THE STORY OF THOMAS BERRY CONTINUALLY EVOLVING

By Jules Cashford


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

Two people whose lives he changed--Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim—joined with Andrew Angyal, Professor Emeritus of English and Environmental Studies at Elon University in North Carolina, to create a biography of Thomas Berry, which offers both mesmerising insight into Thomas’s own story and how he affected the lives of others. Further, this biography is 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; edited his books; taught his philosophy; and cared for him when he retired—in doing so they shared with him the loss of his library and helped in arranging for his precious books to find another home. Mary Evelyn and John now act as his literary executors and are the managing trustees of the Thomas Berry Foundation. In addition, they teach at Yale Divinity School and at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and they, also, direct the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. Together with Brian Thomas Swimme, they produced the 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 became one with the evolving story of the universe. As the authors 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 and lived his early life in Greensboro, North Carolina. Later he joined the Passionist Order of the Catholic Church and became a priest. Before long he 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 he felt 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 Japanese religion. But his firm, courteous (and undoubtedly unflinching) persistence won out eventually. He was permitted to teach at Seton Hall University, then at St. John’s University, and finally at Fordham University where in 1970 he initiated a unique program in History of Religions. He achieved an integration of his brilliant scholarship with his cosmo-


gical vision in the founding of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research in New York where he continued his work after leaving Fordham University. As his biographers say, “Here he placed human and Earth history within a universe story.” In this period of his life he also served as President of the American Teilhard de Chardin Association.

His work at the Riverdale Center resulted in a twelve-volume set of the Riverdale Papers. These papers laid the foundation for the writing of his 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 (co-authored with Brian Thomas Swimme); The Great Work: Our Way into the Future (1999); Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community (2006); The Sacred Universe (2009); and The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth (2009).

Of special interest is 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 many poems, which he sometimes recited outdoors 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.