

this; and, how both the Kabbalah and the Course emerge as robust 'tools for the head' to help one think through this expansion in our perspective; how they help tease us out of the 'box'. All offered not as a dogmatic system but as an experiment after knowing to try out and see. Ironically, the only touches of 'dogma' come at the sometimes too narrow, slightly grumpy characterisations of the mainstream Church whose blending of good and evil is probably more nuanced than is allowed here.

But, in the meantime, three thoughts on attractiveness.

First, because it is a picturing of reality that is ultimately inclusive – the illusion comes to an end – we are reunited within our commonly held, unifying reality, nobody is excluded, let alone punished. Jesus, the man from Nazareth, in the Course's view, is the first person to fully recognize the full nature of our situation and goes to his death not as a substitution for sin but as a demonstration that death too is simply an illusion. His death is exemplary, that requires no imitation because its reality is rooted in the fact of the Resurrection where we are enabled to 'see through' death.

Second, because the pathway to this Atonement (and one of the features of the Course is that it uses Christian language in uniquely innovative, and coherent within its own logic, ways) is through the continual practice of forgiveness, a forgiveness not born out of either condescension or pity (or subtle manipulation) but from bringing to birth a continuing recognition of our underlying unity. Everyone I harm or who I am harmed by is fundamentally myself. Harm is a condition of separation, is only possible because we entertain this illusion of separation. True forgiveness is the continuing attention to our connectivity, our being enfolded one in another.

Third, because it is resolutely practical. The Course is primarily a work book of 365 daily meditations and exercises (with supporting commentary and materials). Diligently followed, it is meant to work, to transform one's life in a way that makes forgiveness and love possible. It is a practice that is both gentle and yet wholly tough minded. As with forgiveness, so with love, many of the forms in which it appears to us in the realm of Ego are precisely that, exercises in Ego – what the course calls 'special love', as distinct from 'holy love' predominates – for when we examine our motives how many of them do we find to be self-driven, self-protective, self-interested? Mostly answers the Course robustly, maybe Smoley suggests, a little too dispiritingly so!

This perhaps leads to a consideration of what is less attractive about the Course – that like previous 'Gnostic' perspectives though the route may be open to all in theory, in practice, its demands a certain austerity. This may be as with the Course, a psychological one or, as on other occasions, ascetic or intellectual ones such that it becomes a path so daunting as to be for the few! Though, perhaps, this is offset in the Course's case with a sense of the spaciousness of 'time' – since the only downside is the illusion that we already know, we will find the opportunity to apply ourselves to liberation in due course!

The book ends with chapters that consider what this perspective might mean for the practice of Christianity more broadly – what practices and perspectives may persist and which might be usefully put aside – and with a helpful 'summa' that recapitulates the Course's theology or framing that can only be a helpful hermeneutical key to engaging with the text itself.

At the end of my first reading of the book, I did want to want to set it down, only partially tongue in cheek, with a satisfying hurrah of 'Valentinus rides again'! Valentinus having been the most successful and purportedly eloquent of early Gnostic writers.

Whether you are convinced or not, it is one of those books that wholly deserves to be seriously wrestled with to assure yourself as to why or why not? It, also, deserves to prompt more serious Christian theological reflection on the Course in Miracles itself (though on the likelihood of that, I expect I am as pessimistic as the author)!

## THE COSMIC LITURGY

Peter Reason

### ■ THOMAS BERRY: A BIOGRAPHY

Tucker, Mary Evelyn, John Grim,  
and Andrew Angyal

Columbia University Press,  
2019, 360 pp., £25, h/b  
– ISBN 978-0-23117-698-9

Thomas Berry was one of the great ecological teachers of our time, one who linked contemporary concerns for ecological devastation with the deep human urge to connect with

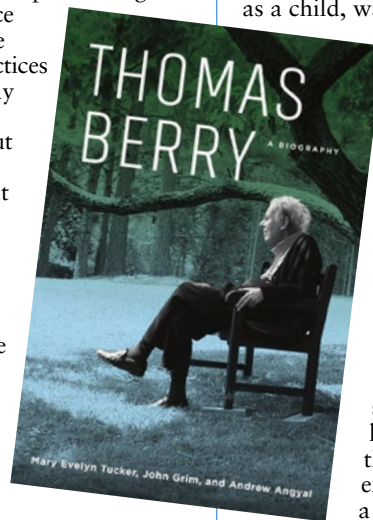
the cosmos. His books include *The Dream of the Earth*, *The Great Work*, and, in collaboration with cosmologist Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*. These, along with his lectures, films and teaching, and his extensive collaborations, brought his ideas to a wide public both within religious traditions and beyond.

Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim worked closely with Thomas Berry for over thirty years as his students, editors and literary executors; they have collaborated with Andrew Angyal, Emeritus Professor of English and author of several biographies, to give us this account of his life.

In *The Great Work*, Berry told how, as a child, wandering from his house, he came across a meadow 'covered with white lilies rising above the grass'. In this magic moment he realized: 'whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in its natural cycles of transformation is good; whatever opposes this meadow or negates it is not good'.

The biography shows how this early learning deepened through his religious experience. Drawn to a contemplative life, he joined the Passionist order. As a monk he participated for years in the Divine Office, the daily cycle of prayer that follows the cosmological sequence of the day between darkness and light; and the cycle of the year that marks the transition from Christmas/solstice to Easter/springtime. Berry saw that this ritual cycle represented 'the age-old effort of humans to bring human life into accord with the great liturgy of the universe'. Drawing on these foundational experiences he articulated the 'great work', the task of 'moving modern industrial civilization from its present devastating influence on Earth to a more benign mode of presence'.

These experiences were illuminated by three main teachings, derived from Teilhard de Chardin: that the universe from its beginnings has a psychico-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension; that the human story and the universe story are a single story; and that western religious traditions need to move from an almost exclusive concern for redemption to an emphasis on creation. Later, in *The Dream of the Earth* he wrote of 'the great spiralling galaxies... and this privileged planet Earth!'; of humans



as ‘the most recent wonder of the universe, a special mode of reflecting on this larger curvature of the universe itself’.

Berry struggled to find a way to develop and teach these insights: we learn of his studies of cultural history, his experiences in the army and in China, his vocational crisis as a monk; how he widened his studies from Western and Christian traditions to include Asian and indigenous perspectives; how, eventually, in 1970 he founded the Riverdale Centre for Religious Research in a Victorian house in the Bronx with view across the Hudson River. Riverdale was devoted to reflection on evolutionary history: ‘human, biological, geological, and cosmological’. Here, Thomas held seminars and discussion with teachers and students from many walks of life and academic disciplines. The account of life at Riverdale is of a lively community of inquiry, focussed around a broad theme but with space for individuals to pursue their own directions.

It was from Riverdale that the ‘new story’ emerged in collaboration with cosmologist Brian Swimme. The cosmological stories told by all religions arise not abstractly but from ‘intimate human interactions and the Earth systems. They can give humans a sense of belonging and purpose, providing reflections on such basic questions as: Where do I come from?’ Thomas saw that modern humans are troubled because we no longer have a good story, that we are between stories. The new story united science and humanities in an account of the evolution of the Universe from ‘the great flaring forth’ to humanity’s evolving place in the cosmos. It moved from human-centred to Earth-centred, offering a story that places the human in the context of Earth.

Berry’s teaching evolved from his understanding of ‘the interior presence... the livingness of things’ in the context of evolutionary time. In many ways, his perspective was close to ‘panpsychic’ philosophy, the metaphysical view that the cosmos is a coherent field of mind/matter; that all things, including the Earth itself, are integral to the fabric of the living, sentient cosmos, philosopher Freya Mathews puts it. But he never used the term ‘panpsychic’. Mary Evelyn Tucker, in personal correspondence, suggests that this was in part because he liked to coin his own terms: asserting, for example, that Earth is not a collection of objects but a communion of subjects. Further,

he was building on the cosmic evolutionary perspective of Teilhard de Chardin, rather than any philosophical panpsychic tradition, Whiteheadian or Spinozan. This unfortunately means that his work has been somewhat overlooked in contemporary debates on panpsychism.

This biography gives those influenced by Berry’s teaching invaluable insights into how his perspective evolved and the quality of his presence as a spiritual and ecological teacher. The later chapters-on Time, Teilhard de Chardin, Confucian perspectives and Indigenous traditions-move away from the strictly biographical and draw together some of the continuing threads and influences that ran through his life.

The book closes with an assertion of the deep confidence in the future that Thomas Berry bequeathed: we can all learn, through mutual presencing with the Earth community, to become ‘cosmic persons’ - although this is the achievement of a lifetime. He was confident in the evolutionary processes and the continuing revelation that can align ‘human imagination and ingenuity with the creativity of the universe and the Earth’ leading to a new Ecozoic Age.

This biography beautifully shows us the unfolding life of a great religious, philosophical and ecological teacher, one who was also - as I know from direct experience - immensely kind, humorous and generous. We are told that, as he approached his death at the age of ninety-four he remarked, ‘I will be in the universe where I always have been’.

*Peter Reason’s most recent publication (with artist Sarah Gillespie) is On Presence: Essays | Drawings <http://peterreason.net/OnPresence.html>.*

## THE RETURN OF THE SACRED FEMININE

David Lorimer

### ■ WHEN GOD HAD A WIFE

Lynn Picknett and Clive Prince  
Bear and Co, 2019, 326 pp., \$16,  
p/b – ISBN 978-1-59143-370-5

This latest book follows up the authors’ previous scholarly historical

work to examine how the authorities in both Judaism and Christianity rewrote history ‘to erase the feminine side of faith, deliberately ignoring Jesus’s real message and again condemning women to marginalisation.’ It breaks new ground in showing how goddess worship was present in early Judaism, while continuing the revolutionary work instigated by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic gospels in 1945, which have given a very different picture of Jesus as a messenger of wisdom - as indicated in my review in the previous issue of books about Mary Magdalene.

The narrative highlights early on the political importance of religious orthodoxy in legitimising and reinforcing the authority of the

King ruling on behalf of a single God. The cult of Yahweh ‘was increasingly identified with centralised royal power’ entailing the removal of other gods such as Baal and the merging of El with Yahweh. This picture in fact represents the Deuteronomist rewriting of the Bible in the seventh century and airbrushing out

the figures such as Asherah, originally a Canaanite goddess and the consort of Baal. Many artefacts testify to her worship alongside Yahweh as the great mother and sacred tree as a symbol of fertility. An eighth century inscription refers to ‘Yahweh and his Asherah.’ It is remarkable to read that the statue of Asherah was present in Solomon’s Temple for 236 of the 370 years of its existence. The existence of a goddess implies the office of priestess, which in all probability also involved ritual sexuality and the *hieros gamos* or sacred union.

A later development is the emergence of Sophia as wisdom, which is more of a symbol – the old Testament version of the Blessed Virgin Mary - than a ‘full-blooded female archetype’ also embodying the erotic. Then we come to the Hellenisation process in Alexandria, also incorporating Isis. Interestingly, Philo identifies Sophia with Logos, thus conferring enormous power, but in the Gospel

