THOMAS BERRY, WHITEHEAD, DE CHARDIN, BEING, BECOMING, PROCESS AND ONTOLOGY
By Herman Greene

Not always appreciated is the fact that Thomas Berry was the consummate scholar. As a Catholic Priest and a member of the Passionist Religious Order he received a classical education in philosophy and theology and earned a doctoral degree in history from Catholic University of America. He read the complete works of St. Thomas Aquinas in Latin. (Try this yourself here) And he read the complete works of St. Augustine in Latin. He studied original Indic texts in Sanskrit and original Chinese texts in Chinese. He studied numerous indigenous traditions and later contemporary science. He was a historian of cultures, a teacher of comparative religions and a self-professed geologian. He had a personal library of over 10,000 books covering many subjects and cultures.

His work was synthetic blending many cultures, traditions and philosophies, yet it had a disciplined structure. Two influences on his thought stand out, St. Thomas Aquinas and Teilhard de Chardin.

His writing was clear, often lyrical, filled with references, yet mostly devoid of footnotes. It appealed to and influenced people in many different ways. For some his writing was inspirational leading to greater connection with and care for the natural world. For some it was mystical offering greater connection to and devotion to the divine. For many who took to his work, it guided their actions and changed their lives. It is truly a credit to him that hundreds if not thousands of people changed the direction of their lives in substantial ways to live out the vision and understanding he gave them.

While Thomas’s work has been the subject of study at many universities, it is not often characterized as a major intellectual work. This is, however, how I have always understood his work. My personal orientation is to the intellectual, but this does not account for my high regard for his thought as a major intellectual work. This came because of my background in Whitehead’s process philosophy. The first paper I read by Thomas was “The Spirituality of the Earth—the original version. I saw in Thomas’s work the practical manifestation of a universe understood as organic and continually in process, what some would call evolutionary. I immediately recognized his work as brilliant.

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1The original version of this paper is very different from the edited version that appears in Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York, Columbia University Press, 2009)
The consonance of Berry’s work with process philosophy in *The Riverdale Papers* and in *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story*, *Befriending Creation*, and *The Great Work* was transparent to me from the time I first began reading it in 1982 and through monthly conversations with him from 1995 until he had his stroke in 2003. After his stroke and in the edited books beginning with *Evening Thoughts* consonance with this set of understandings became problematic.

In *The Universe Story*, Swimme and Berry state: “The most significant change in the twentieth century, it seems is our passage from a sense of cosmos to a sense of cosmogenesis. . . . We have moved from that dominant spatial mode of consciousness, where time is experienced in ever-renewing seasonal cycles, to a dominant time-developmental mode of consciousness, where time is experienced as an evolutionary sequence of irreversible transformations.”

This is a radical claim that *the very most significant change in the 20th century* is the passage of human understanding to a sense of cosmogenesis.

This usage of cosmogenesis did not follow from the dictionary meaning of the term as a branch of astronomy that deals with the origin of the universe. It was “cosmogenesis” in the sense that Teilhard de Chardin used the term to refer to a certain understanding of the universe and Earth’s geological and biological evolution. “According to Teilhard, the universe is no longer to be considered a static order, but rather a universe in process. And it is a continuing, upslope trajectory of evolution that Teilhard declares a cosmogenesis.”

Thomas Colebrook recognized this in his 1991 lecture on Thomas Berry:

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Tom Berry seldom engages in theological discourse. However there is one book \textit{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, \textit{from being to becoming}.”

Marjorie Hope and James Young also wrote about this in a 1994 article where they quoted Thomas:

> “Teilhard posed the greatest challenge of our time: to move from the spatial mode of consciousness to the historical, \textit{from being to becoming}. The Church finds difficulty in recognizing the evolution of the Earth. For a long time it wouldn’t accept even the evolution of animal forms. To this day there is no real acceptance of our modern story of the universe as sacred story. As a child I was taught by the catechism that the Earth was created in seven days, 5000 years ago. There was no sense of developmental, transformative time in the natural world.”

A possible source of Berry’s phrase from “being to becoming” and his emphasis on irreversibility is from the 1992 book \textit{From Being to Becoming: Time and Complexity in the Physical Sciences} by Ilya Prigogine.

Other sources for the concepts of “from being to becoming” and “irreversibility” in Berry’s thought would be Henri Bergson’s \textit{Creative Evolution}, Teilhard de Chardin, and Alfred North Whitehead.

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\item \textsuperscript{10} Michael Colebrook, “Thomas Berry,” presentation to a seminar held at the College of St Mark & St John, Plymouth, UK (1991) (italics added), \url{http://greenspirit.org.uk/resourcepack/?page_id=125} (accessed March 15, 2014).
\item \textsuperscript{12} See, e.g., Berry’s references to Prigogine in \textit{Dream of the Earth}, 198 and 217.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Henri Bergson’s, \textit{Creative Evolution} was originally published in French in 1907 and its English translation appeared in 1911. The original English translation was by Arthur Mitchell and was published by Henry Holt and Company. Berry cites Bergson. See, e.g., \textit{Dream of the Earth 22; Universe Story}, 227.
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Both Teilhard de Chardin and Whitehead were influenced by Bergson. Teilhard wrote that his reading of \textit{L’Évolution Créatrice} (Creative Evolution) was the “catalyst of a fire which devoured already its heart and its spirit.” Wikipedia contributors, “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,” \textit{Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia}.\footnote{10}
Whitehead\textsuperscript{14} and other neo-classical philosophers who based their metaphysics on becoming rather than being.

In the final period of his life, from at least 2006-2009, Berry took the position that he held firmly to a philosophy of being, rather than a philosophy of process. He made a distinction between process and ontology, which on its face is a false dichotomy because process metaphysics is itself an ontology. The distinction from process he meant to make by using the term “ontology” was “being,” and in particular in the origin of the universe in an underlying reality of goodness.\textsuperscript{15} In 2008, he wrote an unpublished essay in which he stated: “I am myself fully committed to a philosophy of being. To propose process before being makes no sense to me. It’s like starting a sentence with a verb instead of a noun. Process thought is an effort to make the evolutionary narrative the basis of our interpretation of the universe.”

It is difficult to make sense of his criticism of process thought on this basis as his earlier published work would seem exactly to be “to make the evolutionary narrative the basis of our interpretation of the universe.”

Process thought has four essential elements:

1. \textit{creativity} (including novelty, the temporal, but not ontological, priority of becoming over being, and the indeterminancy of the future);
2. \textit{organic change over time} (including irreversibility, emergence, cosmogenesis, and a teleology toward ordered-complexity, rich harmonies of experience and consciousness);
3. \textit{subjectivity} (including interiority, pan-experientialism, self-organization, identity, decision, and value, meaning and aesthetic experience in becoming); and
4. \textit{interdependence} (including the constitution of every actuality by its relations, process over substance, and coherence).\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{14}See, e.g., \textit{Universe Story}, 227: “This sense of the universe as self-organizing process was presented in its earliest forms of expression by Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Ilya Prigogine.”

\textsuperscript{15}Drawing a distinction between a process and being ontology is also a false dichotomy because as presented in the succeeding article of this issue on “Alfred North Whitehead’s Process Philosophy in Relation to Chardin, Berry and Swimme,” process ontology also includes being, though it gives temporal, but not ontological, priority to becoming. As to there being an originating source of goodness of which the universe in all its particulars is a manifestation, there would be a true difference between process metaphysics and classical being metaphysics. In process metaphysics the divine and the particulars of the universe are co-creative from the beginning. Process metaphysics does, however, include a primordial valuation of the possibilities for realization of the particulars of the universe.

\textsuperscript{16}This definition is included in the Bylaws of the International Process Network, which states:

1. \textbf{Name}. This association shall be known as the “International Process Network,” and is referred to in these Bylaws as “IPN.” “Process” as used in these Bylaws refers to process-relational philosophies that have creativity, organic change over time, subjectivity and interdependence as fundamental aspects of
These are evident in Thomas’s published works though in the heavily edited papers of Thomas published in Evening Thoughts, The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth, and The Sacred Universe, Berry’s consistent adherence to these process understandings is blurred.

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their understandings. Such philosophies include, and are not limited to, those based on the work of Alfred North Whitehead.

Amended and Restated Bylaws, International Process Network, Article I, Section 1 (effective November 29, 2007).

17Citations to these books are given in Note 8 above.