Thomas Berry: Context and Contribution

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Thomas Berry's "The Gaia Theory: Its Religious Implications" provides a bird's eye view of his contribution to the discussion of the relationship of religions and ecology. My response to his reflections will begin with a brief overview of Berry's contribution. I will then consider his essay from two perspectives: first, the ideas he presents, that is, the religious implications he draws from the Gaia Hypothesis, and, secondly, the rhetorical performance in which the ideas are presented.

Thomas Berry has been undoubtedly one of the most consistent voices on behalf of ecological concerns from within the North American religious community since the 1970s. His seminal essay, *The New Story: On the Origin and Transmission of Values*, was published as a monograph in 1978 (Anima). In that essay, he set the contours of his critique of Christian culture's complicity in the ecological crisis, as well as his proposal for a recovery. While he has refined, enlarged, and concretized his critique and proposal since then, Berry is consistent in maintaining that religious (in particular, Christian) beliefs played a significant role in the development of attitudes that led to the instrumentalization of nature in the

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modern world. What has resulted is an immense cultural problem or "supreme pathology," which he describes as an underlying mythic structure to the whole industrial-technological enterprise and a consequent psychic addiction to "progress" at all costs. No quick-fix technological, political, or legal efforts can adequately heal this pathology, he argues. What is required is an infusion of new values at the cultural level. On the basis of dialectical analysis of the history of human-Earth relations in the West, Berry proposes that the scientific account of evolution can ground the appropriate values.

An Original Approach

Charges against the biblical tradition as largely responsible for the ecological crisis were not new in the 1970s (Watts 1958, 1970; White 1967; Deloria 1973; Ruether 1975). While there is no doubt that Berry was aware of these charges, his own critique is nuanced differently from these and accounts for the originality of his proposed solution.

Berry's formal education was in cultural history. Giambattista Vico, the subject of Berry's doctoral dissertation, strongly influenced his methodology.[1] His academic career was in the spirituality of world religions. Throughout his early writings there is a consistent concern for the existentialist dimensions of religion and the role of myth and symbol in the formation of cultures. Hence, in his later critique of Western culture under the horizon of ecological responsibility, he brings to bear an awareness of the power of symbol and myth for distortion, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, for the positive enforcement of appropriate meanings and values within a culture. The judgement of precisely which values are appropriate rests on his examination of Western traditons under the horizon of ecological responsibility.

Berry's proposed solution to the ecological crisis, namely, a story to inform culture with new values relating humans to the natural world, is then a post-critical construction under a definite horizon. Contrary to what might be expected, his emphasis on story did not develop out of the contemporary scholarship on narrative, but from his awareness of the power of stories in the construction of the great cultures of the past. Pre-eminent among these is Augustine's *City of God,* which Berry says was an effective response in its time to a civilization in crisis (1991, 27).

In terms of his interest in science, the most considerable influence on Berry was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Berry's writings, however, also

1. Vico's influence can be seen in Berry's penchant for dividing history into ages based on a change in consciousness and the value he gives to a critical return to primal cultures in order to reform society.

reflect a knowledge of the history of science, of natural history, and of contemporary scientific theories, especially in ecology and cosmology. As evident from his preceding essay, Berry sees in contemporary scientific theories of cosmology an opening for a new valuation of the natural world and a recovery of the religious meaning of the universe. His efforts are focused on making that cosmology functional (effective) in meeting the ecological crisis. Again, he considers story to be the medium through which that effectiveness can be achieved.

Berry enters the conversation between ecology and religion, then, not as an apologist for Christianity, or for any particular religious tradition. If anything, he is an apologist for all religion in that he sees a necessity for a religious interpetation of the universe as it is newly understood by contemporary scientists. He challenges religionists and theologians to take these theories more seriously and to consider their implications for religious beliefs and practices. By his own admission, however, he is not primarily concerned with addressing the religious communities, as such. He is speaking to the larger public. (His recent consultations with U.S. Vice-President Al Gore and his staff exemplify Berry's larger public interest.)

Berry's writings also testify to his own religious experience of the natural world, a kind of mystical apprehension of ultimate reality through a contemplation of the universe. This is a contemplation not only of the static forms that fall within the ordinary confines of one's life, but of the whole emergent process that brought them into being. It is this religious apprehension as much as his academic background that grounds Berry's vision of the universe. His intent, like that of feminists and liberationists, is to recover a voice that has been silenced. In Berry's case, though, it's the voice of the natural world. His consideration of the Gaia Theory, then, is within the context of how this theory relates to the story of the universe and, thus, to his overall program.

Gaia: What Is It?

The Gaia Hypothesis (now raised to the status of theory) is an example of some of the new theories of science that support Berry's vision and that of ecologists in general. Named for a Greek Goddess of the Earth, the hypothesis was formulated by James Lovelock in 1972 as a result of his research for NASA to determine if life existed on Mars (Lovelock 1991, 30). His approach was to analyze the atmosphere of Mars. In so doing, Lovelock became keenly aware of the difference life systems made to the atmosphere of Earth when compared to that of other planets. He was particularly interested in the dynamic interaction that occurs on Earth between the biota and atmosphere. He observed that life creates its own conditions (atmospheric components and temperature) for survival.

Lovelock hypothesized that the temperature and atmospheric components of Earth are actively regulated by Earth's life forms. In turn, these conditions participate in the evolution of the biota. Because the interaction is similar to that which characterizes an organism, Lovelock hypothesized that the Earth is best understood as a living organism. He was soon supported by Lynn Margulis, whose own research on microorganisms seemed to corroborate Lovelock's (Margulis and Lovelock, 1974).

The Gaia Hypothesis became the subject of much debate in the scientific community. Some of the debate centered around the meaning of "living" as applied to the planet. Berry lays out the understanding that Lovelock and Margulis intend. The debate was as much about philosophical assumptions, such as the nature of scientific inquiry and knowing, as it was about the research findings.[2] Was this real science? Was the assertion that the Earth is alive a scientific statement? Though a scientific proposal, the Gaia Theory has captured the imagination of ecofeminists, ecologists, and others beyond the borders of academic science (Ruether 1992; Spretnak 1991; Hughes 1983).

Are There Religious Implications?

Berry identifies two dimensions of the Gaia Theory as having religious implications. One is the changing perception of scientific methodology implied by this kind of theory; the other is the theory itself. In terms of methodology, Berry places the Gaia Theory among scientific theories that contribute to the demise of dualist, mechanistic, and reductionist methods that governed the development of modern science. Lovelock's procedure was to begin with the "whole," the complex interaction within present Earth systems and to bring that awareness to experimental analysis at the micro-level. The underlying presumption is that the relationships will be organic rather than mechanical. The model is one derived from a life-supporting universe rather than a mechanistic or even chemico-physical one. Such a model is closer to our ordinary and aesthetic experience of nature. Hence, our artistic and religious "talk" about the natural world has a closer affinity to the images engendered by this kind of theorizing.

Berry also finds religious implications in the content of the Gaia Theory, the same religious implications that arise from the story of the entire universe. The integral relationship between biota and environment that obtain on planet Earth is a further specification, he says, of the intimacy

2. Laurent LeDuc (1993) investigates this aspect of the Gaia Hypothesis. See his dissertation, *Intellectual Conversion and the Gaia Hypothesis*, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto School of Theology, 1993. Unpublished.

that is characteristic of the larger universe. The theory indicates agency, a self-organizational dynamic, which suggests the subjectivity of the universe. This evokes a sense of identification of humans with the universe—as subject to subject, and a sense of reverence.

Such a "feel" of human presence for the universe is not new. It was characteristic of primal peoples and of other cultures such as that of China. According to Berry, it was lost in the development of Western society, but has recently been witnessed again in the experience of the astronauts and in the change that is occurring in science. Berry advocates a return (albeit a post-critical one, as in Ricoeur's "second naiveté") to these earlier sensitivities. Today these sensivities can be enhanced, however, by the account of the transformational process whereby the universe as we experience it came into being. For Berry, the Gaia Theory emphasizes the "special numinous quality" the Earth assumes within this process. The Earth manifests "the deepest realms of existence." It is on this planet that the transformatory process is in full-bloom.

The Gaia Theory can be said to have the religious implications that Thomas Berry sees in it if one accepts as "religious" the human experience of awe and wonder before the universe. Berry is using the term "religious" in Eliadean fashion; the human is intrinsically religious. As Berry suggests in his comment on Aquinas, this common human experience invites thematization within different religious traditions. What Berry is raising, then, are general notions open to different theological interpetations. Even from a Christian perspective, however, there is also something quite traditional in Berry's reflections. (His reference to Aquinas is revealing.) The natural world raises the question of ultimate reality, of God. Even the activity of human intelligence, in this case, science, mediates the divine. The idea that there were actually two scriptures, the physical universe and the Bible, was not uncommon in the Christian tradition (Santmire, 1985, 36, 63–64, 128). There is also a strong sense of sacramentality evident in Berry's association of the "creative process" of the universe with "revelatory experience of the divine mystery" and "mystical communion."

Religion (Christianity in particular) has been preoccupied in the modern period with historical consciousness and the human subject. This was a necessary and challenging project that attempted to confront many of the same forces that instrumentalized both people (some groups more than others) and nature. The emphases have been on the re-valuation of history, especially the history of suffering, as the domain of God's activity. Berry's project, of which this essay provides a cursory view, confronts another area of alienation. It raises the questions: Have we fully recovered the human subject or the meaning of God if God's creation is almost totally excluded from the realm of meaning and value? Can we not find,

in the entire scientific enterprise and the human quest it signifies, any meaning constituitive of our religious understanding of reality? The clearest statement of "The Gaia Theory: Its Religious Implications" is that there are indeed religious implications.

Critical Reflections

Berry's essay does present a number of difficulties. The linguistic turn has sensitized our ears to statements such as "[T]he universe itself is self-referent, a text without context." Berry seems to mean simply that an interpetation of the universe is a necessary context for an interpretation of anything else in the universe. But, can an interpretation escape context? Likewise, modern history has made us wary of organicist views, comprehensive stories, and foundational stances, all of which are indicated in Berry's position. Deconstructionists make a thought-provoking stand no matter what our postmodern position. Effective human freedom is hard won and always precarious. Yet the ecological crisis is an undeniable fact that brings a certain humbling dimension to all our efforts and questions. It is a crisis whose roots are deeply embedded in our culture. Its solution rests on a comprehensive willingness that a religious vision can inspire.

I believe that any assessment of Berry's contribution to the religion-ecology conversation must take into account his own performance within that conversation. In other words, the presentation of his ideas is at least as relevant as are the ideas themselves. Most of his works, including this one, were first presented to live audiences. They are provocative and evocative. This essay, with its poetic excursions and suggestive metaphors (Universal Mother, privileged planet, curvature of space, mystical venture), is clearly intended to evoke the sensibilities of which it also speaks. His account of the story of the universe is also replete with imaginal language.[3] In the forward march of the narrative, some images invite the reader to pause, escape established rhythmic bonds and freely envision alternative worlds. These images are generally associated with differentiation and contingency; the universe is not programmable. In Berry's words, "the larger task of the scientific venture and ultimately of the religious venture is to relate [unity and differentiation] to each other."

If Paul Ricoeur is correct in concluding that metaphors, like parables

3. For a discussion of the imaginal language in contemporary cosmology, see Stephen Happel, "Metaphors and Time Symmetry: Cosmologies in Physics and Christian Meanings." *Quantum Cosmology and The Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*. Edited by Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C.J. Isham (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1993).

in the gospels, break the closure of stories, and if Bernard Lonergan is correct in seeing in images and symbols potential power in meeting the social surd of decline, then this aspect of Berry's contribution has to be considered in all discussions relating his proposal to social praxis and the other agendas of late modernity. No essay of Berry, including this one, is merely an essay. "The Gaia Theory: Its Religious Implications" is not only about the religious implications of Gaia; it is Berry's own praxis directed toward human subjects in an effort to evoke within them and, hence within the culture, the values necessary to confront the ecological crisis. In this sense, it is a performance of the religious implications of Gaia. This suggestion does not imply that Berry's ideas be removed from the critical scrutiny of the religious or theological academy, but does suggest a larger context for critical attention.

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