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SEPTEMBER 6, 1991

Approaching the Ecozoic period of Earth history

Geologist calls universe
'communion of subjects'

By THOMAS C. FOX

Thomas Berry, standing in a sanctuary and behind a wooden pulpit, runs his fingers tenderly over the smooth surface as if gathering energy from the tree from which it came. His eyes closed, his head tilted upward, he says nothing for about 20 seconds, gathering his thoughts.

It is a Sunday morning in a Congregational church and this frail but driven man, 76, exudes an inner peace concealing deeper apprehensions. Since the 1988 publication of his book *The Dream of the Earth* (Sierra Club), Berry has been cited as the indisputable foundational figure, the Thomas Aquinas of ecotheologians, one of a growing number of thinkers taking yet another crack at the age-old questions of meaning. This generation of ecotinkers is working to develop a spirituality molded by the insights of modern science and tuned to a suddenly ecology-conscious age.

To grapple with mounting environmental problems calls for a new spiritual framework, they say, one that explains not only how humanity got to where it is but that explores the nature of humanity and how it fits into the larger cosmic picture. In some ways, this is an age-old exercise, but it is also as new as knowledge of black holes in the universe. Make no mistake. They see themselves as explorers of the sacred.

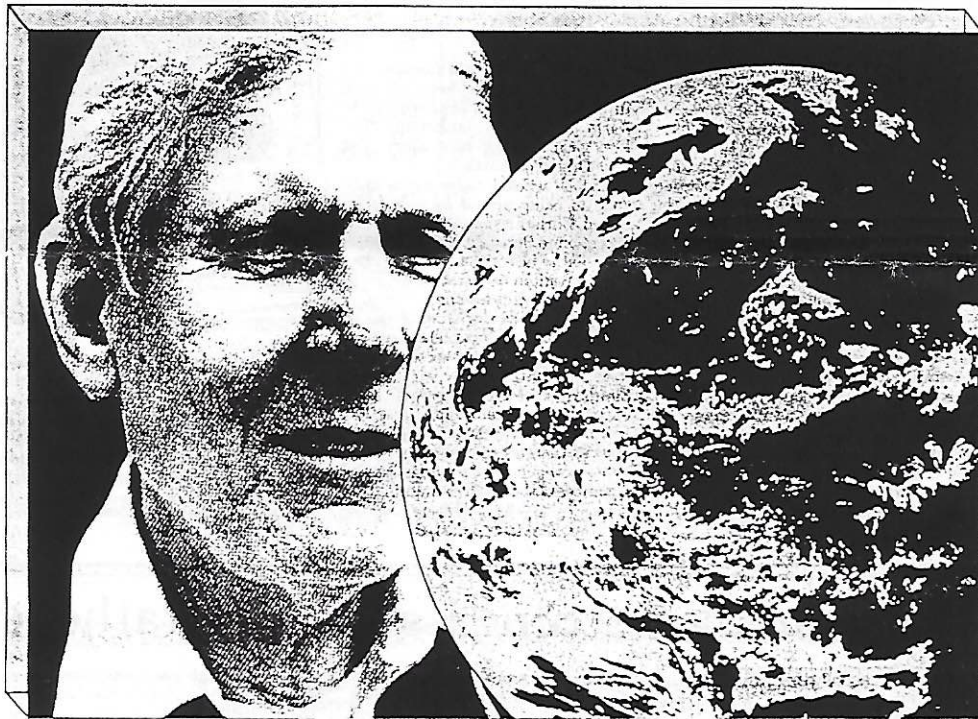
Through the late 1970s and 1980s, Berry's ideas simmered at the edges of Catholic thought even as they percolated more vigorously in the ranks of the environmental movement. But in the 1990s, the sometimes seemingly rebellious words of this Passionist priest, this self-proclaimed geologist, have spread more rapidly in Catholic circles, whether in universities or at the social activist level.

For many, Berry has become a kind of cult leader, a wise and mysterious guru. He speaks before hushed audiences. His writings are cited among some of the more sensitive ecologists.

Through this recent acclamation, Berry has remained unflustered. He is a simple and unassuming man. Virtually all the clothes he owns he wears or carries with him in a small suitcase when he travels. He is an intellectual with wide-ranging interests.

Born in Greensboro, N.C., he was ordained in 1942, spent 10 years in Passionist monasteries, served as a chaplain in NATO, taught Chinese and Indian history, studied Native American culture and has served as president of the American Teilhard (de Chardin) Association. Today, he heads New York's Riverdale

Tom Fox is NCR editor.



Thomas Berry

Center for Religious Research along the Hudson.

He is a storyteller and his vista is often no less than the history of the universe. He calls it the sacred story. By telling this 20-billion-year-old cosmic tale, he hopes to move his audience out of a human-centered and into an Earth-centered sense of reality and value.

Waiting to speak this Sunday morning, Berry's well-carved face twitches slightly as if in warm recognition of the words he is about to utter. There is an element of the mischievous about him, as if he's living in a moody yet sometimes playful realization that the environmental nightmare he abhors represents disorder within a larger, gloriously mystical order.

In the late afternoon of life, Berry's plea to honor the planet is finally beginning to get the attention he has long sought for it. Maybe too little too late, but far more than ever before. And this pleases him.

"Listen to these words carefully," Berry tells his church audience, asking them to take a few moments to ponder their meaning: "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects."

He repeats his words slowly. "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects..." They seem to

hang above the marble sanctuary floor proclaiming all Berry stands for, the poetic summation of all he has learned in a lifetime. These two phrases Berry believes unlock the secrets of proportion, relationship, humility, awe, prayer, Earth, sky, humanity and stone. He also knows it takes time to digest.

Implicit in Berry's homily this day in this church is the thought that if humanity would only become aware — really aware — of the sacredness of all relationships, it would understand the need and means to live in harmony and love.

This, in his view, is our most pressing task. Failure to grasp this truth could very well mean, he believes, the failure to save the planet from destruction.

"Imagine," Berry tells the congregation, "living on the moon and looking endlessly at the essentially flat and formless lunar landscape. If our planet's landscape were as barren as the moon's, our image of the divine would be just as barren. We derive our image of the divine from the natural order."

"The environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis," he insists. "And sadly, the churches are for the most part silent. They seem to fail to grasp its spiritual dimension."

Berry maintains that humanity is at an epoch crossroads. He speaks in biblical terms, using Exodus imagery: "We

are now at a critical moment in evolutionary history. Either the human community will leave the desert to enter a new age, either it will live in harmony with the natural order, or both will perish in the desert.

"In biological terms, the planet Earth is at the end of the Cenozoic period. This is being terminated by the industrial economy that humans have imposed on the planet during these past two centuries. In this context, the major life-giving systems of the planet, air, water and soil, are severely diminished in their life-giving capacities."

"To establish a viable situation for the Earth community requires a transition from the Cenozoic to what might be termed the Ecozoic period of Earth history."

"(The problem is) we have ruined the Cenozoic mode of life expression before we have discovered our way into the Ecozoic. Strangely, we do not feel in an agonizing situation because we are only dimly aware of the order of magnitude of what is happening to the planet."

But Berry feels the agony. He is fueled by it. And as he spoke, based on comments heard after his Sunday morning talk, he fueled others in the church. He was smiling as he stood later in the back of the church shaking hands. More converts. ■

The human is the universe in self-reflective celebration

THE DREAM OF THE EARTH

By Thomas Berry
Distributed by Credence Cassettes, \$9.95 paper

BEFRIENDING THE EARTH: A THEOLOGY OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN HUMANS AND THE EARTH: THOMAS BERRY, CP, IN DIALOGUE WITH THOMAS CLARKE, SJ
Edited by Stephen Dunn, CP, and Anne Lonergan
Twenty-Third Publications, 158 pages, \$7.95 paper

By MARY HEATHER MacKINNON

The Dream of the Earth is a powerful introduction to the mind and heart of Thomas Berry, a Passionist priest of the Roman Catholic tradition who describes himself as a geologist and cultural historian. For those who already know Berry's work, this book brings together decades of material from his countless lectures and numerous *Riverside Papers*. For those new to Berry, this book presents the foundational work of a man who believes that the continuation of all life on earth demands that the human community think and act out of a new mode of consciousness.

Berry proclaims that the ecological crisis of our times requires the human community to abandon its preoccupation with the viability of human life alone. The role of the human, according to Berry, is to foster the well-being of all life systems. The future of life requires the human community to understand itself as mutually interdependent and interconnected.

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with all of life. The human is the universe in conscious, self-reflective celebration.

For Berry, the essential need of the human community is the development of a functional cosmology that will enable us to organize ourselves in a mutually life-enhancing relationship with the entire earth community. Berry's term for his functional cosmology is the "new story," the story of the universe itself.

This "new story" must replace the traditional cultural and religious myths of Western civilization if we are to have a biocentric vision of reality that will motivate us to seek and to establish planetary health.

If one is looking for the fundamental notions of Berry's prophetic thought, three of the 16 essays in *The Dream of the Earth* are especially important: "The Ecological Age," "The New Story" and "The Dream of the Earth."

Anyone who reads Berry needs to be open to being disturbed as well as inspired. Christians in particular may take exception to Berry's delineation of the responsibility he attributes to Christianity for the wanton devastation of the earth community by the human community.

For Berry, the Christian emphasis on redemption and transcendence of earthly existence has deeply severed the human from its innate identity with all of life. Similarly, the Genesis creation myth bears much responsibility for fostering patriarchal power structures that have allowed the human community to dominate, to consume and to abuse the natural resources of the earth community.

Berry's "new story" declares that the

future existence of the human and the earth communities is one reality. *The Dream of the Earth* is required reading for insight into how this is possible.



Berry calls for a cosmic consciousness to permeate our political, social, medical, judicial, economic, educational, national and religious institutions. He receives both criticism and acclaim for this. Practitioners denounce him as a romantic idealist while futurists relentlessly seek his wisdom. Christian theologians, however, appear

to have the most concerns about Berry's beliefs. **Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth** is an excellent resource for those who wish to explore these concerns.

Befriending the Earth is an edited version of a 13-part video series by the same name. Both represent a discussion between Berry and Jesuit Father Thomas Clarke on the theological implications of Berry's cosmological teachings.

This book highlights a notable difference in the approach of Berry and Clarke as well as a difference in Berry's own thought from his earlier publication. While Berry and Clarke share similar beliefs, there are nuances in Berry's thought that offer a spiritual relevance and a creativity that is unavailable from the familiar religious language of Clarke.

Before publication of *Befriending the Earth*, Berry's works do not refer directly to traditional God-language and theological categories. In this volume, Berry is more explicit about his own faith and how it is fundamental to his understanding of the earth as the primary locus and revelation of the divine.

Berry possesses a profound reverence for the time-developmental process and potentialities of the universe. The reader of *Befriending the Earth* is left with that same reverence for both Berry and Clarke whose integrity is evident in their attempts to rethink theology in light of the new cosmology. This book needs to find serious readers among faculty and students in all fields of theological study who are also willing to do likewise. ■

Americans scratching issues find Catholics everywhere

THE GREENING OF THE CHURCH

Sean McDonagh, SSC
Orbis, 226 pages, \$16.95

By ARTHUR JONES

Scratch any major issue these days and Americans come up with "Catholic" under their fingernails. Catholics work on homelessness, on education in the inner city, on health care for the poor, housing for the elderly, migrant and peace programs, on AIDS, on social reforms.

That we know these people is part of our Catholic identity, too. If, sometimes, our involvement is Walter Mittyish — if only I wasn't so busy doing this why I'd be doing that, too — we have activists such as this author to call us back from dreams into action. In the public eye, what Catholics do, based on what Catholics believe, adds up to what "Catholic" is.

However, "Catholic" is not yet synonymous with environmental concerns. But it is edging that way. And from several different starting points: creation spirituality in the Dominican Father Matthew Fox mode, Passionist Father Thomas Berry's dreams for and of the earth, the folks connected with Genesis Farm, Pope John Paul II's relating creation to economic justice — though the church is not yet "greened." But it will be if Irish Columban Father Sean McDonagh has his way.

In his cry of pain which is this book,

Arthur Jones is NCR's editor-at-large.

McDonagh describes the Catholic Christians' stake in a sound ecological vision. Creation is the most notoriously neglected sacrament of our times.

McDonagh anchors his book in the bits of creation he knows best. There is the plight of specific dwindling rain forests, and the specific people dependent on them: the tribal peoples of South Cobabato on the once densely forested Philippines' island of Mindanao, where he spent decades as a missionary.

Yet, at home in Ireland McDonagh also sees the beautiful waters of Lough Derg turn brown because the turf (peat for fuel) is being cut from below the waterline on the surrounding land. Ireland or the Philippines, Chesapeake Bay or Colorado River, the problem is the same: exploitation — paradoxically both essential and mindless — until nature's rejuvenating capabilities are finally overwhelmed.

For McDonagh, the Philippine rain forests are gone. Not going, gone. The forest peoples' life-styles, gone. The wildlife, gone.

A prime value of this not-easy-to-read and oddly organized book is McDonagh's gripping testimony as he links Third World debt to tribal peoples' woes, then marries that to our First World affluence and our own nonnegotiable insistence on creature comforts.

Another value is its sweep, from noting why our technological society is unsustainable even at its present pace, to an examination of Vatican II and papal documents with the environment in

mind. McDonagh also looks anxiously at the population figures and concludes that "the Catholic church is not facing up to the magnitude of this problem."

On the spiritual side, McDonagh explores the prophets of Israel, the psalms and wisdom literature for a deeper understanding of teachings and obligations therein. Later, he quotes from Chief Seattle and ponders Pope John Paul II's deepening interest in and concern for the global task.

But what runs most strongly through the book is McDonagh's pain, the pain of the devastation he has seen come to the Philippines. His heart is in the Philippines. And so is his anguish. It is the pain of not having been able to do very much about what happened in Mindanao. It is the pain of the individual faced with the overwhelming forces of transnational financial and industrial corporate networks and their global helpmates, national governments and those quasi-governmental agencies — such as the World Bank and the penury-enhancing Torquemada of Third World debt, the International Monetary Fund.

McDonagh, bearing this burden, — the knowledge of the ineffectiveness of the lone crusader — has turned to the organization that represents 17 percent of the global population, the Catholic church. As McDonagh cares for creation, he pitches his Catholic hopes against his worst worries. There is some of each in this book.

Be prepared to read this as a textbook rather than as an easy narrative. But see

it, too, as a fine example of one man Catholic digging deeply, with prophetic passion, into one more pressing issue.

Passion is what we hope to get when we scratch an issue and come up Catholic. ■

"this is a painstaking effort. Its stated purpose is to disclose how various truths such as free will, and including some now considered undemonstrable, can be reflectively demonstrated... The author sedulously presents his method of inquiry and then four chapters: on language and concepts; on self, mind, and external reality; on logic and mathematics; and finally on the existence of God, with further inquiries" "exercises of erudition, acumen, and reasoning skill"
—Thought, Fordham University

REFLECTIVE INQUIRIES
PAUL WJECISNEF

ON PROOF FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD, AND OTHER REFLECTIVE INQUIRIES

BY PAUL WJECISNEF

264 pages, 85 diagrams, index
ISBN 0-9619519-0-7 Cloth, \$20.00 paperback
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Into paradigm shift of sin, salvation, evangelism

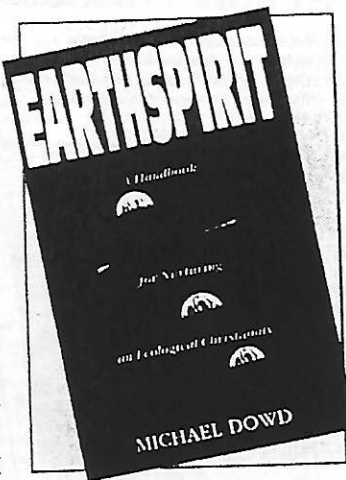
**EARTH SPIRIT:
A HANDBOOK FOR NURTURING
AN ECOLOGICAL CHRISTIANITY**

By Michael Dowd
Twenty-Third Publications, 117 pages,
\$7.95 paperback

**GEO-JUSTICE:
A PREFERENTIAL OPTION
FOR THE EARTH**

By James Conlon
Resources Publications, Inc., (160 East Virginia St.,
#290, San Jose, CA 95112), 159 pages,
\$12.95 paperback

By JANE BLEWETT



Christians are finally awakening to the fact that the devastation of our home planet is an ecological tragedy and carries immense implications for their religious journeying, for their sense of who God is and what the human venture is all about. Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth* opened many to an awareness of the "new cosmology," the new sacred origin "story" that locates the human within the vast, awesome, 15-billion-year journey of the universe and in the heart of the total community of all life.

Now, there is a hunger for more, to explore further, make connections with the "old story," give the "new" a ring of familiarity. Michael Dowd's little book is just such an effort, drawing on biblical Christianity and linking it very consciously with the new cosmology. It is a remarkable work, six chapters simply and clearly written, taking the reader gently by the hand through familiar religious categories into the new paradigm.

Briefly but in a helpful way he addresses what the shift in consciousness entails and why it is critical at this juncture in history. He discusses sin; salvation; evan-

gelism; heaven and hell; the kingdom of God, which he calls the "reign of reality"; other religions; Jesus as the way, truth and life. The Bible is treated with great reverence but opened out in perceptive ways to demonstrate its relevance in an age that understands the origins of the universe and the place of the human in a vastly different way from the writers of the sacred texts.

Dowd draws heavily on the thoughts of others, quoting extensively throughout the book. He makes no apologies for this since his purpose is not a "major work of original thinking," but rather a handbook with "as concise an introduction (for Christians) to the new cosmology as possible." The last chapter is an excellent annotated bibliography, and every chapter concludes with questions for discussion. At a popular level, Dowd has made a major contribution that many will welcome.

James Conlon's book also probes the

"new story" but enters the discussion from a different perspective. In naming his book, *Geo-Justice: A Preferential Option for the Earth*, he locates himself within the justice and peace community and makes his case within that context, its language and categories. His geojustice has three interlocking components: global, local and psychosocial. Working within these three arenas, Conlon develops his analysis and broadened definition of justice.

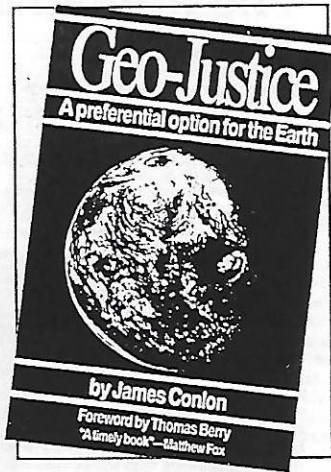
As one example of how the three interact, Conlon gives the case of the rubber workers in the Amazon rain forests. At first, they became concerned about the forests because their own livelihood was at stake, but gradually they joined forces with a global effort to save a precious resource. In this process, they themselves developed a deeper understanding of their own human potential and community power. Each component affected and was affected by the other.

"Geo-Justice," Conlon states, "becomes an operative vision for creating harmony and balance on the earth, in our community and within ourselves." His claim is that passion and compassion for the earth in our times brings new energy to the work of healing the planet and of addressing the psychic, social and global oppression

If we humans discover and honor our rightful place within the unfolding life of the earth, there is every reason to trust the future.

of our world.

Throughout the book, Conlon draws on his own life experience, his many years of community organizing under Saul Alinsky, his justice and peace work, his teaching at Matthew Fox's Institute in Culture



and Creation Spirituality, numerous workshops and retreats, to document the way *Geo-Justice* is becoming an "operative myth" for the new millennium.

It is a good track record, and he gives the readers several case studies and examples to bring together theory and practice.

The work of this book, defining justice with the larger context of an earth struggling for justice and peace for its total community, is urgently needed. Understandably, many who are weighed down with the burdens of poverty and oppression do not see how their own future well-being is linked with the well-being of the planet. Conlon helps make the connections.

If poor and hungry people are pitted against a poor and devastated earth, only a desert will ensue. But if we humans discover and honor our rightful place within the unfolding life of the earth, there is every reason to trust the future. ■

Rich kindred with animals, gods and oppressed masses

**EARTH, SKY, GODS & MORTALS:
DEVELOPING AN ECOLOGICAL
SPIRITUALITY**

By Jay B. McDaniel
Twenty-Third Publications, 214 pages, \$12.95 paperback

By STEPHANIE KAZA

In a time when newscasts and scientific studies are rife with gloom and doom scenarios of the deteriorating environment, it is a rare book that inspires hope and possibility for a sustainable future. Despite the burgeoning number of "How to Save the Earth" books and technological fix-it suggestions, we are still far from a positive outlook. Jay McDaniel, in his latest book, *Earth, Sky, Gods & Mortals*, contends that not only ecological thinking, but also ecological spirituality is es-

Stephanie Kaza is an assistant professor of environmental studies at the University of Vermont, Burlington, where she teaches environmental ethics, ecofeminism, religion and the environment and conservation biology.

The book is rich in theological inquiry, but even more it is an outstanding model of faith for a religion in search of an appropriate ecological response.

sential for reclaiming and reembodying our rich relationship with the earth and its creatures.

McDaniel, inspired by his students and church and academic community, writes primarily to a Christian audience, but his ideas are valuable for anyone seeking a spiritual foundation for personal transformation in relationship to the environment. A student of John Cobb, McDaniel draws on his studies in process theology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue to suggest an ecological spirituality that is based on social justice, ecological sustainability and harmony with God. He emphasizes interconnectedness with all beings, compassion, tolerance and open-

ness to other religions.

At the core of McDaniel's thesis is the idea that an ecological spirituality must be based on a faith without absolutes. He rejects the common interpretation of God or the absolute as a changeless, graspable object in favor of God as "mystery in which we place our deepest trust." By implication, McDaniel links the mechanistic objectified view of the universe related to so much environmental destruction with an absolutist view of God. But rather than reject Christianity in toto as some environmentalists choose, McDaniel offers a beautiful alternative of ecological faith as openness to the divine lure to love.

The book is a clearly outlined, fourfold path to ecological spirituality through openness to the earth as the body of God, openness to the sky as resource for prophetic imagination, openness to the gods as powerful influences and openness to mortals (people and animals) as opportunities for richness in relationship.

McDaniel boldly investigates many traditional Christian interpretations that have promulgated attitudes of intolerance, superiority and anthropocentrism in relationship to animals, landscapes and other cultures. In a most remarkably compassionate but firm way, he offers life- and faith-sustaining alternatives that can better serve the earth. McDaniel courageously invites readers to consider

ecologically relevant aspects of feminist theology, liberation theology and incarnational theology.

In a brilliant metaphor of the "divine elephant" — the mystery described from many experiences — McDaniel points to absolutizing as the root of the logic of domination. If "Christ is the Way that excludes no way," then there must be room for all experiences, with no single interpretation as ruling authority. This is a major challenge to the premise of many Christian beliefs, and rightly so, for no longer can a single religion impose its point of view on others in a world of pluralistic voices.

While firm about the errors of the past, McDaniel speaks from the depths of his own faith to suggest a third-phase Christian maturity that rejects godolatry in favor of rich and respectful relations with animals, ecosystems, gods and goddesses, as well as those suffering from social injustice. *Earth, Sky, Gods & Mortals* is rich in theological inquiry, but even more it is an outstanding model of faith for a religion in search of an appropriate ecological response. In these environmentally disastrous times, McDaniel offers a way to actively cultivate the wisdom and depth of spiritual calling to remember the richness of all our relations in the interdependent, mutually enhancing web of life. ■