



**Thomas Berry, C.P.** (November 9, 1914 – June 1, 2009) was a Catholic priest of the Passionist order, cultural historian and ecotheologian (although cosmologist and geologist — or “**Earth scholar**” — were his preferred descriptors).

Among advocates of **deep ecology** and "**ecospirituality**" he is famous for proposing that a deep understanding of the history and functioning of the evolving universe is a necessary inspiration and guide for our own effective functioning as individuals and as a species. He is considered a leader in the tradition of Teilhard de Chardin.

Author Michael Colebrook describes two key elements in **Thomas Berry**'s thinking: *"Firstly, the primary status of the universe. The universe is, 'the only self-referential reality in the phenomenal world. It is the only text without context. Everything else has to be seen in the context of the universe'. The second element is the significance of story, and in particular the universe as story. 'The universe story is the quintessence of reality. We perceive the story. We put it in our language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in theirs. We can read the story of the universe in the trees. Everything tells the story of the universe. The winds tell the story, literally, not just imaginatively. The story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important to know the story. If you do not know the story, in a sense you do not know yourself; you do not know anything.'"*

## Biography

Born William Nathan Berry in Greensboro, North Carolina, Berry was third of 13 children. By age eight, he had concluded that commercial values were threatening life on the planet. Three years later he had an epiphany in a meadow, which became a primary reference point for the rest of his life. He later elaborated this experience into a set of *Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process*. The first of these principles states:

*“The universe, the solar system, and planet earth in themselves and in their evolutionary emergence constitute for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.”*

At age 20, Berry entered a monastery of the Passionist order (ordained 1942) and, traveling widely, he began examining cultural history and foundations of diverse cultures and their relations with the natural world.

He received his doctorate in history from [The Catholic University of America](#), with a thesis on [Giambattista Vico](#)

's philosophy of history. He then studied Chinese language and Chinese culture in China and learned Sanskrit for the study of India and the traditions of religion in India. Later he assisted in an educational program for the T'boli tribal peoples of South Cotabataon, a Philippine island, and he taught the cultural history of India and China at universities in New Jersey and New York (1956-1965). Later he was director of the graduate program in the History of Religions at Fordham University (1966-1979). He founded and directed the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in Riverdale, New York (1970-1995). Berry studied and was influenced by the work of Teilhard de Chardin and was president of the American Teilhard Association (1975-1987). He has also studied Native American culture and [shamanism](#).

## Works

Thomas Berry's books include:

- *The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico* (1949)
- *Buddhism* (1968)

- *The Religions of India* (1972)
- [\*The Dream of the Earth\* \(1988\)](#)
- *Befriending the Earth* (with Thomas Clarke, 1991)
- *The Universe Story From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era, A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (with physicist [Brian Swimme](#) , 1992)
- *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (1999), Bell Tower/Random House, NY, ISBN 0-609-80499-5
- *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as Sacred Community* (2006), Essays, edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker, A Sierra Club Book, ISBN 1-57805-130-4, See description and TOC.

Berry also contributed two introductory essays ('Economics: Its Effects on the Life Systems of the World' and 'The Earth: A New Context for Religious Unity') to the volume *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, in which Brian Swimme, Caroline Richards, Gregory Baum and others discuss the implications of Berry's thought for a range of disciplines and paradigms. Berry's 'Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process'

[\[1\]](#)

offer a postscript to this 1987 work.

Berry was featured in the 2007 documentary [What a Way to Go: Life at the End of Empire](#) .

## Honorary degrees

2008 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. Elon University, Elon, North Carolina, March 15, 2008

2003 Honorary Doctorate of Theology. The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, Illinois

1998 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. The College of Mt. St. Vincent, Riverdale, New York. October 19, 1998.

1997 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. St. Mary's University. Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

1997 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California.

1994 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. St. Thomas University of Miami, Florida.

1994 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. Loyola University of New Orleans, Louisiana.

1993 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California

## **Other honors and awards**

2007: *Earth is Community* conference held in London, UK to honor Thomas Berry, organized by the Gaia Foundation and Greenspirit, September 15, 2007

2005: *Thomas Berry Student-Writing Award* established by the Environmental Leadership Center, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North Carolina. To foster dialogue and quality writing on environmental themes

2003: *Frederick II Peace Prize*, Pax Romana Earth Charter Project. Castel del Monte, Adria Italy. March 15, 2003

2002: *The Cosmological Imagination* conference held in Berkeley, California, to honor Thomas Berry organized by the Philosophy, Cosmology and Consciousness Department of the California Institute of Integral Studies. November 2 to 4, 2002

2002: *Juliet Hollister Award*, The Temple of Understanding, University Club, New York City. April 16, 2002

2001: *Francis of Assisi Award* for contribution to Earth Day Forum on Nature and Culture, presented to Thomas Berry by DePaul University's Institute for Nature and Culture, Chicago, Illinois

2000 *Thomas Berry Professorship* proposed for the Loyola Institute for Ministry of Loyola University, New Orleans

2000 Named to the Council of Honored Elders of the group 'Earth Elders', Santa Rosa, CA

1999 The *Thomas Berry Hall* at the Whidbey Institute of Chinook on Whidbey Island north of Seattle. Dedication July 23, 1999

1999 The *Thomas Berry Lecture* established by the Fine Arts Department of the University of British Columbia, 1999. Endowed by Fine-Arts Professor Emeritus Herb Gilbert, choosing the title Ecozoic Art Prize based on the term originating with Thomas Berry.

1999 David C. Korten's book *The Post-Corporate World: Life After Capitalism* (Narvel-Koehler Publishers, 1999) is dedicated to Thomas Berry

1999 Inclusion in *World Authors 1990 - 1995* of H.W. Wilson Co.

1998 First Annual *Jerry Mische Global Service Award*. Global Education Associates, on their 25th Anniversary Celebration. April 30, 1998

1998 The *Thomas Berry Foundation* established in Washington, DC

1998 First Annual *Thomas-Berry Environmental Award and Lectureship* sponsored by the Center for Reflection on the Second Law (CRSL) and the Humane Society of the United States, presented by Dr Mary Evelyn Tucker

1997 The New York Open Center Award: *A Visionary Voice in the Merging of Ecology and Spirituality*  
. October 30, 1997

1997 College of Mount St. Vincent on the Hudson first annual *Thomas-Berry Environmental Award* made to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. for Achievement in Restoring Ecological Health to the Hudson-Valley Region of New York State

1996 Inclusion in the New Catholic Encyclopedia XIX (Supplement 1989-1996).

1995 The *Lannan Foundation Literary Award for Non-Fiction* for *The Dream of the Earth*. \$50,000 prize

1995 Made an honorary charter member of The Club of Budapest, June 1995

1995 First *Green Dove Award* of Common Boundary, November 10, 1995

1993 The Catholic University of America Alumni *Award for Achievement in Research and Scholarship*  
. October 23, 1993

1993 The *Bishop Carroll T. Dozier Medal for Peace and Justice*. The Christian Brothers University of Memphis, Tennessee

1992 Named Honorary Canon of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine, New York

1992 The *James Herriott Award*, The Humane Society of the United States

1992 The *Prescott College Environmental Award*, Prescott, Arizona

1992 *Scholar-in-Residence* for the Humane Society of the United States on a continuing appointment until today

1989 The *United States Catholic Mission Association Annual Award*

## References

1. [^ Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology \(Amazon USA\)](#)

## See also

- The Great Story
- [Alfred North Whitehead](#)

## External links

- [An Electronic Archive of Selected Papers by Thomas Berry Delivered at Harvard, April 1996](#)
- [Thomas Berry and the New Story: An Introduction to the Work of Thomas Berry](#) by Professor Mary Evelyn Tucker
- [Towards An Authentic Eco-Spirituality by Al Fritsch, SJ, PhD](#)
- [Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process](#) by Thomas Berry
- [Whole Terrain](#) link to Berry's articles published in [Whole Terrain](#)
- [Interview in Appalachian Voices](#)
- [The Earth Community](#) - multi-media celebration of Thomas Berry
- [The Passionists](#)