

A Beethoven String Quartet

William Peck

William Peck is Bowman and Gordon Gray Professor Emeritus, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Peck writes in German as well as Spanish and English, having published, among other topics, a number of works concerning the life and work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His area of research, conducted primarily in Guatemala where he lived in the highlands until the age of 13, and also Honduras and Mexico, has been Mayan religion.



Thomas Berry is undoubtedly one of the true intellectual giants of our time. This estimate of his stature actually depends on the ways in which his work transcends the intellect and includes the power of feeling within the embodied human creature who is, in turn, embedded in the wild energy and beauty of the universe. His importance is not simply that he offers a fresh vision of things, indeed, of all things; but that his work has an uncanny relevance for the massive crisis that currently threatens our world.

The immediate political name for the crisis is “global warming.” A continuous partisan battle has been fought recently over the scientific status of this concept. However, few, if any, of the participants in the political debate have lifted the discussion to the level of its framing presuppositions. This is the level at which Berry operates with elegant precision and mastery. His vast knowledge of both Eastern and Western religious traditions informs not only the pertinent and intricate scientific details, but enables him to summarize his warnings with unparalleled simplicity and authority.

An analogy to the way Berry combines simplicity of tone and expression with a complex grasp of wide-ranging issues drawn from many fields of knowledge may be found in the late string quartets of Beethoven. Using only four instruments, first and second violins, viola, and cello, Beethoven explores a huge range of sonorities, rhythms, and musical encounters which sometimes seem to evoke the expressive power of a whole orchestra and yet frequently drop to tenderly elegiac passages. Thomas Berry, for example, in *The Great Work*, discusses the “Four Wisdoms:” the wisdom of the indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the world’s great religious and philosophical traditions, and the wisdom of modern science.

Throughout his writings he weaves this set of four clusters of tradition out into large areas of inquiry, yielding especially important insights into the role of post-Cartesian science in the current ecological catastrophe. The Four Wisdoms are merely an illustration of the way his whole authorship combines forcefulness, simplicity, and balance to convey new and important prophetic warnings without becoming bogged down in the usual frenetic political shouting that surrounds much contemporary environmental discussion.

I am most grateful to those who introduced me to the writings of Thomas Berry and I will mention three literary gems to anyone desiring an introduction to the rich and healing contributions of this extraordinary author: *Creative Energy: Bearing Witness for the Earth*, *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community*, and *The Great Work*.