

Thomas Berry, *The Sacred Universe: Earth, Spirituality, and Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker; New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 181 pp., \$22.95 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-231-14952-5. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i3.371.

Thomas Berry died in 2009, after a long and influential life as a renowned cultural historian, student of world religions, and writer on ecological topics. He was a Roman Catholic priest of the Passionist order who sought throughout his life to find non-parochial language, common ground, and vital critical ecological insights within and among the religious traditions of the world, including the indigenous ones. This volume is a collection of essays written by Berry over the period from 1972 to 2001, edited by one of his admirers and former students.

Berry worked through the years to awaken a planetary consciousness keenly alert to the environmental crisis confronting all peoples on Earth. He was motivated to draw upon the spiritual promise and significance of natural science's grand 'new story' of cosmic, terrestrial, and biological evolution. This new story, in Berry's view, provides resources and inspiration to bring people together in shared conversation about the future of the Earth, is essential for stimulating diverse religious traditions to break away from their anachronistic rootage in pre-scientific cosmologies and for making their leading thinkers and adherents more alert to the crying needs of the present day.

Berry places high value on the distinctive ideas and practices of the world's diverse religious traditions, and he welcomes their specific contributions to the worldwide dialogue he believes needs to take place among them. But he is also convinced that traditional religions need to be radically reconstructed and reformed so that they can be more capable of dealing with the fact of ever-increasing global awareness and interdependence, as well as with the inescapable fact of dire threats to biological species and their habitats occurring throughout the world. He ventures the hope that we can soon enter into a new 'Eozoic' age that will replace the present Cenozoic one, and suggests that the latter sadly qualifies as a sixth age of vast terrestrial extinctions that is now following upon the five preceding it.

In short, for Berry, a new ecological consciousness, firmly grounded in what he regards as the common, culture-transcending new scientific story, is desperately needed. The historical religions have a crucial role to play in raising the consciousness of the peoples of Earth. They can help to provide a framework of thought, awareness, and motivation within which Earth's peoples can discover fresh, realistic, and effective approaches to the problems erupting everywhere in a time of increasing religious interaction and potential conflict, rapidly accelerating globalization, and actual and impending ecological devastations.

Berry emphasizes the need for a kind of spiritual awareness that attends to the numinous qualities of the Earth and our awesome place as one biological species within many complex and imminently endangered ecosystems. The older emphasis on revelation contained in sacred texts needs now, he argues, to be supplemented with the profound revelations of the sacred and divine within the natural order. The focus of religion needs to be broadened to include more than concern for individual redemption in some realm beyond this earthly one, but it must also overcome the anthropocentrism and sense of separation and alienation from Earth and its other creatures that has long characterized many religious traditions. He finds a helpful counterweight to this tendency especially in Confucianism, with its unitary vision of humans, earth, and heaven, but also in other Asian traditions such as Taoism and in indigenous, earth-centered cultures.

He also urges a need for new liturgies, as well as for recovery of aspects of the older Shamanistic liturgies of native peoples, which can effectively call our attention to and celebrate our grounding in the Earth and our responsibilities to the whole community of creatures on Earth. Natural rights should no longer be restricted to human beings, he argues, but extended to all living beings. And technology and economic development should be set within the context not merely of the wants and needs of human societies but of the community of all of Earth's creatures in their natural environments.

Some of these motifs are by now familiar to us, but Berry is one of the influential writers of the early 1970s and beyond who helped to make them so. The essays in this volume, written over a relatively long span of time, are sometimes repetitious, as is perhaps inevitable. But Berry writes with such compelling eloquence of style, reasonableness of argument, and infectiousness of ecological and religious concern that this reader welcomed the repetitions. The book's focus is mostly on large-scale objectives and ideals, not so much on concrete ways of realizing them, although Berry himself was well aware of the need for thinking resolutely about practical means as well as envisioned ends.

The most gnawing critical question raised in my mind by these essays, and one that unfortunately is nowhere addressed in them, is whether the new story so highly touted by Berry is a genuinely universal story for all the peoples of Earth, as opposed to a kind of unconsciously Western and at least partly chauvinistic story being uncritically urged upon them and assumed without question to transcend and encompass the particularities of their own traditions and backgrounds. The assumptions built into this new story are mostly of Western origin (e.g., the notion of linear time), and they contain aspects of a comprehensive worldview as well as more specific claims to enduring scientific discovery and truth. Is the new story in its entirety as neutral, culture-transcending, and time-transcending as Berry unabashedly assumes it to be? Or is it at least in significant part a distinctive worldview in its own right, to be compared and contrasted with the worldviews of other cultures and times in a more humble and open-minded manner?

Perhaps the new story is all that Berry assumes it to be, and I as a typical Westerner am convinced that it is, but it is unfortunate that he does not address this important question about it somewhere in these essays. Another way of putting my point is that the new story itself needs to be critically analyzed, at least in some of its deep-lying aspects, from the perspectives of the religious traditions Berry intends for the new story to bring smartly up to date and to usher into ready agreement with itself. I am not endorsing some brand of cultural relativism, but I am defending the need for authentically open-minded, multi-sided conversations, and for shared inquiries that seek thoroughly to unearth and critically investigate tacit assumptions in all the views under discussion. The spirit of this observation is one with which I am sure Berry would have agreed, but he should have noted that it also applies to possibly debatable large assumptions that may lie behind the scientific cosmology and evolutionary outlook he took for granted and so enthusiastically championed. It is hard for us to recognize and critically examine our most deeply entrenched assumptions, convictions, and beliefs, but we need continually to do so.

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