

SEEING THE WORLD ANEW: RESPONDING TO THOMAS BERRY'S GREAT WORK

By Kelvin Ravenscroft

*Now night has advanced. The stars are more brilliant than ever.
The time has come for us to enjoy our final moments with each other
as we continue our journey on into the twenty-first century.*

—Thomas Berry, *Evening Thoughts*

As a child I recall having a deep, and at times, almost overwhelming sense of the wonder and mystery of the world, and throughout my life I have been nurtured and uplifted by a powerful aesthetic sense. I find that beauty, in its many and varied forms, is life affirming and a source of hope. I was enthralled by observing the night sky and I frequently pondered upon questions such as “Does the universe have an end?” “Where does everything that exists come from?” and, “Does the universe have any meaning, purpose or goal?” Many years later I continue to engage with such ultimate questions.

As the years pass, I find that there is a close connection between a sense of beauty and the divine. Aesthetics and spirituality, although distinct, are interconnected. I consider that a significant dimension of Christian life and ministry is to engage in creating oases of calm, stillness, and beauty which can be catalysts for transforming, both personally and socially, some of the challenges that face the world today, particularly ecological challenges. Indeed, a significant attraction to me in the spiritual vision of Saint Francis is his recognition and affirmation that all of creation is permeated by the presence of God. Reflecting upon this vision, I continue to take seriously the profound incarnational nature of Christianity—through the physical, material, embodied world, God is to be located. I, therefore, am increasingly of the view that Christian faith affirms and celebrates a spirituality of the everyday, of perceiving the extraordinary in the ordinary. Exploration of the Franciscan spiritual vision led me in 2009 to becoming a Companion of the Society of Saint Francis.

This recognition of the Divine permeating all things I continue to find being articulated in the arts in their various forms, particularly literature, painting, and film. For example, I have been deeply inspired by

Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* which explores the experience of the Reverend John Ames in 1956 as he approaches the end of his life and reflects upon key experiences that have contributed to his spiritual development and sense of self. Amongst the novel's many and varied themes and ideas, it affirms the importance of paying attention to the detail of the world around us and developing the capacity to see the world anew.

This capacity to see the world anew was beautifully presented in Tate Liverpool's 2013 exhibition, "Chagall—Modern Master," which poignantly illustrated how love and loss can be deeply interrelated and how Chagall was inspired to capture the detail and the beauty of the world even amidst episodes of significant suffering.

The experience of suffering has been powerfully explored in the Chilean director Patricio Gunzmán's film *Nostalgia for the Light* which makes connections between astronomers who explore the distant origins of the cosmos and humankind's place in the universe. It also explores the experience of women who, after many decades, continue to search for the remains of their loved ones who disappeared during the military dictatorship of General Pinochet. The film raises the question of the relationship between personal memory and cosmic memory and illustrates how contemporary experience is always rooted in the past. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are inextricably linked.

Exploration of, and reflection upon, this relationship between personal experience and the ongoing evolution of the cosmos has been expressed in four dimensions of my personal narrative: the development of a Thomas Berry Manchester/Journey of the Universe interfaith community group; the creation of a foundation course for secondary (high) school students entitled "Ways of Seeing"; integration of concepts, themes, and ideas of Thomas Berry into the preaching, teaching and ministry of my local Church of England parish church; and a book writing project exploring approaches to contemplative education that incorporate significant elements of Thomas Berry's vision. I discuss these four dimensions below.

Thomas Berry Manchester/Journey of the Universe Community Group

Since 2015, together with my wife Malgorzata Kmita, I have convened and facilitated a Thomas Berry Manchester/Journey of the Universe Interfaith Community Group, which, through exploration of

the writings of Thomas Berry, art, music, poetry, and film, considers how Berry's ways of seeing and being connect with and relate to science, ecology, spirituality, the arts, and economics.

The group is informal and relaxed in its exploration of these significant concepts, themes, and ideas, and provides an opportunity for people to gather and look at what can be termed "the bigger picture" of how our lives individually and collectively are located and immersed in the ever-unfolding story of the cosmos.

Following each meeting I send out a report by email to the group that details what has been explored and considered in the meeting. In addition, each week I send out a Friday reflection, inspired by Berry's vision, which aims to provide food for thought and inspiration. I also send out occasional emails giving notice of forthcoming events, exhibitions, films, and concerts that may be regarded as being congruent with Berry's philosophy.

"Ways of Seeing" Education Programme

In my work as a head of the Department of Religious Studies in an 11-18 grammar school (and in other schools and colleges in which I have taught) I developed a foundation course for pupils in their first year of secondary (high) school entitled "Ways of Seeing" for the Religious Studies curriculum. This course was interdisciplinary and existential in its approach and utilised insights and perspectives from the spiritual traditions of the world, philosophy, science, music, poetry, and prose to consider the ways in which each person develops a personal philosophy of life, a perspective, a *weltanschauung*, a way of seeing the world. The pedagogical philosophy I adopted in developing this curriculum was significantly inspired by the approaches to teaching and learning of Janusz Korczak and Vasily Sukomlinsky, and I have incorporated my reflections upon my teaching of the "Ways of Seeing" programme into the material I have written for the contemplative education book project which I outline below. The curriculum I developed was significantly inspired by the spiritual vision of Thomas Berry and included materials and resources which invited and encouraged children to deeply explore their place in the cosmos.

Thomas Berry and Church Preaching, Teaching, and Ministry

I am an authorised lay minister in my local Church of England parish church, a role in which I lead worship and preach. For many years I have integrated into the ministry of the church exploration of how Christian faith can engage with the ways of seeing and being of Thomas Berry and how these can inspire and encourage the church community to respond to, and engage with, issues such as the climate crisis, ecological devastation, species loss, and diminishing biodiversity.

Contemplative Education Book Project

For several years I have been engaged in writing a book exploring approaches to contemplative education which considers in some depth how Thomas Berry's life, legacy, and vision can be regarded as being profoundly contemplative in its approach. The writing of this book is an ongoing project.

In conclusion therefore, in these four dimensions in which I have responded to Thomas Berry's Great Work, I have aimed to share something of how Thomas Berry can speak profoundly to our current age. Indeed, I affirm his declaration in *Evening Thoughts* that

we see these early years of the twenty-first century as the period when we discover the great community of the Earth, a comprehensive community of all the living and non-living components of the planet. We are just discovering that the human project is itself a component of the Earth project, that our intimacy with the Earth is our way to intimacy with each other. Such are the foundations of our journey into the future.