

# Thomas Berry – An Earth Spirituality Out on the Edge

Memories and musings on the monk who suggested the church "put the Bible on the shelf for about twenty years."

Mike Bell

January 6, 2017



Image: Abdallahh/Flickr

One day in April of 1990 I was listening to the CBC radio science program, Quirks and Quarks. It was a special Earth Day program and they were interviewing Thomas Berry, a cultural historian, a monk in the Passionist Order, and a Roman Catholic priest.

He had become quite famous because of his writings and his speaking out against abuses to Earth. I knew him. We had been members of the same religious order, and in my younger days as a student for the priesthood we lived together in the same monastery in New York.

Toward the end of the program the interviewer asked Berry what the Christian churches could do about Earth Day. He responded, “It would help if they put the Bible on the shelf for about twenty years.” That answer reverberated around the world and made its way to the Vatican.

Berry was a man who lived on the edge of the institutional church. He lived in the present; but, like the Roman image of the Janus with a face looking in two directions, he could see into the past and the future at the same time.

When he looked back within the church he saw an institution he loved and whose written scriptures inspired him. But he could also see that it was an institution locked up in its history with a suspicion of science and a belief that it was the only true church. It was bound by countless rules, regulations, and an unceasing emphasis on sexual matters to the exclusion of other more pressing concerns. And like many other mainline Christian churches, it was losing its members – particularly among the young, many of whom believed it had become irrelevant.

He often noted that if we lived on the moon, our minds, emotions, speech, imagination, and sense of the Divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.

When he looked into the future outside the church, he saw a new world of great scientific advances that was teaching us more about Earth than we have ever known before. He also saw harmful multinational corporations, rampant capitalism, and extractive economies that were destroying Earth. But the church seemed unaware of what was happening. It was like a damaged ship adrift in an ocean, buffeted on all sides by violent storms, trying to fix the leaks but unable to steer its way through.

From Berry’s point of view the church was unable to come to grips with the modern world around it. It saw the world as something “out there,” something totally distinct from itself. It did not see its members as Earthlings, part of Earth and the universe. It had lost its essential relationship with Earth and the universe. For Berry that relationship was critical. It was the key to all spiritualities and the primary source of divine revelation. He often noted that if we lived on the moon, our minds, emotions, speech, imagination, and sense of the Divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape. He noted that “We can no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an ‘it’ rather than a ‘thou.’”

But what is an Earth Spirituality?

I found out one day on one of my trips to visit him in North Carolina. I was living in the Arctic and working as a consultant in Inuit and Dene communities. I said to him, “Tom, a lot of people in the Arctic are interested in earth-based spiritualities. Have you ever written anything on an earth-based spirituality?” He paused for a moment and said, “No, I haven’t.” Then he said, “But I

have written something on the spirituality of Earth that you might find interesting.” That’s when the lights went on.

“We can no longer hear the voice of the rivers, the mountains, or the sea. The trees and meadows are no longer intimate modes of spirit presence. The world about us has become an ‘it’ rather than a ‘thou.’”

I finally understood what he had been saying in all his writings. We are Earthlings, part of the living Earth and the universe. Just as our human consciousness is the universe reflecting upon itself, so our human spirituality is an extension of the anima mundi – the Earth soul. This is what gives meaning to his famous comment about putting the Bible on the shelf. Our relationship with Earth – its beauty and its munificence, its ecosystems that are the means of our survival – is our source of life and what makes us aware of the Divine influence in our lives. This is also the primary source of revelation available to all religious traditions, to all indigenous traditions, to all nations, and to all individuals no matter what their cultures, histories or belief systems.

Berry often noted that in this relationship we are not a collection of objects, we are a communion of living subjects, linked to a living Earth and all its species. He saw this Earth spirituality as something that must be deeply imbedded within us.

But we must also live on the edge.

We must look deeply into our lifestyles, institutions, and systems that are helping to destroy Earth. And this must awaken within us a “love of the land,” to use a traditional indigenous expression. More importantly we must translate this awareness into action. We must look forward to the world we are leaving to our children and grandchildren. We must work to stop the abuse of Earth and care for its health and vitality. We must adopt the mission Berry described as the Great Work: creating a mutually enhancing relationship between our species and Earth. This Great Work is healing work.

In this [Anthropocene age](#) of runaway climate change, we must learn to live on the edge with an Earth Spirituality. We are continually groping our way forward and it can be very uncomfortable out there on the edge. But it begins with an awareness best expressed by one of Thomas Berry’s mentors, Teilhard de Chardin:

“We are not human beings on a spiritual journey; we are spiritual beings on a human journey.”

---

*Mike Bell, once a fellow monk with Thomas Berry, has a special interest in bringing Berry’s Earth Spirituality to local communities. He lives in Comox, BC*