

## Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry: Reflections from a Parallel Universe

---

*Dennis Patrick O'Hara*

When Thomas Berry considers the origins of the ecological crisis besetting the planet, he often cites two fundamental causes: that humanity has come to consider itself as separate from the rest of the planetary ecosystem, and that humanity fails to recognize the rest of creation as sacred. If we are to survive the profound challenges confronting us, Berry argues, then we must establish a viable rapport with the rest of the Earth community, living with the rest of creation in ways that are mutually enhancing for each.<sup>1</sup> Berry contends that we must adopt a functional spirituality appropriate for an ecological age.

We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world, from a spirituality of the divine as revealed in verbal revelation to a spirituality of the divine as revealed in the visible world about us. From a spirituality concerned with justice merely to humans to a spirituality of justice to the devastated Earth community. From the spirituality of the prophet to the spirituality of the shaman. The sacred community must now be considered the integral community of the entire universe, more immediately the integral community of the planet Earth.<sup>2</sup>

In the latter years of his life, as Thomas Merton became increasingly aware of an emerging public interest in ecology and threats to planetary health, he speculated on the underlying malaise that would per-

1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), pp. 55, 151; Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation* (ed. Stephen Dunn and Anne Lonergan; Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) 42, 99, 115; Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), pp. 30, 54, 113-14.

2. Thomas Berry, 'An Ecologically Sensitive Spirituality', *Teilhard Perspective* 30.1 (1997), pp. 3-7 (5).

mit humanity to act in such an irrational and destructive fashion.<sup>3</sup> Like Berry, he prescribed a spirituality that would recognize and foster humanity's true place in creation, calling forth the authentic self of each person that we might 'enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls'.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I shall explore how such musings by the Trappist monk share several common themes with the Passionist geologist Berry. I shall consider some of the theological foundations of their respective positions, and how Merton's pursuit of the inner or true self might be re-framed within Berry's understanding of humanity's place within cosmogenesis. Such parallels and comparisons are made in the hopes that a new and perhaps more nuanced understanding can be gained of each author, permitting each to become a refreshing lens for examining the other.

On 12 January 1963 Merton expanded his already wide-ranging correspondence to include Rachel Carson, who in 1962 had written *Silent Spring*, the landmark text on the modern ecological crisis.<sup>5</sup> In that letter, Merton deplored both humanity's irresponsible destruction of the planet as well as our pathological and seemingly intrinsic 'hatred of life' that 'inevitably lead us to despair in the midst of "plenty..."'. A rather lengthy quotation from that letter catalogues the foundations for his perspective.

[Because of original sin], man [sic] has built into himself a tendency to destroy and negate himself when everything is at its best... [However], the whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a 'paradise' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them. ...[M]an is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. ...[H]e must make use of nature wisely...ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible—in my terms, to the Creator, in any case, to the source and exemplar of all being and all life... But man has lost his 'sight'... It is in

3. For a prior discussion of Merton's and Berry's shared interest in ecology, see: Dennis Patrick O'Hara, 'The Whole World...Has Appeared as a Transparent Manifestation of the Love of God': Portents of Merton as an Eco-Theologian', *The Merton Annual* 9 (1996), pp. 90-117. Another discussion of Merton's ecological perspective can be found in Donald P. St John, 'Merton's *Chuang Tzu*: An Ecological Reading', *Teilhard Studies* 37 (Winter/Spring 1999), pp. 21-40.

4. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Direction Books, 1972), p. 25.

5. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1962).

thinking that he sees...that he has lost his wisdom and his cosmic perspective.<sup>6</sup>

For Merton, the cosmos is a 'transparent manifestation of the love of God', a revelation of divine goodness, in which the experience of God certainly will not be restricted to extraordinary visions or encounters, but will be found in the ordinary events of daily living. The mystery at the heart of all things will necessarily participate in the gracious mystery of God.<sup>7</sup>

Thomas Berry associates this mysterious, numinous presence with the emergence and evolution of the universe. Drawing upon scripture, he reminds us that in the prologue to John's Gospel we learn that the Word, through which all that is has been made,

by its own spontaneities brought forth the universe... This spontaneity as the guiding force of the universe can be thought of as the mysterious impulse whereby the primordial fireball flared forth in its enormous energy, a fireball that contained in itself all that would ever emerge into being.<sup>8</sup>

Berry contends that God not only desires and chooses to communicate with creation, but that this communication through the various forms of creation ultimately manifests as a participation of the divine. Because the natural world represents 'modes of divine presence', notes Berry, we need to 'perceive the natural world as the primary revelation of the divine, as primary scripture, as the primary mode of numinous presence', and as the 'primary subject of incarnation'.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, for Berry, any obliteration of the planet by humanity is a destruction of the sacred presence within that reality; it is to 'silence

6. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (ed. William Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 71. While noting the lack of inclusive language employed by Merton (and on occasion, by Berry), I have chosen not to amend the exclusive language in any of the quotations taken from their respective works.

7. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955) p. 33; Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), pp. 291-92. A more contemporary exploration of this theme can be found in two texts authored by a confrère of Merton's, Charles Cummings: *The Mystery of the Ordinary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); and *Eco-Spirituality: Toward a Reverent Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991).

8. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, pp. 196-97.

9. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 11, 37, 105. Cf. Thomas Berry, 'The Ecozoic Era', Eleventh Annual E.F. Schumacher Lecture: Great Barrington, MA (19 October 1991), p. 22.

forever a divine voice'.<sup>10</sup> Any wanton destruction of the natural world diminishes our experience and knowledge of God, since the way we come to know the world becomes the language by which we come to speak of God. Berry speculates that

If we have powers of imagination, ...if we have words with which to speak and think and commune, words for the inner experience of the divine, ...it is again because of the impressions we have received from the variety of beings about us. If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.<sup>11</sup>

If the grandeur of the universe is diminished, then so too are our ways to express a sense of the divine who is grandeur beyond all other.<sup>12</sup>

This connection between our symbols—based on our appreciation of the natural world—and the way we are able to speak of God was also apparent to Merton. Since creation is a revelation of the divine, Merton observed, it can inform our thoughts and prayers, acting as 'cables', medium and message.<sup>13</sup> Merton was echoing St Teresa's observation that 'all creation teaches us some way of prayer'.<sup>14</sup> In one instance, he poetically reflected on the metamorphosis of six or seven 'black and russet' caterpillars to their pupal state. Using such insect metamorphosis as a metaphor, he exhorted his reader to seek with similar 'glad alacrity' transformation in Christ. He declared, 'we can learn such ways to God from creeping things and sanctity from a black and russet worm!'<sup>15</sup>

Merton notes that with the exception of humanity all of creation necessarily constitutes a holiness in the sight of God. Other-than-human creation exists exactly as intended by the love and art of the Creator. Its various unique identities and natures, completely fulfilling the will of God, become its sanctity. Drawing from his understanding of Duns Scotus and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Merton declares, 'Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His

10. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p. 46.

11. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 11. Cf. Thomas Berry, 'Wonderworld as Wasteworld: The Earth in Deficit', *Cross Currents* 35.4 (1985), pp. 408-22 (416).

12. Thomas Berry, 'The Passion of Mother Earth', *Passionists* 13 (1986), pp. 9-14; Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, pp. 47-49.

13. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 7.

14. As quoted in: George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 27.

15. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), p. 184.

reality in them'.<sup>16</sup> Because the various elements of non-human creation perfectly satisfy their identity, Merton remarks, they 'have no problem'. It is humans, whom God has left 'free to be whatever we like', who are challenged with finding salvation and sanctity through the discovery of each person's 'true self'. But we are not abandoned to this task, for we remain 'sons [and daughters] of God' who are 'called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity'.<sup>17</sup>

Thomas Berry shares this understanding of creation as sacred and good, and also comments on its continuing relationship with the divine. Berry reminds us that with perhaps the exception of the modern era, humanity has generally tended to be aware of an all-pervading mysterious power present within the universe. We have tended to believe that there is an ineffable, pervasive presence of the divine in the world about us. And while every form of existence is subsequently considered to be a mode of divine presence, we nevertheless recognize that each existence is not itself divine. The planet itself and every other existence, while awesome, intrinsically valuable, and a sacred community in its own right, are not specifically divine; there is a difference between the sacred and the divine. Berry explains, however, that 'if there were a difference in the sense of separation, the created world would not be. I could not exist except for a divine presence'.<sup>18</sup> Without God, there simply is no world, no creation.

But if humanity has tended to view creation as sacred, and if 'the whole world has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God' as Merton suggests, then why has humanity so objectified and de-sacralized the planet that we find ourselves threatened by the perils of ecological extinction? There are perhaps as many answers to this question as there are varieties of ecological exploration (eco-theology, deep ecology, eco-feminism, eco-justice, political ecology, etc.). Thomas Berry, however, believes that the dominant cultural trends in modern Western society have been significantly influenced

16. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 30. Elsewhere in that text, Merton echoes the opening passages of Genesis when he heralds that, 'There is no evil in anything created by God... The world and everything made by God is good' (pp. 21, 24).

17. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 31, 32 (Merton's emphasis). In his comments to the novices when he was novice master, Merton asserted that we could be confident that the non-human portion of creation was 'doing the will of God, every single minute'. Quoted in Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 185.

18. Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, p. 19; cf. p. 10. See also Thomas Berry, 'Creative Energy', *Cross Currents* 37.2-3 (1987), pp. 179-86.

by six 'transcendencies' that have fostered both humanity's delusion that it is isolable from planetary ecosystems and humanity's perception that the other-than-human elements of creation lack a sacred dimension.<sup>19</sup> Among these transcendencies he cites a Christian preoccupation with the redemptive dimension of Christ and the relative neglect of Christ's creative role. Berry argues that Christians need to 'move from an excessive concern with the individual Jesus [of history] to the cosmic Christ in terms of St Paul's Letter to the Colossians, [and]...the prologue of St John's Gospel. This is the macrophase mode of the Christ reality'.<sup>20</sup> That is, since the world originates in, through and by Christ—the principle of intelligibility, the Word, the *Logos* who is the creative context of all existence—there has been a Christ dimension to developmental time from time's very inception. The story of Christ is the story of a 15 billion-year-old universe, not merely the story of a certain individual who lived at a particular historical period. According to Berry,

Only after the experience of the Incarnation and of the gospels could we have the name [of Christ] functioning in this way. It is our way of identifying something that has been there from the beginning... Anything that was created was created in that context.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, Christ is part of irreversible, cosmological, developmental time, not merely human, historical time. In Berry's understanding, Christ is a continuous part of creation history, and Jesus the Christ is the microphase mode of the macrophase or cosmic Christ. When we become more fully aware of this latter aspect, Christ is revealed to us

19. Berry argues that, 'We have, then, four of what I call 'transcendencies'—transcendent deity, transcendent human, transcendent redemption, transcendent mind. We also have transcendent technology, which enables us to evade the basic biological laws of the natural world. And we have not only a transcendent technology, but also a transcendent destiny or transcendent goal, a millennial vision in which, within history, we get beyond the human condition.' See Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, p. 115.

20. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, p. 77. Our present discussion conflates Berry's discussion of two 'transcendencies'—transcendent deity and transcendent redemption. The former emphasizes the transcendent nature of God to such a degree that the effects of divine immanence and the incarnation are essentially overlooked. The latter represents a disproportionate preoccupation with the redemptive dimension of Christ to the virtual exclusion of the creative aspect, prompting us to seek escape from this fallen and abandoned world in favour of our true home, heaven. It fails to recognize that our home is with God, wherever that happens to be, including this very moment.

21. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, p. 78.

in the universe. The natural world, Berry argues, consequently becomes our primary scripture, our first revelation of the divine, the context within which we can experience the divine manifestation.

Merton also reflected on the role of the cosmic Christ. Influenced by Dun Scotus's notion that the incarnation was not primarily necessary because of sin, but was inevitable because of God's love, Merton came to resonate with the subtle doctor's view that the cosmic Christ was not a postscript to the creative action proceeding forth from the mind of God. Instead, the cosmic Christ was God's first thought, forming the paradigm of creation. All of creation, which was formed by the Word and continues to manifest the Word, is refreshed through the additional epiphany of God's love in the incarnation in Jesus the Christ.<sup>22</sup> Drawing from the works of the Greek Fathers and Bonaventure, Merton also observed that from the beginning of time, Christ has permeated all of creation; that even prior to the existence of humanity, Christ was the 'Cosmic Mediator' who would additionally mediate the inclusion of all of humanity 'in Himself in His Incarnation'. Because humanity was intentionally created in the image of God, it was 'already potentially united with the Word of God'. Furthermore, God had 'decided from all eternity to become man in Jesus Christ'.<sup>23</sup>

Both Merton and Berry note that if God saw fit to become human, then humanity should not be so quick to seek escape from earthly existence.<sup>24</sup> Since the world has been transformed by the mystery of the incarnation, humanity enjoys a heightened intimacy and inseparable unity with Christ. For this reason, Merton asserts, humanity can accept its imperfections, seeking to be transformed through contemplation and action, so that the 'ineffable and indefinable light of Christ' might penetrate the 'false self' and bring the 'true self' into view. Through the dynamics of the incarnation, humanity can realize

22. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 31-32, 64, 110. Berry also recalls Scotus's view that the superabundant goodness of God prompted the Divine to give of itself in the creative act of forming the universe. 'This explanation of the incarnation insists that this self-giving of the divine would not be complete without a personal, divine presence within creation'. See Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, pp. 68-69.

23. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), pp. 134-36.

24. This propensity to flee to heaven from this vale of tears, oblivious or indifferent to the grace and gift of God's creation all about us, represents another dimension of Berry's critique of a disproportionate preoccupation with 'transcendent redemption'.

its divinization and overcome the failings of the modern world.<sup>25</sup> By virtue of Christ's entry into creation, Merton declared that he was joyful to be a member of the same race into which God chose to become incarnate.<sup>26</sup> Merton had come to believe that the good that God had begun with creation was perfected through the incarnation, bringing divine presence to all aspects of creation, not just its human forms. 'The world has been transformed and illuminated' by and in the resurrection light that is 'in all things, in their ground, not by nature but by gift, grace, death and resurrection... If God is 'all in all', then everything is in fact paradise, because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God.'<sup>27</sup>

Berry shares Merton's appreciation of the magnitude of the incarnation. Berry has described the incarnation of Christ into cosmic history as 'the greatest revolution in the human order, the moment of the total recreation of man'.<sup>28</sup> This is an event of such magnitude that Berry claims that Christianity itself has not grasped its full revolutionizing import. Had it done so, he insists, it would not have spent so much energy emphasizing the need for humanity to be redeemed from this world. It would have celebrated the entry of Christ into cosmic history and the immanence of the divine in the world, an immanence resident in a divine-human-nature communion. Indeed, Christianity would have espoused a more positive attitude toward the planet. For 'if God has desired to become a member of the earth community man himself should be willing to accept his status as a member of the same community'.<sup>29</sup>

These reflections on the impact of the incarnation and the role of the cosmic Christ speak to the two primary causes that Berry cites for the

25. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Kansas City: Sheed, Andrew & McMeel, 1977), pp. 20-21; Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 176-83. See also Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 98, 120.

26. Writing in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, a rather ecstatic Merton declares, 'I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate'. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 157 (Merton's emphasis).

27. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (selected and ed. Wm H. Shannon; New York: New Directions, 1985), pp. 644, 566. Cf. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 202.

28. Thomas Berry, 'The Christian Process', in *idem*, *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1976), 4:8.

29. Thomas Berry, 'The Third Mediation: The Christian Task of Our Time', in *idem*, *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, NY: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1979), 6:5.



ecological crisis, mentioned at the beginning of this paper—a belief that the human is separate from the rest of the planetary community and a belief that the other-than-human world lacks a sacred or spiritual dimension. These reflections also augment Merton's thoughts concerning the relationship between the Creator and the created outlined in his letter to Rachel Carson. But they do not sufficiently address the malaise that Merton identifies in the opening passages of that correspondence—that our destruction of the planet seems to result from a seemingly intrinsic 'hatred of life' that 'inevitably lead[s] us to despair in the midst of "plenty"'. To satisfy that task, we turn again to Merton's understanding of the 'true self' and the 'false self', and consider these within the context of Berry's thoughts on alienation and humanity's place within cosmogenesis.

Merton proposed that while the exterior 'I' or false self is captive to temporal desires and clever manipulations, the interior 'I' or true self 'seeks only to be, and to move (for [the true self] is dynamic) according to the secret laws of Being itself, and according to the promptings of a Superior Freedom (that is, of God)'.<sup>30</sup> Our inner self is not crafted by us through rigorous spiritual exercises to become a heroic and perfected figure. Rather, Merton contends, it is simply who we truly are in the eyes of God, manifesting a sharing of the divine gift already given. Our 'inner self is a kind of mirror in which God not only sees Himself, but reveals Himself to the 'mirror' in which He is reflected'.<sup>31</sup> Pursuit of the true self, while requiring a certain introversion and detachment, nevertheless brings us into relationship with the 'world of other personal 'subjects'' since 'our inner self is inseparable from Christ and hence it is in a mysterious and unique way inseparable from all the other 'I's who live in Christ, so they all form one 'mystical Person', which is 'Christ'.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, we are called to service

30. Thomas Merton, 'The Inner Experience', *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; New York: Paulist Press, 1992), pp. 294-356 (296-97).

31. Merton, 'The Inner Experience', p. 302. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 158, Merton describes this unassailable mark of the Creator within its created. He observes, 'At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us...'

32. Merton, 'Inner Experience', pp. 310, 311-12. In 'Contemplation in a World of Action' (in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings* [ed. Lawrence

with and for others, not to isolation for our own ends. When we truly harken to the Spirit's internal beckoning and penetrate into the incarnate mystery of Christ, we can return, divinized, to the Source, the Ground of all existence.<sup>33</sup> But how do we accomplish this? Merton answers, 'by the *commitment of our whole self and our whole life to the reality of the presence of Christ in the world*'.<sup>34</sup> That is, we put aside that which is trivial and base, recognize the presence of the cosmic Christ and the victory of the incarnation, and conform to the promptings of the Spirit dwelling within us as our own spirit.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, when we live in and succumb to a society that favours the superficial and inauthentic, Merton declares that we are 'alienated' and become 'a "thing" rather than a person', because we are not realizing our true self.<sup>36</sup>

While Thomas Merton tends to explore the tensions between the true self and the false self within a context limited to humans and the divine, Thomas Berry resolves this dynamic within the developmental processes of cosmogenesis—processes that include the divine, the human and the rest of creation. For Berry, our experience of alienation results from a failure to realize our 'authentic existence'; from an 'alienation from the integral functioning of the Earth, with its consequent anthropocentrism and its dedication to consumerism, ...leading

S. Cunningham; New York: Paulist Press, 1992], pp. 368-87 [387]), Merton claims that 'To treat the world merely as an agglomeration of material goods and objects outside ourselves, and to reject these goods and objects in order to seek others which are 'interior' and 'spiritual' is in fact to miss the whole point of the challenging confrontation of the world and Christ. Do we really choose between the world and Christ as between two conflicting realities absolutely opposed? Or do we choose Christ by choosing the world as it really is in him, that is to say created and redeemed by him, and encountered in the ground of our own personal freedom and of our love? Do we really renounce ourselves and the world in order to find Christ, or do we renounce our alienated and false selves in order to choose our own deepest truth in choosing both the world and Christ at the same time?... The world cannot be a problem to anyone who sees that ultimately Christ, the world, his brother and his own inmost ground are made one and the same in grace and redemptive love.'

33. Merton, 'Inner Experience', pp. 324-32.

34. Merton, 'Inner Experience', pp. 334-35 (Merton's emphasis).

35. Merton, 'Inner Experience', p. 336. In the poem 'Hagia Sophia', Merton observes that 'Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Life reflected in them, considered as a spontaneous participation, as their invitation to the Wedding Feast. Sophia is God's sharing of Himself with creatures... All things praise her by being themselves and by sharing in the Wedding Feast.' See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 368-69.

36. Merton, 'Inner Experience', p. 339.

to a devastating exploitation of the planet'; from a preoccupation with the phenomenal Ego and a neglect of the absolute Self.<sup>37</sup> We have forgotten that we have been formed by 15 billion years of cosmic history, and are not only sustained by those processes, but contribute to them.<sup>38</sup> Reawakening to our authentic self recalls that we, and the rest of the players in cosmic history, participate in a shared adventure as an interrelated community, not only because we have emerged from a common source—the primal singularity; not only because quantum theory reminds us that each being in the universe is attracted to and attracts, is affected by and affects every other being in the universe; but because the self-communication and goodness of God extend to all of creation, holding all of us in a common although differentiated affection.<sup>39</sup> To imagine that 'the human journey could be different from or isolated from or opposed to the Earth journey' reveals a profound autism to our place within creation history and our present contribution to the universe story.<sup>40</sup> But because that journey is enabled and guided by the numinous mystery, by the *Logos* that has been part of the transformative adventure of cosmogenesis from its inception, we are subsequently participants in a larger sacred com-

37. Thomas Berry, 'The Cosmology of Religions' (typed manuscript, 1997; quoted by permission of Thomas Berry, Greensboro, NC), p. 52; cf. p. 57.

38. A playful Carl Sagan used to pose the leading question, 'How long does it take to make an apple pie?' The correct answer was about 15 billion years since it took that long for a being to come into existence who could transform various ingredients into such a wonderful treat. This anecdote brings to mind Merton's own reflection on the contribution of Teilhard de Chardin who also awakened us to our place within cosmogenesis. Merton notes that, 'The enormous success of Teilhard de Chardin is due to the universal relief that Christians now feel: they are all at once able to acknowledge their collective guilt and make a gesture of *reconciliation* with 'the world' to which, it turns out, they belong anyway. Teilhard has enabled Christians to believe in themselves as men in the world to which they obviously and necessarily belong, and toward which any attitude of '*contemptus*' in theology would be a meaningless pose. His phenomenal success is due to the fact that he has enabled thousands of Christians to become reconciled *with themselves*. In doing this, of course, he has accomplished a providential task, essential for genuine contemporary renewal of religion.' See Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 51 (Merton's emphasis).

39. For similar views of this perspective, see: Beatrice Bruteau, 'Eucharistic Ecology and Ecological Spirituality', *Cross Currents* 40.3 (1990), pp. 409-514 (505); Renate Craine, 'Hildegard of Bingen: "The Earth Hungers for the Fullness of Justice"', *Cistercian Studies* 26.2 (1991), pp. 120-21; Dennis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 29, 38, 70.

40. Berry, 'The Cosmology of Religions', p. 63.

munity, integrated into the religious dimension of the Earth.<sup>41</sup> When, Berry asserts, we act in ways that are mutually enhancing for ourselves and the rest of the ecosystem, when we respond to the 'flow of the cosmic process, when we are obedient to what we hear coming to us through the earth, ultimately we are being obedient to God who is mediating the will of God and our call through all of the earth's processes'.<sup>42</sup> We are living true to our inescape, true to the sanctity intrinsic to our being. According to Berry:

Subjective communion with the earth, identification with the cosmic-earth-human process, provides the context in which we now make our spiritual journey... It is the journey of primordial matter...toward an ever more complete spiritual-physical intercommunion of the parts with each other, with the whole, and with that numinous presence that has been manifested throughout this entire cosmic-earth-human process.<sup>43</sup>

By recognizing our authentic existence, we seek to overcome the malaise identified by Merton in his letter to Rachel Carson—i.e., a

41. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, pp. 43, 52. Cf. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, p. 206. Berry develops his understanding of the religious dimension of the Earth in his essay 'The Cosmology of Religions'. In that essay he states, 'When we consider a religion of the human as species, we find that such a religion implies a prior sense of the religious dimension of the natural world. If the earth is an economic mode of being as well as a biological mode of being then it might not be too difficult to think of the earth as having a religious mode of being. This seems to be explicit in many of the scriptures of the world although this concept is yet to be articulated effectively in the context of our present understanding the great story of the universe. In general we think of the earth as joining in the religious expression of the human rather than the human joining in the religious expression of the earth. This has been the difficulty in most spheres of activity. We consistently think of the human as primary and the earth as derivative rather than thinking of the earth as primary and the human as derivative' (p. 10).

42. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending the Earth*, p. 59. Merton echoed this understanding when he concluded that 'faith...is birth to a higher life by obedience to the Source of Life: to believe is thus to consent to hear and to obey a creative command that raises us from the dead'. Merton lamented that humanity could nevertheless choose this death. He concluded that 'the only way in which I can make sense in the unparalleled confusion and absurdity of the breakdown of Western culture is to recognize myself as part of a society both sentenced and redeemed: a society which, if it can accept sentence and redemption, will live. A society which has received the mercy of Christ and been unfaithful to Him. And if my society cannot face this truth, it will destroy itself and perhaps everyone else besides' (*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, pp. 19, 72).

43. Thomas Berry, 'The Spirituality of the Earth', in Charles Birch, William Eakin, and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.), *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theory* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), pp. 151-58.

'hatred of life' that 'inevitably lead[s] us to despair in the midst of 'plenty'', and a loss of 'wisdom' and a loss of 'cosmic perspective'. By recognizing our authentic self, we adopt a spirituality that better prepares us to address the ecological crisis challenging us. A renewed spirituality of the authentic self, as advocated by Merton and Berry, transforms us in harmony with the inner voice, the creative mystery, that ever beckons and guides. It prompts us to act in ways that are mutually enhancing for us and the rest of the ecosystem, to ask for no more than we need and take no more than what our fair share provides, and to celebrate our gifts and glorify the One who gives them.<sup>44</sup> When we truly realize that we are not isolable from the rest of the ecosystem—that we are but one member among many who constitute a sacred, earthen community—then we can more readily and fully undertake the unique contribution that the Creator asks us to make to an unfolding and meaningful universe story. Our task, now, is nothing less than a profound reinvention of the human, through critical reflection and mystical attentiveness, in accord with the numinous mystery.<sup>45</sup> Merton and Berry provide insight into this great work and suggest how we can respond to both the invitation and the critical need.

44. As Berry notes, 'Intimacy with the planet in its wonder and beauty and the full depth of its meaning is what enables an integral human relationship with the planet to function. It is the only possibility for humans to attain their true flourishing while honoring the other modes of earthly being. The fulfillment of the Earth community is to be caught up in the grandeur of existence itself and in admiration of those mysterious powers whence all this has emerged' (*The Great Work*, p. xi).

45. Berry, *The Great Work*, pp. 159-65. Even as early as 1952, Merton recognized this profound need and attainable remedy. He declared that, 'when your mind is silent, then the forest suddenly becomes magnificently real and blazes transparently with the Reality of God: for now I know that the Creation ...is revealed in Him, in the Holy Spirit: and we who are in God find ourselves united, in Him, with all that springs from Him. This is prayer, and this is glory!' See Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1953), p. 343.