoic era has seen a flourishing and abundance of life unique in the whole history of Earth. The emergence of humans is part of this story. But we are now exploiting this abundance to such an extent that Earth is now experiencing another major extinction event. The Great Work as Tom Berry sees it is to carry out a transformation from a period of human devastation of Earth to a period in which humans would be present to the planet in a benign and mutually beneficial manner.

He has something to say about the role of the university in this process.

The university would be the context in which the universe reflects on itself in human intelligence and communicates itself to the human community. The university would have the universe as its originating, validating, and unifying referent. Since the universe is an emergent reality the universe would be understood primarily through its story. Education at all levels would be understood as knowing the universe story and the
human role in the story. The basic course in any college or university would be the story of the universe.

While our universities have gone through many transitions since they first came into being in the early medieval period, they have never experienced anything like the transition that is being asked of them just now. The difficulty cannot be resolved simply by establishing a course or a programme in ecology, for ecology is not a course or programme. Rather it is the foundation of all courses, all programmes and all professions because ecology is a functional cosmology . . . . Such a functional cosmology can exist, however, only within a university where the spirit dimension of the universe as well as its physical dimension is recognised.

Bibliography (in addition to sources cited in footnotes)


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