

AN APPRECIATION OF THOMAS BERRY

By John Haught

I wish I had known Thomas Berry better. I recall meeting him briefly only once or twice, and I was struck by his graciousness and humility. I first came across his essays in *Cross Currents* when I was teaching courses on science and religion at Georgetown, and later on I used his *Dream of the Earth* in my classes on “science and religion” and “religion and ecology.”

Thomas’s *Dream* struck me immediately as one of the few works available at the time of its publication that could teach Christians in clear, uncomplicated language how to love nature motivated by the principle themes of their faith tradition, especially, for Christians, the doctrine of Incarnation. Secular environmentalists at the time suspected that Christianity was ecologically problematic because its otherworldly orientation distracted people from attending to the welfare of their Earthly habitat. Thomas’s writings—as well as his own career—are still one of the best refutations of that accusation.

As far as my own academic interest in the relationship of science and faith is concerned, I discovered in Thomas’s writings an implicit theology of nature that helped me bring a more ecologically sensitive slant to the contributions of Teilhard de Chardin whose works had appealed to me since graduate school and had already formed much of the background to my own classes and writings on science and theology. Two of Thomas’s ideas in particular reinforced, and helped me appreciate in a new way, parallel themes in Teilhard that I had previously found most helpful.

First, there is the realization that the universe has a narrative constitution, something cosmologists knew almost nothing about until after Einstein. It is an idea that has yet to make a big difference in the thought of most theologians. Starting in the late 1960s an interest in the theology of story, sometimes called “narrative theology,” became something of a rage in academic religious studies for a decade or so. I found this development refreshing, but at that time “story” usually referred narrowly to human experience and was usually noninclusive of the natural world. I was excited, then, when I read in Thomas’s essays that the concept of narrative must now comprise not only the human story and the story of life on Earth but also the entire universe.

Teilhard had been one of the first scientists in the twentieth century

to have realized that the universe is a story and not a state, and surely this Teilhardian emphasis had been influential in Thomas's intellectual formation. But Thomas did not interpret the significance of the new cosmic story in exactly the same way as Teilhard. For Teilhard, the fact that the universe is still being born means that it still has a future. Indeed he thought that the world leans on the future as its foundation. This understanding of the cosmos opens up a new space for the virtue of hope, and it turns our attention to eschatological questions about the ultimate destiny of the universe. Consequently, if we humans are promised a destiny that includes imperishability, then this would mean that in some way the whole universe to which we are inseparably connected cannot be condemned to "absolute death" either. Something everlasting, Teilhard believed, is always being "garnered" from the story.

Like Teilhard, Thomas noted how the new cosmic story weaves many episodes or epochs of natural history into a seamless whole. However, he is less preoccupied with the question of ultimate cosmic destiny than Teilhard. Instead, Thomas takes advantage of how the cosmic story dethrones the classically dualist—and ecologically toxic—anthropocentric impression that we humans do not really belong to the natural world. The fact that we are part of the same story as the creation of galaxies should make us feel humbler than before, but also more alive and more grateful. In general Thomas's ecological religious vision is more "sacramental" than eschatological. This emphasis raises interesting questions that I have tried to address in *The New Cosmic Story* and elsewhere.

Second, there is Thomas's claim that one of the great adventures going on in the cosmos is the invention and intensification of *subjectivity*. Not just objects but also hidden centers of experience known as subjects are part of the very fabric of nature. Subjects are no less part of nature than rocks and rivers. Here Thomas (along with Teilhard) departs considerably from most modern and contemporary intellectual and academic thought over which the ghost of Descartes still hovers. But he is right, and in the far distant future his legacy will include gratitude for his emphasis, in the age of scientific materialism, on the "insideness" of nature.

So, Thomas helped me appreciate Teilhard's insistence that a widely empirical survey of the natural world cannot overlook the fact that nature has a "within" or an insideness that most scientists and philosophers have ignored in their attempts to understand the universe. As a result of Thomas's work, more and more thoughtful people are telling the inside story of the universe as well as the outside.