

“Thomas Berry’s Earth Spirituality and the “Great Work”

Cultural historian Thomas Berry has devoted his career to understanding how Western religion and culture have failed to sustain a nurturing relationship between humans and the Earth. In his major works—*The Dream of the Earth*, *The Universe Story*, and *The Great Work*—he has traced the Western spiritual estrangement from the earth implicit in the growth of modern technological culture. Berry calls for a new cosmology, expressed in a “New Story” or mythic consciousness that will reunite humans with the creative energy of the universe and overcome our destructive spiritual estrangement from the source of life. Berry’s work offers both a conceptual framework for understanding how this western cultural estrangement has come about and a means of overcoming it through his new cosmology. Implicit in Berry’s work is a reunification of science and religion through an “Earth Spirituality,” an incarnational spirituality, an affirmation of the spiritual potential of matter, and a reflection of how we treat the material world. Berry, in a clever pun, calls himself a “geologist,” not a theologian, meaning presumably that he is concerned with the earth, not with God, and reflecting the focus of his spirituality.

In his paper, “The Spirituality of the Earth,” published in *The Riverdale Papers*, vol. V, Berry talks explicitly about his vision of a spirituality that is not merely appreciation of the Earth; instead, he means that the Earth itself is endowed with an innate spirituality. His concern is with the Earth as a maternal and nurturing principle that is the source of our existence and our spirituality. The Earth is *the* primary subject, “endowed with a spiritual mode of being,” not merely an object of spiritual regard (“The Spirituality of the Earth” 1). As Western Christianity has become an increasingly

redemption-based rather than a creation spirituality, Western science and religion have become separate entities and the social impact of religion and ethics has diminished. “The central pathology that has led to the termination of the Cenozoic,” Berry observes, “is the radical discontinuity between the human and the nonhuman” (*The Great Work* 80). But now Western science has provided what amounts to a “new revelation” in its understanding of the origins of the universe, as well as an evolutionary understanding of human nature. A new common ground for science and religion has become possible with the emergent view of the universe. Berry calls for a new spirituality “grounded more deeply in the numinous dimension of an emergent universe.” (“The Spirituality of the Earth” 3). “Our spirituality itself is earth-derived,” he observes. “If there is no spirituality in the earth, then there is no spirituality in ourselves” (“The Spirituality of the Earth” 1). The language of redemption-oriented spirituality has ceased to be effective in our contemporary world and may indeed widen the gap between human and environmental concerns. In building upon the insights of Teilhard de Chardin, Berry argues that “the earth has an intrinsic spiritual quality from the beginning” and that “this spiritual quality finds a distinctive expression in the human mode of being” (“The Spirituality of the Earth” 3).

“For Berry, the primary problem facing humans today concerns the human attitude that we as a species are somehow essentially disengaged from the earth on which we live and that our destiny is to bend nature to our purposes” (Kinsley 172). The story or myth that continues to drive this goal of human domination of the earth is a secular version of the old millennial dream of Christianity, a version in which God will rule the Earth and peace, harmony, and justice will prevail, brought about, however, through

human science and technology. But this destructive myth of a technological wonderland in which nature is bent to every human whim is turning the Earth into a wasteland and threatening human survival. Western spiritual traditions have not been able to impede these lethal tendencies, but have encouraged them as part of God's plan for human domination of the Earth, and these traditions have understood human destiny as primarily involving a heavenly spiritual redemption (Kinsley 173). The Western religious traditions "are also seriously deficient in not teaching more effectively that the natural world is our primary revelatory experience" (*The Great Work* 75). The Logos or reason of science must be balanced with a healthy, life-affirming Mythos, or Story embodying a poetic and spiritual appreciation of the Earth. With their preoccupation with redemption and their neglect of creation, modern religious traditions are unable to offer a spirituality adequate to experience the divine in ordinary life or in the natural world. Not only is the loss of the sacred a notable deficiency in modern religion, but "an absence of the sacred is the basic flaw in many of our efforts at ecologically or environmentally adjusting our human presence to the natural world," according to Thomas Berry ("Foreword" 18). As Loren Eiseley has warned, science alone will not save the world.

An authentic new global Earth spirituality lies in the Universe story, the emergent story of cosmogenesis or the unfolding of cosmic creation leading to life on earth. "There is enormous potential religious value in the new story of the universe, but Christianity still cannot accept this story as its own sacred story," Berry observes in *Befriending the Earth* (27). Our traditional Judeo-Christian story of creation is outmoded and prescientific, but as a culture we have been unable to accept the "New Story" that science has given us, despite the best efforts of popularizers such as Carl

Sagan. The recent rise of religious fundamentalism has made it even more difficult for the three great monotheistic religions to accept a science-based Earth spirituality. The sense of God as transcendent and separate from creation is one of the chief difficulties of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Berry would like to recapture a sense of the immanence of the Sacred in the world. We are at a moment of transition, according to Berry, in which we need a new vision to carry us from the end of the Cenozoic into the Ecozoic Age.

According to Berry, the Earth is the source of our spiritual energy, which needs to be expressed in a nurturing and healing mode. We need a spiritual vision of human life grounded in the biological processes of the planet and integrated with every other terrestrial life form. We need a new understanding of human nature as the “understanding heart of the universe” or “the consciousness of the world” (“The Spirituality of the Earth” 6). The Chinese have a concept of human nature as the *hsin*, “the understanding heart of heaven and earth” (Ibid 6). We need to renew our communion with the spiritual forces out of which we were born. As Berry has repeatedly observed, “the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects” (*Universe Story* 243). In *Dream of the Earth*, he observes that beyond our genetic and cultural coding, humans need “to go into the earth, as the source whence we came, and ask for its guidance, for the earth carries the psychic structure as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet” (195). Science has given us a story of a time-developmental universe in which humans are related to all other forms of life, but this has not yet penetrated into our religious and mythic consciousness. Or perhaps it *was* there, among Indigenous Peoples, but it has been suppressed by the monotheistic religions. Perhaps this communion can come about through the emergence of new

spiritual metaphors, poetry, and liturgies, or in a personification of the Earth itself as a numinous presence—as Gaia or Mary—or in a new understanding of our “coming of age” as a species, but it must result in a spiritual transformation that leads us to take responsibility for the well-being of the planet. The problem lies in our anthropocentric worldview, but can we outgrow it? Our preoccupation with our human needs alone has become totally dysfunctional and needs to change.

Berry’s new Earth spirituality, grounded in a new cosmology, will encourage the growth of universal compassion and empathy for all forms of life. There is great potential for altruism and biophilia in our recognition that we are all created from the same physical matter. Humans will come to understand that they are but one manifestation of the dynamic creative energy of the cosmos, which Dante and Rumi called Love and which draws everything into itself. A new Mythos of the Earth will envision humans as one species in the great community of life and will emphasize the interconnectedness of all life.

In a recent interview in *Caduceus* entitled “The Mystique of the Earth,” Thomas Berry expands the concept of Earth spirituality as Earth community. First of all, he emphasizes that “human health is a subsystem of the earth’s health. You cannot have well humans on a sick planet” (2). He restricts his use of the word spirituality, observing that “we talk about spirituality but first of all humans are not spirits. That’s why I don’t use the word ‘spirit’ or ‘spirituality’ much. ‘Spirit’ has no inner reference to body, or to matter. We are ensouled beings. The soul is that vital principle in a living organic body, and all living beings are ensouled beings” (2). The difference is that “humans have an

intelligent soul, a soul that is capable of reflecting on itself and on the deeper aspects of the universe”(2). Thus “the universe knows itself in us”(2).

Our problem is that because humans have assumed that anything nonhuman is of lesser value, we have created a human governance that only benefits us rather than the larger community of life. We have failed to recognize that we are but a subset of a larger integral Earth community of life. Our laws privilege human rights and private property rights at the expense of the rest of life. “If there are no rights and no protections for anything that is not human, then we establish a predator relationship”(2). When we begin to consume everything that is not human, we risk losing our humanity, which can only be defined in the context of a comprehensive Earth community. What we need is to develop “an integral human order *within* the order of the planet earth” (3). Such a change in human thinking would involve a virtual reinvention of the human, which Berry has called for in *The Great Work* (159-165).

In *The Great Work*, Berry identifies the four human institutions that need to change to facilitate the transition to the Ecozoic Era—government, religion, the corporation, and the university. Universities need to teach the Universe Story and make ecology a centerpiece of their curricula. Humans need to learn that they are genetically related to all other life and that our future depends upon the well-being of the planet. In *The Great Work*, Berry discusses the necessary reforms in all of these major institutions, but he has observed that the single most devastating document for the nonhuman world has been the American Constitution, with its exclusive emphasis on human rights (74). Some of the most interesting applications of Berry’s ideas have emerged in the area of

environmental law, and among the most promising of these developments is a new Earth jurisprudence.

Berry recognizes how difficult it will be to establish a conceptual foundation for legal rights for the nonhuman world, but we have to reframe our thinking, as Aldo Leopold has said, and learn “to think like a mountain” (A Sand County Almanac 140). We have to expand the resources of our language and find new conceptual expressions for nonhuman rights. Berry’s articulation of the nonhuman world’s fundamental right to exist reflects both a “Deep Ecology” perspective and his theological training in Thomistic philosophy, since he often makes recourse to natural rights arguments. His outline of “The Origin, Differentiation and Role of Rights” (1/1/01) provides an important conceptual foundation for environmental law, based on his assumptions that the right to exist is innate for the nonhuman world because it is grounded in the universe, not in any act of human law. There are ten basic precepts in Berry’s original “Rights” statement, and although he has recently published a shorter version of “Rights of the Earth” in *Resurgence* (2002), I am presenting the original, more comprehensive version:

1. Rights originate where existence originates. That which determines existence determines rights.
2. Since it has no further context of existence in the phenomenal order, the universe is self-referent in its being and self-normative in its activities. It is also the primary referent in the being and activities of all derivative modes of being.
3. The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. As subjects, the component members of the universe are capable of having rights.

4. The natural world on the planet Earth gets its rights from the same source that humans get their rights, from the universe that brought them into being.

5. Every component of the Earth community has three rights: the right to be, the right to habitat, and the right to fulfill its role in the ever-renewing processes of the Earth community.

6. All rights are species specific and limited. Rivers have river rights. Birds have bird rights. Insects have insect rights. Difference in rights is qualitative, not quantitative. The rights of an insect would be of no value to a tree or a fish.

7. Human rights do not cancel out the rights of other modes of being to exist in their natural state. Human property rights are not absolute. Property rights are simply a special relationship between a particular human “owner” and a particular piece of “property” so that both might fulfill their roles in the great community of existence.

8. Since species exist only in the form of individuals, rights refer to individuals and to their natural groupings of individuals into flocks, herds, packs, not simply in a general way to species.

9. These rights as presented here are based upon the intrinsic relations that the various components of Earth have to each other. The planet Earth is a single community bound together with interdependent relationships. No living being nourishes itself. Each component of the Earth community is immediately or mediately dependent on every other member of the community for the nourishment and assistance it needs for its own survival. This mutual nourishment, which includes the predator-prey relationships, is integral with the role that each component of the Earth has within the comprehensive community of existence.

10. In a special manner humans have not only a need for but a right of access to the natural world to provide not only the physical need of humans but also the wonder needed by human intelligence, the beauty needed by human imagination, and the intimacy needed by human emotions for fulfillment. (1/1/01)

Thomas Berry's vision of a mutually enhancing Earth community in which the rights of all subjects are respected involves an enormous paradigm shift from the present anthropocentric, mechanistic, reductionistic, and exploitative ways of thinking about the nonhuman world. Berry envisions the Earth as an ultimate good in itself, irrespective of how humans may benefit or profit from it, not merely as a collection of raw materials or natural resources to be exploited. His vision will entail fundamental changes in human ethics, law, and government. The difficulty will be in translating these general principles into more specific policies and programs. "Governance at all levels occurs within a framework established by laws," notes Cormac Cullinan, because "laws are embedded in society and reflect the perspectives of the dominant societies that made them" ("Justice for All" 37). The American Constitution was designed to protect personal human rights and private property rights, not to protect the natural world. It reflects an outmoded eighteenth century view of the natural world and hence has helped to legitimize the continued exploitation of the world. As Cormac Cullinan notes, "Fundamentally changing our governance systems will require more than reforming existing laws or making new ones. We need to take a long hard look, not only at our legal systems, but, more importantly, at the legal philosophies that underlie them. Only

by creating a vision of an ‘Earth Jurisprudence’ will we be able to begin a comprehensive transformation of our governance system”(Ibid 37).

Jonathan Swift remarked that “vision is the ability to see the unseen.” Thomas Berry’s Earth Spirituality offers a new vision of a mutually enhancing Earth community, a vision which could permit us to reconceive the basic institutions of government, religion, education, and business, and from which a genuine Earth Jurisprudence might eventually emerge. Promising work has already been accomplished by Cormac Cullinan’s *Wild Law* (Siberink, 2002), Mike Bell’s work with Inuit self-governance and restorative justice, the Gaia Foundation’s Earth Jurisprudence meetings, and Vandana Shiva’s ten principles of Earth Democracy. In the area of Earth Jurisprudence, Thomas Berry’s call for a “Great Work” has clearly been heeded.

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