

THE UNIVERSE AS ONE LIVING ORGANISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THE COSMOLOGICAL VIEWS OF THOMAS BERRY

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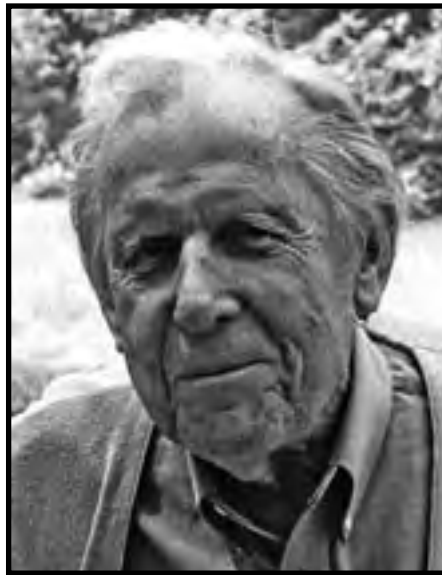
Thomas Berry, described in *Newsweek* magazine in 1989 as “the most provocative figure among the new breed of eco-theologians,” was among the first to say Earth’s crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis. A leading figure in the contemporary resurgence of cosmology, Thomas Berry wrote dozens of essays on comparative religion, cultural history, ecological thought, and the cosmological context.

Let us examine some of the extraordinary ideas brought forth by Thomas Berry, who was once regarded as “the most important contemporary thinker in ecological theology.”

Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and anthropologist who called himself a “geologist,” was a priest of the Passionate Order. He founded the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, located on the Hudson River in Riverdale, New York. Father Berry passed through transition in 2009 at the age of 94 in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he was born. He was as active as ever up until his transition – still writing, traveling, and contributing to “The Great Work,” as he called it.

His first major work on ecology was *The Dream of the Earth*, published in 1988, Page 40

and in 1992 he and Brian Swimme, a physicist who holds a PhD in mathematical cosmology and teaches cosmology at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco, together published *The Universe Story*.



Thomas Berry

Thomas Berry was intensely critical of the attitude of the church, stating that religion has become totally absorbed in the affairs of humanity – regarding the rest of the universe as being insignificant. He called this type of anthropocentrism (or human-centered attitude) “the dark side of biblical religion.”

He noted that the early Christian Church recognized two revelatory manifestations of the Divine, namely:

- The natural world, which was the “First Scripture,” and
- The church and biblical tradition, which was built upon the natural world, and which was the “Second Scripture.”

The revelation of the natural world came first, and the message of Christianity second. He observed that over the last four centuries the balance between these two

revelations has been lost, as an inherent tendency towards alienation from the natural world developed in biblical religion. Christianity is acutely sensitive to suicide, homicide, and genocide, but insensitive to biocide (the killing of life systems of the planet), and to geocide (the killing of the planet itself).

Thomas Berry described the whole universe as one living organism of which we, and planet Earth, are inseparable parts. Everything in existence, visible and invisible, is an extension of the same underlying primary essence we call “the Divine.” All things are basically one and the same, differing only in the way they manifest in specific dimensions, and in the subsequent development according to their individual potentials.

**Everything Is Alive;
Everything Is Connected**

At the Big Bang, all energy that would ever exist erupted as one single existence. As everything in creation is powered by the same mysterious energy that burst forth at that very moment, all things in existence – rocks, forces (such as gravity and the electromagnetic force), living things, etc., are drawn by the universe into a bonded relationship – into a profound intimacy. The universe, in its physical and spiritual aspects, holds all things together.

Spirit and matter throughout all of creation are not separate, but simply different levels of manifestation which form a continuum.

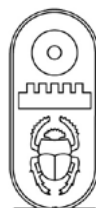
The universe is not “a thing,” but a mode of being of everything. It is a communion of subjects, and not a collection of objects. Everything is alive, and the traditional hostility of Christianity towards animism must be overcome. We must restore the soul to the world. Everything is connected, and mirrors itself in everything else. Full understanding of a proton requires full understanding of the universe. Nothing in creation is divided from anything else, and all things exist in relationship.

“The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human – at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.”

Father Thomas Berry made the startling suggestion that the Bible should perhaps be put on a shelf for twenty years so that we can truly listen to creation. We might then, perhaps, be able to recover the

early Christian view that there were two scriptures: first that of the natural world, and later that of the Bible. Unfortunately, however, we are still reading “The Book” instead of reading the world about us! If we continue doing this, we will drown reading the book.

Our theological view of the Divine is incomplete if we do not consider that the Divine, who made the world, must also be intimately related to it. Only with such a precept can we maintain our true sense of the Divine. If we lose our sense of rapport with the world and with the universe, we lose our sense of the Divine as human beings. To seek the Divine through a mystical experience which transcends nature, means to deny our humanity. It would mean a return to the unconscious bliss of the Garden of Eden, thus





disregarding our evolution as conscious human beings.

Who Are We?

Furthermore, we need a new story of the universe, a new story of belonging. We need a new understanding of who we really are, and where we came from.

In the “New Story,” humans are seen as that particular element in creation upon whom the universe reflects, and celebrates itself in the deep mysteries of its origins – in a very special mode of self-awareness.

We must develop a new type of religious sensitivity – a new vision of the Divine. We must realize that, in a certain sense, we are the universe, and that each part of the universe, including us, acts as a hologram in which the whole is contained. Thus it can easily be seen that the universe is experiencing certain aspects of itself through us – such as the feeling of awe and wonder of its own mysterious origins and sacred nature. Through us the universe can celebrate itself, and become conscious of its own awesome mysteries. The poet does not think about the universe, but rather, the universe thinks about itself through

the poet. Our eyes that search the Milky Way are themselves shaped by the Milky Way. And the mind searching for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way searching for its own inner depths.

“Our sense of who we are and what our role is must begin where the universe begins.”

This is a most fascinating concept, as it may be taken to mean that the human mind which seeks mystical attunement with the Divine is the very mind of the Divine Itself

which searches for Its own inner depth in a special mode of conscious self-awareness. An awesome thought indeed. This concept of the Divine touches on the model of Process Theology which perceives the Divine as an everchanging, and ever-developing process. The universe is the Divine’s body, and the Divine is the mind of the universe. Humans have a special part to play in the development of the Divine, supplying to the Godhead the element of human consciousness with all its specific attributes. The Divine is forever experimenting and developing through Its creation. As we see, Process Theology also embraces the Wholeness Model.

Changes Necessary for a Sustainable Future

Thomas Berry advised us to change our concept of education. Education should not only be geared to train us for jobs, but should also help us to understand our place, and our role in the scheme of things.

Furthermore, economics should be seen as a religious issue. He makes a most thought-provoking statement, namely, that if water is polluted it can neither be used for drinking, nor for baptism.

Thomas Berry emphasized the fact that we must leave our short-sighted anthropocentric position which places us at the height of, and at the center of creation. We are part of the whole, and although we have a very specific part to play in the scheme of things, we are hardly more important than any other part of creation. We must get out of the center of the universe. He comments on the fact that we have arrogantly placed ourselves above all other creatures, regarding humanity and our affairs as the center of meaning and importance.

A democracy that exploits the world is not a desirable form of government. The word “democracy” (derived from ancient Greek) literally means “rule by the people” – referring to people alone, and not to the rest of creation. We should strive towards a biocracy, which is a government concerned with the welfare of all members of Earth’s community.

Our considerations and duties extend far beyond those we have toward each other.

And because current Western religions do not function within this universal context, they have become dysfunctional. They no longer serve their original purpose.

Thomas Berry made the interesting observation that the anthropocentrism of the West gave way to a pronounced theocentrism (placing the Divine in the center) after the event of the Plague in Europe in 1347. People regarded the calamity

as a punishment by the Divine because they had been too attached to Earth and had not committed themselves to salvation from Earth, and to absorption into the Spirit. Attachment to, and involvement with Earth had to be overcome.

Both anthropocentrism and theocentrism deny the unity between the natural world, the world of humanity, and the

world of the Divine. Thus, the mystical bonding of humans with the natural world has become progressively weaker in Western Civilization.

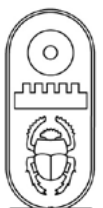
The Universe Is a Communion of Subjects

Thomas Berry urged us to realize two important facts:

- The Earth is primary, while the human is secondary.
- The universe is a communion of subjects, and not a collection of objects.

He made the statement that we are in need of a new concept in religion assigning the primary sacred community to the universe itself, as our true sense of the

“We are not lacking in the dynamic forces needed to create the future. We live immersed in a sea of energy beyond all comprehension. But this energy, in an ultimate sense, is ours not by domination but by invocation.”





Divine emerges through our perception of the universe. This concept is difficult for us to comprehend, as it requires a change in our image of the Divine. And, we are also deeply convinced of our superiority, of being the Divine's chosen creation, and of our divine right to put ourselves in the center of this world at the expense of the rest of creation.

However, humans become sacred by participating in the larger sacred community of the universe. Thomas Berry stated that the indescribable feeling that accompanies such an experience may truly be called "religion"-namely *re-ligare*, meaning "to bind back to the source." This is more real than theology because the feeling emanates from true experience. If we can reach this change in consciousness, the impact will be of such significance that it may be likened to a new type of revelatory experience.

Thomas Berry stated that the following principles, held by conventional Christianity, will have to be reconsidered:

1. Our emphasis on a transcendent, personal Divinity, who is distinct from the universe.
2. The exaltation of the human as a spiritual being, contrasted to the physical nature of all other living beings. (We see ourselves as being so special that our soul has to be created by the Divine in every single case!)

3. The concept that Redemption is a kind of "out-of-this-world" liberation.
4. The Cartesian idea that the world and the universe are a mechanism void of life.

All these "transcendencies" – for example, 1) a transcendent Divinity, 2) transcendent Humankind, 3) transcendent redemption, and 4) a transcendent mind – encourage our fascination with a transcendent technology, which shall liberate us from following the basic biological laws of the natural world. We are striving to create a transcendent goal which, we hope, will allow us to go beyond the human condition. We still try to separate ourselves from the world, instead of recognizing our true place within the sacred community of the universe.

The search for a transcendent technology is a misunderstanding of the goals of modern science – in fact, true scientific understanding is the key to the future of religion.

Having explored the revolutionary New World View that characterizes the postmodern era which emerged in the twentieth century, we see that the new model is based on the Wholeness Principle. This new model of reality is penetrating all fields of endeavor, having made its appearance in science, medicine, psychology, philosophy, and religion.