

## Myth, Poetry and Cosmology

William Grassie

William Grassie, Ph.D., is founder and emeritus executive director of the Metanexus Institute on Religion and Science. Metanexus currently works with some 400 partners at universities in 43 countries. Metanexus publishes an online journal, *The Global Spiral*, with hundreds of thousand monthly page views and over 9,000 subscribers.



I first encountered Thomas Berry's writing in the fall of 1989 as a first-semester graduate student in the Religion Department at Temple University. I was taking a course on hermeneutics with Gibson Winter, who knew Berry from the Riverdale Center days (and who would later give me his collection of Berry's Blue Books from that period). Soon I was reading *The Dream of the Earth* (1983) and Brian Swimme's *The Universe is a Green Dragon* (1984). I was intrigued with the possibility of a mythopoetic reading of scientific cosmology, even as I was reading critiques of science by feminist philosophers and others (Harding 1986) (Merchant 1980).

In the Spring of 1990, I wrote a paper for Gibson Winter's course entitled "The New Cosmology and Creation Spirituality: Hermeneutical Spirals and Global Survival." I noted that the paper was passed around the department and widely criticized, so I thought I must be on to something.

This was the beginning of what I hoped would become my dissertation, except for one problem. There really was not enough source material. That was solved in January 1992, just as I finished my comprehensive exams, when Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme published *The Universe Story*. Now I had a case study upon which to build a dissertation, though not without problems. My committee was none too pleased that Berry and Swimme had written a popular book without footnotes and that I should make such a book the center of my dissertation project. It lacked academic rigor, I was told. They were placated by my inclusion of a chapter reviewing the philosophy of science (*i.e.*, was it possible to treat science as mythopoesis?), a chapter on the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (*i.e.*, how would one interpret such a metanarrative?), and a critique of the project with the help of Donna Haraway (*i.e.*, how might this new metanarrative be dangerous?).

As part of my research, I was able to interview Thomas Berry at the AAR in 1993. He graciously gave me two hours in the hotel lounge in Washington, D.C. During the interview, we discussed the major influences in his work. We discussed his dissertation work on Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). We talked about his travels to China and India and his work in Germany as a military chaplain. We discussed his relationship with the Catholic Church and how he had managed to stay off of the Vatican's radar screen by ostensibly not doing theology. We talked about *The Universe Story* and the influences of A.N. Whitehead and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in his metaphysical approach and Loren Eiseley in his prose. The interview was followed by drinks with Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, along with much laughter and engaging conversation.

The end result was my dissertation, *Reinventing Nature: Science Narratives as Myths for an Endangered Planet* (1994). It was not a work of art, but it did launch me on an exciting career of teaching, research, and service. In retrospect, I can say that the choice of *The Universe Story* as the case study

for my dissertation was prescient. Berry and Swimme's brand of creation spirituality has become an important spiritual and intellectual movement with many disciples and devotees. Their work has inspired others to pursue teaching and writing about the new cosmology as both continuing revelation and rigorous science (Chaisson 2006) (Christian 2004) (Dowd 2007) (Goodenough 1998) (Liebes 1998) (Miller 2004) (Primack 2006) (Rue 2000).

Thomas's writings inspired me greatly in my graduate studies and later career. Even though I found many occasions to disagree with him, his basic intuition and mission in life have now become my own. Thomas's prose always soared with elegance and inspiration. Thomas was a profound and profoundly gifted wordsmith. The eloquence, erudition, sensitivity, and insight of his writings humble me as I try to give voice to my own ideas. Metanexus Institute is partly a tribute to Thomas's inspiration. Many "Great Works" remain to be done. Let's give the last words to Thomas:

"Education and religion need to ground themselves within the empirical story of the Universe. Within this functional cosmology, we can overcome our alienation, and begin the renewal of life on a sustainable basis. This story is a numinous, revelatory narrative that can inspire the vision and energy needed to bring ourselves and the entire planet into a new order of magnificence."

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