


Article

Creation, Thomas Berry, and the Church in Africa

Idara Otu 

The National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul, Abuja 900001, Nigeria; idaraotu@yahoo.com

Abstract: The ecological crisis is a sign of the times, demanding adequate understanding, appropriate interpretation, and pastoral action in light of the Christian faith. Scholarly discourse on the ecological crisis continues to inspire partnership and collaborative actions in Africa. Sometimes, these efforts have yielded significant results, though amid uncharted territories. Scholars appeal for humans to embrace a mutually enhancing relationship with creation to build a common home for all creatures. A suitable and sustainable ecological vision that supports a communitarian approach to resolving the ecological crisis is Thomas Berry's cosmology. Berry's cosmological vision reclaims a creation theology that fosters a mutual relationship between humans and other creatures. Humans are beings in communion and beings in relationships created by God and thus from a common origin and moving toward a common destiny. This cosmological presupposition of Berry aligns with the ecological vision of Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The Pope calls humanity to a new cosmic relationship that would foster interdependency of the ecosystem and respect the intrinsic value of every creature. Given the unprecedented ecological challenges, humans have a unique role as intelligent beings toward other creatures, for future generations and the common good of the earth. This human responsibility toward the earth can be realized through an ecological ethics that fosters interdependence, interconnection, and mutuality in the human–earth relationship. Berry's insights and Catholic ecological teachings merit consideration for African Catholicism.

Keywords: Creation; Thomas Berry; Pope Francis; *Ubuntu*; Church in Africa



Citation: Otu, Idara. 2024. Creation, Thomas Berry, and the Church in Africa. *Religions* 15: 645. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060645>

Academic Editor: SimonMary Asese A. Aihokhai

Received: 22 April 2024

Revised: 21 May 2024

Accepted: 21 May 2024

Published: 24 May 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Theological discourse and pastoral actions to salvage a degrading earth community continue to inspire meaningful collaboration in the African continent. In his Magna Carta on ecology, the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (LS), Pope Francis appeals to humanity to embrace a mutually enhancing relationship with the earth—our common home (Francis 2015, #1). The pope's clear call points to creation as a gift of God with intrinsic value and humanity as interconnected with the earth. Closely related to this magisterial teaching is Thomas Berry's envisioning of the universe as "a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects". In Berry's cosmological vision, the idea of "communion" is an attempt to reclaim cosmology and promote a mutually beneficial and sustainable relationship within creation. Pope Francis and Thomas Berry envision creation as a seemingly concentric community of interconnected and interdependent ecosystems in which every creature is related to another, each with an intrinsic value. Exploring a possible intersection between Thomas Berry and Pope Francis toward articulating appropriate ecological actions for the Church in Africa is an emerging discourse in contextual theology (Otu 2012; Song 2018; Vanin 2021; Otu and Onyekwere 2023). Such theological research is a pathfinder for integral human ecology.

Humans cannot become complacent or indifferent toward the entire well-being of the earth, as called into being by a loving God. The earth is a communion of subjects, with each creature dependent on another. Amidst myriads of ecological challenges and as the apex of creation, humans have a distinct role toward all creatures, future generations, and the earth's common good. Such an anthropological role becomes even more realizable through a cosmological vision and creation theology that promotes interdependence, interconnection, and mutuality between humans and creation. Pope Francis's magisterial

teaching and Berry's cosmological vision intersect and form a basis for ecological action for African Catholicism.

This essay articulates a theological foundation grounded in the cosmological vision of Berry and the teachings of Francis, drawing implications for particular churches in Africa. Besides the Introduction and Conclusion sections, this essay is structured into five parts. The first presents a brief intellectual biography of Berry. The second describes Berry's arguments of cosmogenesis, explaining the principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion in the evolutionary process. The third focuses on the intersection of Berry's cosmology with the Catholic Church's call for ecological conversion worldwide. This involves a dialogue between Berry and the Catholic magisterium, especially Pope Francis, on care for creation. The fourth explores how local churches in Africa can promote ecological consciousness through the spirituality of *ubuntu* in conversation with Berry. The fifth offers concrete ecological actions that can be domesticated in local churches in Africa.

2. An Intellectual Biography of Thomas Berry

Thomas Berry (1914–2009), an American Passionist priest, cultural historian, and theologian (though he referred to himself as a geologist), was born and died in Greensboro, North Carolina (Lonergan 1987, pp. 2–3). This year marks 110 years since his birth and 15 since his death. Berry's seminal insights into the relationship between humans and creation resulted from various circumstances, foremost his childhood experience. At the age of eleven, he moved with his family to live on the edge of a town, in an uncompleted house on a slight incline. Below it was a creek, and across the creek was a meadow which inspired Berry's thoughts and insight on creation. He narrates:

It was an early afternoon in late May when I first wandered down the incline, crossed the creek, and looked out over the scene. The field was covered with white lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something that seems to explain my thinking at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember. It was not only the lilies. It was the singing of the crickets and the woodlands in the distance and the clouds in a clear sky. (Berry 1999b, p. 12)

This cognitive experience made a significant impact on Berry's life. It became the foundation of future discourse about the universe as an interconnected and interdependent reality. Berry arrives at the conviction that whatever preserves the meadow in its natural cycle is good, and whatever negates it is evil (Berry 1999b, p. 13). This insight by Berry was affirmed by his encounter with the Aboriginal peoples of North America and Africa and his understanding of the relationship between humans and the earth. He observes that the Aboriginals who first settled in North America had a unique vision of how humanity can dwell in a mutually enhancing relationship with creation (Berry 1999b, p. 36). This informed their care of the earth and attentiveness to the laws of nature. Similarly, Berry notes that the Bushmen of Africa experienced creation not as many objects to be exploited but as a community of subjects (Berry 1996, p. 5). These experiences contributed to Berry's interest in studying Asian cultures and religions, revealing wisdom within the scope of human–nature relationships. His thoughts on Confucianism affirm this: “Confucian thought originates in the experience of an all-embracing harmony of the cosmic and human orders of reality. This intimate relation between the cosmic and the human is expressed and perfected in an elaborate order of ritual and etiquette, which, in a certain manner, contains and harmonizes both the cosmic and the human” (Berry 1968, p. 3). The Asian religions would later influence Berry's conception of the sacredness of creation and the interdependence between humans and creation.

Intellectuals whose thoughts influenced Berry include Thomas Aquinas and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Berry was greatly influenced by the writings of Aquinas, especially *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which describe creation as a manifestation of the divine and the participation of all creatures in the being of God (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 17; Aquinas 1982, question 1, art. 1). Aquinas argues that the ground for the diversity

of creatures in existence is that the totality of the divine self cannot be communicated in one created being but through a diversity of beings such that another complements the goodness of each created being. The diversity and harmony of the created order are not accidents but express the intrinsic nature of the creation. This conception of the cosmic order by Aquinas inspired Berry to view the diversity of creatures as an enhancement of the plurality of cultures and a starting point for peace with the earth (Berry and Clarke 1991, pp. 3, 17).

Berry was influenced by Teilhard's essays on the universe (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 74; Dalton 1999, pp. 61–75). As a paleontologist, Teilhard is considered one of the earliest intellectuals to acknowledge the universe as characterized by four evolutionary phases—galactic, earth, life, and human evolution (Berry 2003, p. 59). This evolutionary process, for Teilhard, implies that the universe grows in complexity as it continues to evolve (Teilhard de Chardin 2004, p. 33). Berry affirms Teilhard's writings as being instrumental in his understanding of a tripartite aspect of the universe in its complexity: "a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension", "the universe story and the human story, are two aspects of a single story", and "there is need to move from an excessive concern for redemptive processes to a new concern for creation processes" (Berry 1999a, pp. vi–vii). Insights from Teilhard inspired Berry to articulate a universe story that emphasizes an evolving universe. A list of Berry's intellectual influences would be incomplete without mentioning his friendship and collaboration with the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme. Even though Berry introduced Swimme to the writings of Teilhard, the cosmological studies of Swimme would contribute to shaping Berry's cosmological vision of an unfolding universe (Scharper 1997, pp. 23–25). Scholars whose works might have contributed to Berry's cosmological vision include Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), Henry Thoreau (1817–1862), and John Muir (1838–1914) (Berry 1951; Berry 1988, pp. 6–7). Besides the influence of an array of intellectuals, Berry's early childhood experience of creation and studies on cultures and religions significantly shaped his understanding of the universe as a communion of subjects.

3. The Cosmology of Thomas Berry

Despite differing evolution theories, Terrence Nichols maintains that there is a consensus on the fact of evolution (Nichols 2002, p. 200). However, considering modern evolution theories, Berry offers a cosmological vision, the "New Story", that views the universe as evolving through sequential developments in which all that exists issues from a common origin, and all things result from an unfolding process over time (Berry 1988, pp. 127–28). Berry explains that creation is the sum of an evolutionary process that spans about 13.8 billion years of an irreversible transformation sequence (Swimme and Berry 1992, p. 223). The "New Story" presents the cosmos as still evolving and unfolding in a sequential process, as well as a story that stresses the interconnection and interdependence of all creatures. According to Berry, "the universe story, the Earth Story, the life story, and the human story—all are a single story. Even though the story can be told in a diversity of ways, its continuity is indispensable" (Berry 2009, p. 41).

Cosmologists have emphasized the empirical data of the universe's origin, but Berry envisions the origin of the universe as a sacred story (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 150). This intention of Berry arose from his childhood encounter with nature, which made him raise significant questions about the creation and origins of the universe. According to Herman Greene, Berry asks, "who has not been moved by a communion experience when he or she looks at the ocean at dawn or sunset or the heavens at night with all the stars ablaze, or who enters a wilderness area with his foreboding as well as entrancing aspects?" (Green 2000, p. 20; Berry 1999b, p. 82). In response, Berry concludes that humanity is intrinsically connected with the universe in a relationship of origin and bonded together in a single community of life (Berry and Clarke 1991, pp. 4–7, 105). Berry further argues that since the universe brought us into being with all our knowledge and our endowments, the

universe is an intellect-producing, aesthetic-producing, and intimacy-producing process (Berry 1999b, p. 81), which he calls cosmogenesis.

Cosmogenesis means that the universe is not a static occurrence but a continuing process of creativity characterized by three fundamental principles: differentiation, subjectivity, and communion (Swimme and Berry 1992, pp. 71–72). These distinct and interrelated governing principles of the universe manifest the ultimate divine mystery that brought the universe into existence and pertain to the nature of the universe in physical reality and intrinsic value. Cosmogenesis implies that the universe evolves as the diversity of modes of being increases (differentiation) and as the psychic interiority of each entity deepens (subjectivity) without diminishing the interrelatedness of the whole existence (communion). These governing principles, for Berry, are integral to each other, such that “were there no differentiation, the universe would collapse into homogeneous smudge; were there no subjectivity, the universe would collapse into inert, dead extension; were there no communion, the universe would collapse into isolated singularities of being” (Swimme and Berry 1992, pp. 72–73). This evolutionary process depends on communion, which establishes the unity and functioning of the universe.

Communion expresses the inextricable interconnection and interdependence between all beings from the beginning of creation, which continues as the universe evolves. Communion is the underlying principle that weaves the ecological age into reality. In Berry’s words, “every reality of the universe is intimately present to every other reality and finds its fulfillment in this mutual presence. The entire evolutionary process depends on communion. Without this fulfillment that each being finds in beings outside itself, nothing would ever happen in the entire world” (Berry 1988, pp. 106, 121). Communion, therefore, is the intrinsic bond of all creatures with each being in the universe. Humans live in a single and integral earth community characterized by mutuality and interdependence. In this cosmological vision, Berry asserts that the universe is a communion of subjects and not a collection of objects (Swimme and Berry 1992, p. 243).

The evolution of the universe contributes to the formation of genetic coding, which connects humans with other creatures and the universe, providing “constant guidance in the organic functioning that takes place in all our sense functions, our capacity for transforming food into energy, in our thought, imaginative and emotional life” (Berry 1988, pp. 8, 30). Non-human species remain viable within the verge of their genetic coding, but for humans, it is ordered toward further transgenetic cultural coding (Berry 1999b, p. 91). Expounding on the genetic coding of each creature, Berry writes:

The species coding of the human carries within itself all those deeper physical and spiritual spontaneities that are consciously activated by the genius of human intellect, imagination and emotion. These cultural patterns are handed down non-human which form the substance of the initiation rituals, educational systems and lifestyles of the various civilizations. (Berry 1996, p. 9)

In this context, Berry maintains that human relationships with creation are invariant with their genetic coding, which connects humans with other beings and the entire universe. He further contends that certain human qualities are observable in nature, pointing to astounding psychic qualities, including self-organizing capacities and the capacity for intimate relationships. According to Berry, these qualities indicate that “modes of consciousness exist throughout the universe in a vast number of qualitatively diverse manifestations” (Berry 1999b, p. 81). Berry concludes: “Above all, we discover that every being has its spontaneities that arise from the depths of its being. These spontaneities express the inner value of each being in such a manner that we must say of the universe that it is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects” (Berry 1999b, pp. 81–82).

Berry’s cosmological vision reveals the universe as evolving through a dynamic and integral process of cosmogenesis. Cosmogenesis is marked by the principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion, demonstrating an interdependence between humans and other creatures since the primeval origin of creation. Through genetic coding, humans are bound with other creatures and the entirety of creation in an inseparable communion.

This mutuality and integrality do not promote equality but enhance the quality of existence of each creature. Hence, no two sunflowers are entirely the same. Instead, every sunflower is unique and irreplaceable in its existence. The universe is home to creatures as subjects in communion with humans and not objects to be exploited by humans. Berry envisions an ecozoic era of a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and the earth (Berry 1999b, pp. x–xi). A pathway to this mutual relationship between humanity and creation is a determinant of recognizing the intrinsic communion in the universe that implicates all creatures as interdependent beings.

4. The Catholic Magisterium and Thomas Berry

Understanding the place and role of the human person in creation is fundamental in any narrative of the origins of existence. In Berry's "New Story," the human person is closely linked with other creatures and the earth, showing the bond of communion within creation. In the same vein, the teaching of the Catholic magisterium on ecology primarily focuses on the care and preservation of creation by humans, such that "integral human development is closely linked to the obligations that flow from man's relationship with the natural environment" (Benedict XVI 2009b, #2). Consequently, ecological responsibility demands a consciousness of the proper anthropological and cosmological visions. What follows is an exposition of the intersection of, Thomas Berry and the Catholic magisterial teachings on creation.

The ecological crisis arose as a consequence of the misconception of the human person and the workings of the earth (White 1967, pp. 1203–7). This misconception is discernible in the appropriation of the novelties of modern science to drive the prevailing modes of production and consumption, which threaten creation. Pope Francis, in *Laudate Deum* (LD), argues that it is no longer plausible to argue against the "anthropic" origin of the ecological crisis because the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which causes global warming, was stable until the nineteenth century, below 300 parts per million in volume (Francis 2023, #11). The pope notes that in the middle of that century, in conjunction with industrial development, emissions began to increase and accelerated significantly, as confirmed by the Mauna Loa observatory, which has taken daily measurements of carbon dioxide since 1958 (Francis 2023, #11). There was a historic high of 423 parts per million in June 2023; as well, more than 42% of total net emissions since the year 1850 were produced after 1990 (Francis 2023, #11).

It is the exploitation of creation by humans for which the magisterium "invites contemporary society to a serious review of its lifestyle which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences" (Benedict XVI 2009a, #51). This invitation to examine the relationship between humanity and creation has resulted in a call for ecological education, a fruit of the interior conversion of humans' posture and disposition toward the integrity of creation and other creatures. According to John Paul II:

An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth. This education cannot be rooted in mere sentiment or empty wishes. Its purpose cannot be ideological or political. It must not be based on a rejection of the modern world or a vague desire to return to some 'paradise lost.' Instead, a true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behavior. (John Paul II 1990, #51)

Ecological conversion is imperative as the ecological crisis moves creation toward a potential precipice of self-unsustainability and humanity toward the edge of self-extinction. Ecological conversion points to the substantial change required in humanity's sensitivity to the natural environment (John Paul II 2001, #4). Pope Francis affirms that the ecological crisis summons humanity to an interior ecological conversion (Francis 2015, #217). Drawing from a pastoral letter by the Australian bishops, he writes: "To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion or

change of heart” (Francis 2015, #218). Ecological conversion would inspire humanity to “greater creativity and enthusiasm in resolving the world’s problems and offering ourselves to God” (Francis 2015, #220).

Berry’s functional cosmology inspires an ecological consciousness, in that humans are products of the same psychic–spiritual and physical–material reality that was present at the beginning of creation. Humans are one species in the multi-complex community of life. To bring about a rightful relationship between humans and creation, Berry envisions an “ecozoic era,” a period characterized by a mutually enhancing relationship between humans and creation (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 149). The Church’s invitation to an ecological conversion is closely related to the ecozoic era of mutually enhancing relationships with the earth. In the same vein, the “New Story” is meant to inspire humanity to recognize its existence and telos as bound up with the entirety of creation, thereby leading to a change of heart to care for and preserve creation rather than exploiting nature.

Furthermore, it means a restoration of communion, an intrinsic dynamic of the universe. Unless humans genuinely understand and accept their rightful role in creation, ecological conversion becomes a spiritual ascent without any meaningful ecological action. Ecological conversion, therefore, must be rooted in ecological literacy, which leads to a mutually enhancing relationship, sustainable development, respect for biodiversity and the variety of ecosystems, and the simultaneous promotion of human dignity and the integrity of creation (Francis 2015, #19). Realizing a true ecological conversion depends on human consciousness of the essence of the “New Story” and an understanding of the dynamics of creation.

Given an estranged existential communion between humans and creation, ecological conversion invites humanity to a “greater intimacy with the natural world, to the establishment of the kind of covenant relationship that God is described as establishing with the whole of creation in Genesis 9:1–7” (Ormerod and Vanin 2016, p. 334). As rational beings, the essence of the human person comes from an infinite Creator who is relational, as expressed in the Trinity. The person is a relational being who enters into a relationship with creation *ad invicem* (directed to the other). To exist as a human is to be in levels of relationships—relationship with God, relationship with fellow humans, and relationship with other creatures. According to Pope Francis, God has united humanity with all those creatures, and the whole is a “contact zone,” emphasizing the relationality and mutuality that exist in creation (Francis 2023, #67). Berry considers this communion aspect of the creation as lost by humanity through a distancing of itself from the earth.

A significant factor has been the exegesis of the Genesis creation narrative (Gen 1:2–4a; 26–31) to create a dichotomy between humans and creation through a “dominion theology of stewardship (Ilo 2019, pp. 38–63). This notion of stewardship has been explained by many theologians and in magisterial documents. Ecological stewardship pertains to the human responsibility to rightly use and conserve natural resources as gifts from God on behalf of the Creator (Bakken 2005, p. 1598). This understanding is rooted in the creation story, which gives man and woman the obligation to “have dominion” (Gen 1:26) and to “cultivate and care” for creation (Gen 2:15). The creation texts, though meant to express faith in God as the Creator of existence, call for a biblical hermeneutic that reflects the nature of space and time as created by God. It means that anthropocentric features in the creation narratives may not confer on humans, creatures of God, supremacy over other creatures, though they may be cast in inadequate human language. Notably, the image of the garden of Eden to be tilled (Gen 2:15) must be interpreted to support sustainable use of the earth’s resources and respect for the integrity of creation. A proper exegetical interpretation could be that creation is God’s gift to us, and we are God’s gift to creation. It means that while humans are born of the earth, nourished by the earth, and healed by the earth, humans are responsible for preserving and caring for the earth. If the biosphere and ecosphere provide for the needs of humans, humans should protect the integrity of creation (Berry 2000, p. 2).

Pope Francis acknowledges the challenge of interpreting the Genesis creation narratives to support a proper understanding of the relationship between humans and creation. He writes: “The Judaeo-Christian vision of the cosmos defends the unique and central value of the human being amid the marvelous concert of all God’s creatures, but today we see ourselves forced to realize that it is only possible to sustain a ‘situated anthropocentrism.’ To recognize, in other words, that human life is incomprehensible and unsustainable without other creatures” (Francis 2023, #67). This resonates with Berry’s ecological insight that humans are the product of a single psychic–spiritual and physical–material origin. Thus, humans cannot be obviated from the rest of creatures. For Pope Francis, “as part of the universe. . .all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect” (Francis 2023, #67). Berry invites humans to move from being selfish to being selfless. This is a right to self-giving, a foundational right for other rights (Himes and Himes 1993, pp. 55–73). The earth has given itself to humanity, but humanity has not given itself to the earth. The advancement of rights to protect creation is imperative, as humans cannot continue with the crass moral dualism in which humans dominate the universe. In contrast, the rest of the creations lack moral consideration. Humans should be responsible stewards of nature and protect the integrity of the earth (Rasmussen 1996, p. 107).

5. African *Ubuntu* and the New Story

African communal ethics of *ubuntu* offer a framework for a theology of creation that resonates with the African context. *Ubuntu* recognizes that man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God, which implies that humanity does not occupy an undue superiority over other cultures (Tutu 1999, p. 36). The worldview as captured in the Zulu language states: “*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*”,—“a person is a person through other persons.” In other words, since “I am a relational being, therefore I am in a web of relationship.” The principle of *ubuntu* expresses the infinite bond of the communion of life between all that exists in creation, establishing a web of interconnection and interdependence (Louw 2011, pp. 173–92). This creates a communion in which creatures participate in each other’s nature without losing their individuality. The principle of *ubuntu* is expressed in symbols, myths, cultural practices, folktales, poetry, and songs of many African cultures (Uzukwu 1992, pp. 92, 274). Though there are many ethnic communities in Africa, there is an underlying cosmological vision. It is generally believed that humans and all creatures—the living, unborn, and the living–dead—are interrelated in a community of life without dichotomy. Humans cannot understand themselves without reference to nature (Metuh 1987, pp. 61–80; Uzukwu 1992, pp. 92, 274).

Ubuntu expresses the distinctiveness of each person and the human person as a being in a relationship and a being with the other. With this principle, the disruption of the mutuality and interdependence within creation disrupts the cosmic order. The African ethic of *ubuntu* is orientated toward the common good of humanity and creation, promoting human and cosmic flourishing. This practice is characterized by participation and solidarity that nourish abundant life for each creature and the entire creation (Ilo 2019, pp. 57–59). The bishops of Africa, through the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, recognize this interconnectedness in creation; thus, “to live in communion both with the environment and with God in Christ. . .is about a life of intimate relationship to be with and for God, to be with and for the other and with all visible and invisible beings that constitute creation” (SECAM 2019, #83).

The interdependence and interconnection expressed through the principle of *ubuntu* resonate with Berry’s New Story, which recognizes the universe as a communion of subjects characterized by relationality. As such, each created being is inseparable from other creatures in creation. According to Berry, “we were brought into being by the natural world, and we must survive on its conditions. In our resistance to these conditions, we have evolved a pathology of destruction in our consumer-oriented society” (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 46). Despite individuation in space and time, nothing on earth exists in isolation

from other creatures. Berry further explains that “everything in the universe is genetically cousin to everything else. There is literally one family, one bonding, in the universe, because everything is descended from the same source” (Berry and Clarke 1991, p. 14). This ecological intersection between Berry and the principle of *ubuntu* offers a valuable intellectual resource in reformulating an Afro-theological cosmology with implications for the Church in Africa. This will not make the Genesis creation story irrelevant but strengthen it through inculturation. Since there are many links between the gospel and culture, the Catholic Church rejects nothing valuable in any culture that aids the proclamation of the gospel (*Gaudium et Spes*, #58).

6. Toward Ecological Education for Particular Churches in Africa

The Catholic theology of creation affirms that all that exists was created by God *ex nihilo*, expressing a belief that God is the origin, ground, and goal of existence. This starting point for creation theology is expressed in the Church’s creedal, doctrinal, and magisterial teachings. However, the development of creation theology must not be confined to magisterial teachings, even as Pope Francis notes that the commitment to care for the creation “cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an ‘interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity’” (Francis 2015, #216). On this, the cosmology of Berry and the Catholic magisterial teachings on ecology offer a paradigm for local churches in Africa for ecological action. Myriad crises mark the ecological context of the African continent, yet Africa contributes the least to the planet’s carbon footprint. According to Pope Francis:

The warming caused by huge consumption on the part of some rich countries has repercussions on the poorest areas of the world, especially Africa, where a rise in temperature, together with drought, has proved devastating for farming. There is also the damage caused by the export of solid waste and toxic liquids to developing countries, and by the pollution produced by companies which operate in less developed countries in ways they could never do at home, in the countries in which they raise their capital. (Francis 2015, #51)

A fundamental pathway for local churches in Africa is ecological education of all the faithful. Such education as proposed here pertains to education about creation and origins of the earth, transmitting knowledge that provides conceptual understanding and fosters care for creation (Palmer 1998, p. 165). The goal of eco-education is to increase and foster the ecological consciousness of the individual toward an ecological conversion and ecological responsibility. Ecological education will promote a way of thinking and acting that respects the integrity of the earth and promotes the common good of creation for the present and future generations (Otu and Onyekwere 2023, p. 17). Ecological education will create “an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. . .that would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life” (Francis 2015, #202). This understanding of eco-education is in tandem with Berry’s vision of a period with a mutually enhancing relationship between humanity and the earth. Such an ecological education would benefit from integrating Berry’s cosmology with African *ubuntu* to teach the faithful in Africa concerning their respective context. Here, three themes should be considered—God as the Creator of the earth, the interdependence between humanity, and the role of humanity in caring for and preserving creation.

Consequently, local churches in Africa have a responsibility to revise their catechesis on the care of the earth in a manner that responds to the ecological challenges in their context and provides renewed forms of ecological action for the ecclesial community. Such a catechetical plan must integrate the cosmological stories of the faithful in light of Genesis creation narratives, demonstrating the relationality and interdependence embedded in creation, as well as the intrinsic worth of every creature. Drawing from Berry’s principles of differentiation, subjectivity, and communion, ecological education must embrace a holistic cosmological vision rather than a dominion theology that fractures the communion and

harmony of creation. Particular churches in Africa must be creative in developing ecological ministries that focus on ecological education, ecological conversion, and ecological responsibility, as well as integrating ecological concerns into the pastoral plans of each local church. This could be achieved by integrating ecological education in the Rites for Christian Initiation, marriage courses, and the ongoing formation of clergy, consecrated persons, and lay pastoral agents. Local churches must domesticate the teachings of the Catholic Church in a way that integrates contemporary cosmological theories and their cosmological stories.

7. Conclusions

Thomas Berry's insights into the universe reveal how vulnerable and limited we are with and without the earth. It is in this context that the words of Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew I, come alive: "First we [humans] must regain humility and recognize the limits of our powers, and most importantly, the limits of our knowledge and judgment. We have been making decisions, taking actions, and assigning values that are leading us away from the world as it should be, away from the design of God for creation" (John Paul II and Bartholomew I 2002). The New Story articulated by Thomas Berry presents a foundation for appreciating the theology of creation through the prism of Catholic magisterial teaching on creation.

This essay has demonstrated that Berry's functional cosmology, magisterial teaching on ecology, and African *ubuntu* are complementary, offering grounds for ecological action by the Church in Africa. Particularly, this is shown in the proposal for an ecological education that prioritizes a new vision of the earth rooted in communion and relationality and promotes the dignity of the human person and the integrity of the earth. The African *ubuntu* could be a vehicle for developing appropriate continental African ethics.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1982. *Theological Texts*. Edited by Thomas Gilby. Jamestown: Labyrinth Press.
- Bakken, Peter W. 2005. Stewardship. In *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. Edited by Bron Taylor. New York: Thoemmes Continuum, pp. 1588–99.
- Benedict XVI. 2009a. *Caritas in Veritate*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Benedict XVI. 2009b. If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation. World Day of Peace Message. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliiii-world-day-peace.html (accessed on 10 May 2024).
- Berry, Thomas. 1951. The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico. Doctoral dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington, DC, USA.
- Berry, Thomas. 1968. *Five Oriental Philosophies*. Albany: Magre Books.
- Berry, Thomas. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.
- Berry, Thomas. 1996. *Ethics and Ecology* [Paper]. The Harvard Seminar on Environmental Values, Harvard University. Available online: <https://oncaring.org/blog/cpvb2c8sjezpbobyi4z7ngwtgoale3> (accessed on 10 May 2024).
- Berry, Thomas. 1999a. Foreword. In *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas Berry and Bernard Lonergan*. Edited by Anne Marie Dalton. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, pp. vi–vii.
- Berry, Thomas. 1999b. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. New York: Harmony/Bell Tower.
- Berry, Thomas. 2000. Evening Thoughts. *Earth Light* 39: 134–35.
- Berry, Thomas. 2003. Teilhard in the Ecological Age. In *Teilhard in the 21st Century: The Emerging Spirit of the Earth*. Edited by Arthur Fabel and Donald St John. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 47–73.
- Berry, Thomas. 2009. *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth*. Edited by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

- Berry, Thomas, and Thomas Clarke. 1991. *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation Between Humans and the Earth*. Mystic Court: Twenty-Third Publications.
- Dalton, Anne Marie. 1999. *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas Berry and Bernard Lonergan*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- Francis. 2015. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* [Encyclical Letter]. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (accessed on 1 May 2024).
- Francis. 2023. *Laudate Deum: To All People of Good Will on the Climate Crisis* [Apostolic Exhortation]. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html (accessed on 19 May 2024).
- Green, Herman. 2000. Thomas Berry's Great Work. *The Ecozoic Reader* 1: 1–19.
- Himes, Michael J., and Kenneth R. Himes. 1993. *Fullness of Faith The Public Significance of Theology*. Mahwah: Paulist Press.
- Ilo, Stan Chu. 2019. The Gospel of New Creation: An African Ecotheological Ethics for Human and Cosmic Flourishing. In *African Ecological Ethics and Spirituality for Cosmic Flourishing: An African Commentary on Laudato Si'*. Edited by Stan Chu Ilo. Eugene: Cascade Books, pp. 38–63.
- John Paul II. 1990. Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html (accessed on 19 May 2024).
- John Paul II. 2001. General Audience Sddress. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html (accessed on 18 May 2024).
- John Paul II, and Bartholomew I. 2002. *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html (accessed on 19 May 2024).
- Lonergan, Anne. 1987. Introduction: The Challenge of Thomas Berry. In *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*. Edited by Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards. Mystic Court: Twenty-Third Publications, pp. 1–3.
- Louw, Daniël J. 2011. Noetics and the notion of Ubuntu thinking within an Inter-cultural Hermeneutics and Philosophical Approach to Theory Formation in Practical Theology. *International Journal for Practical Theology* 15: 173–92. [CrossRef]
- Metuh, Emefie Ikenga. 1987. *Comperative Studies of African Traditional Religions*. Onitsha: IMICO Publishers.
- Nichols, Terence L. 2002. Evolution: Journey or random walk? *Zygon* 37: 193–210. [CrossRef]
- Ormerod, Neil, and Cristina Vanin. 2016. Ecological Conversion: What Does it Mean? *Theological Studies* 77: 328–52.
- Otu, Idara. 2012. The Eco-Theologies of Thomas Berry and John Zizioulas: Intimations for Ecological Justice. Unpublished Master's thesis, Regis College, Toronto, ON, Canada.
- Otu, Idara, and Kingsley Onyekwere. 2023. Sacred Scripture, Church Fathers, Magisterium and *Laudato Si'*. *The International Journal of African Catholicism* 13: 3–20.
- Palmer, Joy A. 1998. Spiritual Ideas, Environmental Concerns and Educational Practice. In *Spirit of the Environment: Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*. Edited by David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer. London: Routledge, pp. 146–67.
- Rasmussen, Larry L. 1996. *Earth Community Earth Ethics*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Scharper, Stephen Bede. 1997. *Redeeming the Time: A Political Theology of the Environment*. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press.
- SECAM. 2019. Available online: <https://www.uecon.org/gallery-uec/86-institutions/9-coaching-events-9> (accessed on 10 May 2024).
- Song, Youngmin. 2018. Toward an Ecological Conversion: Ecospiritual Literacy for Developing Roman Catholic Ecological Education. Doctoral thesis, University of St. Michael's College, Toronto, ON, Canada.
- Swimme, Brian, and Thomas Berry. 1992. *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos*. San Francisco: Haper Collins Publishers.
- Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. 2004. *The Heart of Matter*. Translated by René Hague. Eugene: Harvest Books.
- Tutu, Desmond. 1999. *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Image Book.
- Uzukwu, Eugene. 1992. Human rights in Africa—A Contextual Theological Reflection. *Sados* 24: 92–274.
- Vanin, Cristina. 2021. The Relevance of Thomas Berry for 21st Century Catholicity. *Religions* 12: 878. [CrossRef]
- White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis. *Science* 155: 1203–7. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.