

## **Omega Point, Ecozoic Era, and the Anthropocene**

John Grim, President's Corner Spring/Summer 2016

For some time I have been intrigued by three terms used to designate periods of time having cosmological, geological and cultural significance, namely, *omega point*, *ecozoic era*, and *anthropocene*. They are much more than simply markers of time. A basic question confronts me when I considered each of them: why do they have such persuasive force?

This is the question I take up here as I reflect upon these three terms, namely, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's image of *omega point*, Thomas Berry's call for an *ecozoic era*, and the increasing usage of the term *anthropocene* attributed to the Dutch Nobel-laureate chemist, Paul Crutzen. Each term has distinct meanings for its originator and here I will draw out a few implications.

### **Omega Point**

There is no easy entry into Teilhard's novel, terminology. For example, "Omega Point" is a central idea that continues to puzzle and allure. One reason is that it has an end-time, or eschatological, tone based on the final Greek letter of the alphabet. This would have immediate resonance with Teilhard's own Christian tradition and its ongoing sense of the return of Christ at the end of time.

For Teilhard, *omega* has two distinct usages with broader implications: first, *omega* is definitely a central idea within the evolutionary process but not limited to that. Second, *omega* is also a transcendent term for the culminating convergence beyond evolution.

Teilhard's first sense of *omega* can be described using the Orthodox Christian concept of "divinizing," i.e. something within the evolutionary process brings everything into the context of the sacred. For Teilhard the interwoven character of all reality as matter-spirit led him to speak of the universe as a "divine milieu."

Teilhard related the human encounter with *omega* through terms such as hominization and noosphere. These challenging terms describe a human-spiritualizing dynamic (hominization) and a human sphere of consciousness around and over the Earth (noosphere). Thus, the first usage of *omega* can be seen as a natural point of convergence, for example, when the subjectivity of humanity converges with the interiority of the cosmos. Teilhard speaks of this *omega point* as a social and spiritual maturation of the Earth.

This first usage of *omega* is as a source of energy within the process without which evolution could not occur. In this regard Teilhard writes in *The Human Phenomenon*: “For the noosphere to be actual and real, the center must be actual and real. To be extremely attractive, *omega* must already be supremely present.” (*HP*, 192) Here Teilhard speaks of a *Christ-omega* residing within the whole evolutionary process drawing it forward.

Teilhard’s second usage of *omega* relates to transcendence and pre-existence. Thus, the Alpha beginning of the universe is directly related to the Omega Point as the end of the universe. Likened to the poles of God, this energetic transcendence also acts through the mediation of Christ-Omega. When Teilhard talks about unity, then, he is referring to the two poles of God - alpha and omega - beginning and end. This second usage of *omega* instantiates, makes fully present, one of Teilhard’s cardinal cosmological principles, namely, *union differentiates*. That is, the “within” of reality is all of the differentiated consciousnesses within the universe pulled by radial energy. This “within” is *omega* that ultimately converges in a transcendent Omega Point beyond material evolution.

In his major opus, *The Human Phenomenon* Teilhard uses the image of a pyramidal cone to explain his insight into *omega* both within the process and without in its final convergence. He writes: “[Evolution] is the pyramid whose summit is supported by its base. This is how it looks along the way. And this is even how Omega is itself discovered by us at the end of the process, insofar as the movement of universal synthesis culminates in it. But notice carefully that in its evolutionary aspect Omega still only

shows *half* of itself. At the same time there is the term of the series, it is also *outside* the series. It not only crowns but closes the series...we need to do more than say that it *emerges* from the rise of consciousness: we must add that it has simultaneously already *emerged*.” (*HP*, 193)

There is an inspirational charge in Teilhard’s amazing capacity for articulating *omega* as a unity both within and without evolution. This powerful sense of unity in Teilhard’s thought can, as he emphasizes, differentiate reality. But it also passes through the material-spiritual universe leaving behind remnants of its creative past.

Thus, in the cultural realm, Teilhard described “primitive peoples” as humans through whom the “Spirit of the Earth,” or *omega*, has evolved. Indigenous peoples are differentiated, but left behind by the *Christ-Omega* as spirit-matter moves through and beyond them to later civilizations. This sense of progress pervades much of Teilhard’s thought and in some statements maps onto a colonialist reading of the Other as now inferior to the work of building *omega*. To critique Teilhard in this way acknowledges his limitations while continuing to ponder and to affirm his penetrating insights into the emerging complexity-consciousness of the universe.

The suasive power of Teilhard’s image of *omega* activates a unity of convergence with which he interprets “world religions” without always acknowledging their particular expressions of that convergence. For example, Teilhard labels religions like Buddhism and Hinduism as “world-denying.” He lacks sufficient awareness of the many ways in which these traditions symbolically embodied the divine in the world of material substance. That is, these religions also have strong world-affirming dimensions. Teilhard could not see that the *Christ-Omega* he preferred, because of Christianity’s incarnational orientation, was paralleled by differentiated and even incarnational expressions in religions other than Christianity.

### **Ecozoic Era**

Thomas Berry named our emerging human-Earth period as the *ecozoic era*, namely, a period of flourishing human-Earth relations. This aspirational vision flowed

from his awareness of the magnitude of the planetary destruction humans have effected by means of industrial, extractive economics. On a geological scale, he understood the Cenozoic period, the last sixty-five million years of the incredible florescence of life on Earth, as coming to an end. This is marked by the sixth extinction spasm that humans are now causing. Such a realization provoked Berry to call for a transformation into a new period of flourishing for the Earth community, which he termed the *ecozoic era*. Berry described it this way:

The magnitude of the ecological crisis of our times is such that we are presently terminating the Cenozoic era of Earth's development and entering into the Ecozoic phase of the Earth process. The Cenozoic has been the period of the expansion of life in the full brilliance of its expression, but this expansion of the life systems of Earth is being terminated. This will affect all our human institutions and professions that were appropriate to the Cenozoic era. They must now undergo a transformation if they are to be integral with the new period in the historical evolution of the planet. The transformation required is from an anthropocentric norm of reality and value to biocentric and geocentric norms. This will affect every aspect of our human thought and action. It will affect language, religion, morality, economics, education, science, technology and medicine.

In our discussion of sacred community, we need to understand that in all our activities the Earth is primary, the human is derivative. The Earth is our primary community. Indeed, all particular modes of Earthly being exist by virtue of their role within this community. ("Earth as Sacred Community," in *Evening Thoughts*: 43)

For Berry the Cenozoic period provided the biological context for human self-reflexive consciousness to emerge. The richness of life evident in this period has given rise to our capacity for wonder, beauty, and intimacy. In presenting the term *ecozoic* Berry calls for a new awareness and reciprocity on the part of humans so they can be present to the planet in ways that are mutually enhancing. Yet, Berry did not bracket the term, *ecozoic*, in an anthropocentric container.

This shift to the *ecozoic* is resonant with what contemporary geologists are identifying as our current age, namely, the "Anthropocene." This is the period in which human-induced change has become the defining characteristic of this era. Thomas Berry understood that the transformation needed now is a turn from an anthropocentric fixation

to more biocentric and ecocentric concerns. The full resilience of Earth's ecosystems is beyond our knowledge. Nonetheless, life as we know it is being severely curtailed by human industrial processes. The short-term material benefits to the human largely distract us from realizing the consequences of what we are doing to the larger Earth community.

Even religions themselves are threatened as we diminish our experience of the divine in nature. While many religions have a profound sense of the divine within the cosmos, this experience of the universe often lacked an understanding of ecological relatedness. Berry reflects with Teilhard on the human story as integral with the universe from the beginning. He realized that this divine reality is the story within all differentiated reality. In this sense Berry affirms both process and differentiated beings as integral to evolution. The dynamic presence of the universe to itself is reflected in all consciousness, especially that of humans. That presence infuses every dimension of the galactic story. Cosmic presence is at the heart of the Earth story interrelating it to everything else. Berry's ecological thought is inherently cosmological. Perfection is simultaneously in the whole and that whole is expressed in each particular being and event of the universe.

Thomas realizes that human impacts on landscapes and biodiversity are not adequately described on a human historical scale. More importantly, he observes the geological scale of human industrial extractive economies. He understands these shifts as presenting profound challenges to the survival of our current petroleum-based civilization. The transitions to the *ecozioc era* require reconnecting at deep cosmological dimensions of our being. Berry proposes that the *ecozioc era* would emerge as we re-discover the story of our evolutionary journey along with our ecological consciousness and cosmological rituals, such as those transmitted by Indigenous Peoples. His concern was for the community of life on Earth, as he writes:

Humans as a planetary presence are currently closing down the Cenozoic era of Earth history and entering the Ecozioc era. This geological shift is marked by the fact that the sixth extinction spasm is occurring, and it is of our own making. This is the largest transition in Earth history since the end of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. The

survival of other species and the vitality of human affairs will depend on our capacity to adapt to this transition. Above all, this entry into the Ecozoic era is the entry into the period of the Earth community with a new sense of its sacred dimension. Just as traditional societies entered into the sacred liturgy of the natural world expressed in the sequence of cosmological transformations throughout the season of the year, so now we are in the process of rediscovering the sacred dimension of the great Earth community in its stupendous unfolding over these past billions of years. (“Earth as Sacred Community,” in *Evening Thoughts*: 43, 45)

## **Anthropocene**

The term, *anthropocene*, has a multilayered history with Soviet scientists using the term in the 1960s. The biologist, Eugene Stoermer, proposed it in the 1970s, and some geologists began to use it. But major persuasive attention came after a public address by Nobel-winner Paul Crutzen. Then, in an article in 2000 Crutzen and Stoermer emphasized humanity’s impact on the whole Earth as marking a geological age. They used the term *anthropocene* for this current geological epoch. In regard to its start, they said: “To assign a more specific date to the onset of the ‘anthropocene’ seems somewhat arbitrary, but we propose the latter part of the 18th century, although we are aware that alternative proposals can be made (some may even want to include the entire holocene). However, we choose this date because, during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become clearly noticeable. This is the period when data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several ‘greenhouse gases’, in particular CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub> [methane]. Such a starting date also coincides with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784.” (“The Anthropocene,” in *Global Change Newsletter* 41: 17-18) Thus, Crutzen and Stoermer also focused on the industrial period as marking human activities that increasingly affected the whole planet.

Interestingly, some scientists, such as David Sloan Wilson, have seen a connection between the geological epoch, *anthropocene*, based on the dominant impact of humans on the planet and the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In this sense he describes noosphere, namely, human global consciousness, as a manifestation of

Omega Point. (See “Evolution and the Anthropocene: Science, Religion, and the Human Future,” Smithsonian Museum, May 22, 2016).

The use of the term *anthropocene* represents a remarkable effort on the part of the geological community to provide language for reflection on the magnitude of human impacts on the Earth. Admittedly, the International Union of Geological Sciences, the professional organization that recognizes names for the ages of the Earth, has yet to affirm shifting from the term Holocene for the current period of the Earth from 11, 700 years ago after the last ice ages.

Thus, *anthropocene* draws our attention to the amounts of methane and CO<sub>2</sub> that humans have put into the atmosphere, as well as nuclear isotopes that now appear all over the Earth from the testing of weapons, biodiversity extinction due to habitat loss, and ocean and soil degradation. We are aware that the lists of environmental pollution and degradation are lengthy and depressing. Is this what gives the term *anthropocene* its suasive force, namely, truth-telling?

Yet, are there also limits embedded within this term *anthropocene*? The philosopher, Kathleen Dean Moore, and others have argued: “Not the ‘Anthropocene.’ That name completely muddles the metaphor. We don’t name new epochs after the destructive force that ended the epoch that came before....the very notion that humanoids have become the “Deciders,” the shapers of the Earth, makes the Earth guffaw in swirls of violence. If we are shaping anything at all, we are shaping climate chaos, and chaos in the ocean and on the land. If there is a voice in that whirlwind, it is not the voice of man.” (*Earth Island Journal*, Spring 2013) This objection to naming an era after the perpetrator of the degradation is paralleled by an economic critique.

In Jason Moore’s work, *The Capitalocene: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis*, he identifies the central role of financial capital in the industrial era. “The alternative to the “Age of Man” (the Anthropocene) is the “Age of Capital” (the Capitalocene). In this, capitalism is understood as a world-ecology, joining the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in dialectical unity.” The human impact on the planet is resituated, in his argument, not in a

human holism but in non-linear relations of wealth and power that both consume and produce an ersatz nature.

### **A Final Thought**

While *omega* and *ecozoic* have aspirational dimensions in their intention and meaning, *anthropocene*, might appear more neutral and simply descriptive on the surface. But all of these terms engage and persuade us toward positions of self -understanding in the face of larger realities that confront us. They can determine constructive orientations and ultimately offer values on our journeys. These brief reflections do not move toward final conclusions or closure, but they may open space for interpretive and integral narratives. They may birth new ways of understanding the stories that move us.