

Embracing the World We Are Given

Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology

By Joseph Mitchell, CP

Most of our ancestors lived with fewer comforts, less conveniences, and more physical difficulties than we know. Yet there is a general sense that life today is more challenging and difficult than previous generations. Psychological pressures have intensified and spiritual supports have weakened. The stability which comes from noble convictions has crumbled. There is not a place the soul can easily find rest. The disintegration is experienced on so many levels – political, social, ethical, agricultural, educational, religious and economic. We are living in a time of crisis.

Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest and self-described ecologist, suggests we are suffering a crisis in cosmology. He believes our culture desperately needs a new cosmology if we are to survive. It would be simplistic, according to Berry, to conclude that the deterioration of the Earth is due to selfishness or lack of goodwill. We face ecological uncertainty and psychic confusion not because human beings are inherently greedy or evil. Rather, our crisis has been precipitated because humans are living out of inaccurate perceptions of reality.

AN EXHAUSTED COSMOLOGY AND A DEPLETED EARTH

A cosmology is the story a culture tells itself about the way things are – how the universe came into being, how the cosmos operates. The concept of the world which a people adopt is referred to as their cosmology. Nothing is more foundational than this assumption about the nature of time and space. It is preliminary to everything else created by a society. Consequently, a cosmology becomes the blueprint for the way we orient ourselves toward life and inhabit the Earth. The way we educate our young, farm our lands, build our cities, govern our communities, organize our economies, and understand what it means to be a human being – every cultural institution is envisioned and constructed based upon the cosmology of the society.

According to Berry, it is all a matter of story. We are in trouble now because the cosmology underpinning our culture is flawed. It no longer provides a cohesive story which holds life together. Quite the contrary, the present devastation of the Earth is the consequence of the cosmology which the modern world embraced some 400 years ago. We can contaminate the air, the water, and the soil with vast amounts of toxic chemicals. We can destroy mountains, rainforests, and animal habitats. We can deplete the oceans by over-fishing and fouling the rivers with our garbage. We can ravage the planet that brought us into being and exhaust its capacity to carry life because our cosmology has made us autistic in our ability to relate with the natural world. We are alienated from the Earth that brought us into being.

According to the cosmology at the foundation of Western culture, the Earth has no inherent spiritual dimension. Religious sensitivities and scientific assumptions, though often uneasy with each other, share this central feature in common. Neither story can fathom the universe as being sacred. While some in the scientific secular community may

totally dismiss the sacred and eliminate God from the story altogether, even the religiously oriented have a concept of spirit which is essentially transcendent and separate from the world.

Berry, a historian of culture and religions, locates the defining disjuncture in the historical moment of the Black Death. Beginning in the 14th century and continuing for several hundred years, Europe was ravaged by a plague which killed off between one-third and one-half of the population. It was a traumatic moment for Western civilization. Without knowledge of germs or an adequate explanation for the affliction, there were two basic responses to this horrific experience. The religious community judged the world a wicked place to be escaped; the secular scientific community launched an assault to conquer the world and subject it to human dominion. Our modern cosmology and our current problems surfaced at this point.

The plague, according to Berry, shaped our understanding of the world in a decisive way. The religious story lost a sense of creation as a dwelling place of divinity. The emphasis shifted to a divine being abiding in transcendent splendor beyond the universe. This perspective instills within humans, who believe they are destined for union with God, that they can commune the sacred only by transcending the world either physically or mentally. In this story we are told the Earth is merely an interim situation which must be endured as we prepare for the real world to come. There is an overemphasis on escaping this world in order to find our ultimate destiny beyond. Such a religious story which places the meeting place between humans and God in some distant realm tends to underestimate the spiritual dimension of the natural world.

The division between the secular and the spiritual intensified with the development of modern science. Though the scientific industrial perspective may have eliminated religious overtones from the story, it nonetheless adopted the same worldview which assumes the present situation to be defective. The existing conditions of the world are considered unacceptable and must be improved. Without the restraints which spiritual concerns would require, humans used scientific technology to conquer the natural world and force its submission. The planet became a resource for human consumption. For some 400 years, scientific achievements advanced technology to dominate the Earth and subjugate it to human convenience. Berry refers to this as the “deep inner rage of Western society against its earthly condition.”

Since the Black Plague, Berry contends, humans have been obsessed with the struggle to flee what is considered to be the tragic circumstances of this life. There is a resentful and fearful attitude toward the natural world. The religious perspective suggests the flawed conditions of the world are overcome through transcendence to another realm. It includes numerous stories which promise a better world somewhere else. The secular scientific pursuit, on the other hand, focuses its energy toward probing the Earth in order to bring its processes into submission under human control.

These assumptions have put humans at odds with the natural world. From our modern perspective, the Earth is simply inert matter without a spiritual dimension. Berry insists

this cosmology enabled us to develop a sense of superiority over the world and a determination to have dominion over it. If the Earth is not our true home, the story gives us permission to explore and probe the natural world with little concern for its internal integrity. After all, it is only a background for our transient temporal life and a resource at our disposal.

NEW PERCEPTIONS

During the last one hundred years, our story of creation and the sense of our place in the universe have dramatically changed. The discovery of the birth of the universe is one of the supreme achievements of modern science. There is now a general consensus among scientists that the natural world flared forth 13.7 billion years ago. We have learned that the Earth, as well as the sun and other planets in our solar system, formed 4.5 billion years ago of particles from a supernova explosion of ancient stars. Life first emerged in the form of single-cell bacteria some 3.9 billion years ago and has continued to complexify and evolve into myriad forms. In 1968, for the first time humans witnessed the image of Earth as seen from space – a radiant blue and white planet floating in a vast sky.

The new information perceived through observational science has awakened us to the remarkable and magnificent creativity of our planet as a living organism. The Earth is no mere scenic backdrop on which we live our lives. It is not merely a natural resource for our consumption. Serious scientific discussion speaks of creation as an integral web of life. There is a dawning realization that humans may be a unique dimension of the Earth, but we are not separate from it. In fact, our existence is impossible except within the community of life systems. We do not simply live on the Earth; we are the Earth. Humans are made of the same recycled material as the land, the plants, the rain, and the sea. All of the elements in our body were forged out of a star. We are born out of the natural world and find our survival only within the larger community of life. Nothing in creation is itself without everything else. The inherent integrity of creation is essential to life.

Through new perceptions made possible by enhancements in the telescope and microscope, a momentous change in human consciousness is taking place. We discovered a universe which could never have been detected with the unaided human eye. We are able to witness the essential unity of the cosmos. As Berry is fond of saying, the universe is a communion of subjects, not a mere collection of objects.

Mystics of all spiritual traditions have consistently intuited this to be the case. However, mystics were unable to produce photographs or other evidence to demonstrate what they perceived. Now, with the advancements of modern science, we can see back over 13 billion years and trace the story the universe. Barry claims we can finally appreciate the spiritual and revelatory aspects of the natural world as we witness the story of the universe coming into being and proceeding through a sequence of remarkable transformations.

This, of course, is not our usual way of thinking – it does not fit our conventional story. We learned to understand ourselves in a different cosmology. We developed a culture and institutions without ever questioning the assumptions of a static universe. We assumed the Earth was inert, never anticipating it to be a living system. Now we are in deep personal and social confusion because the old story at the foundation of our institutions is no longer functional. We find ourselves living with political, religious, medical, agricultural, educational, and economic systems which operate out of assumptions that are no longer possible to hold. We are desperately struggling to grasp the implications of what we are discovering about the natural world.

Berry describes our time as a transition from the Cenozoic Era to the emerging Ecozoic Era – a period when humans will be intimately present to the planet as participating members in a single Earth community. The basic thrust of the Ecozoic Era will be the development of technologies which are mutually enhancing to both the human community and the entire Earth community. According to Berry, the transition into a new cosmology will take the form of a new mythic vision. “The distorted dream of an industrial technological paradise is being replaced by the more viable dream of a mutually enhancing human presence within an ever-renewing organic-based Earth community.”

At the present time many living systems are under attack because of abusive human technology. As a species, we teeter on the edge of an ecological catastrophe due, in large part, to over-consumption of natural resources and careless pollution of the environment. Numerous species are going extinct as their habitats are polluted or destroyed. The food chain is being disrupted by manipulation and manufactured substances. If the finely tuned balance that sustains the Earth is disrupted, it will be due to human error. Humans will have interfered with the capacity of Earth to do what Earth has been doing for billions of years.

If, as Berry observes, at its root our problem is a crisis of cosmology which enshrines a worldview of human transcendence over the world of nature, then the solution begins with a change in perspective. As long as we operate out of old assumptions that alienate us from the Earth, shelter us from its spiritual dimensions, and prompt us to pursue progress in immature ways, the destruction will continue. Berry believes we must awaken to the grand story of the universe out of which we emerged. This view of reality is something new for both scientists and believers. It is a remarkable 13.7 story which brought forth hydrogen, stars, planets, rose bushes, zebras and human beings. Only when we abide this new integral cosmology will we find the vision to build a hopeful future.

Catholic Social Teaching and the Integrity of Creation

1. Integrity of Creation:

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the Earth as we have in the past. ...a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge.

Pope John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* (Dec. 1989)

2. Global Warming:

The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.

Pope John Paul II
World Day of Peace Message, 1990 #7

3. Responsible Consumption:

Equally worrying is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way.

Centesimus Annus, #37