

# Understanding Thomas Berry's Great Work

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This article is an analysis of Thomas Berry's recent book, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*.<sup>1</sup> Even more it is an attempt to give a rational framework for understanding the major themes presented in his ecological writings and the major instructions he gives for the epochal reorientation of human civilization for which he calls.

The central theme of Thomas Berry's writing is that there must be a more integral relation between the human and other-than-human nature if the Earth community is to have a viable future and, importantly, if humans are to realize fully their own humanity. *The Great Work* (1999) is the most complete presentation of his vision. It follows his 1988 book, *The Dream of the Earth*,<sup>2</sup> and his 1992 book, which he co-authored with Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era*.<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry is by profession a cultural historian. His vast knowledge extends to theology, philosophy, evolutionary biology, contemporary cosmology, and ecology. His preferred title is "geologian."

In *The Great Work*, Thomas Berry sets forth (i) where we are as a human community, (ii) how we got here, and (iii) where we are going. These three themes provide the outline for the remainder of this article.<sup>4</sup> This article is not so much a critique, as an exposition, of Thomas's thoughts. To a large extent it is presented in Thomas's own voice.

## I. Where We Are

In each historical epoch, Thomas says, people are given a "Great Work to do—in one age, the settling of new lands; in another the creation of artistic, philosophical, religious, or scientific works; and in another the shaping of political structures and ideas. (p. 1) The Great Works of prior periods are seen in the movement of the first people out of Africa in the Lower Paleolithic Period; the creation of language, rituals, and social structures in hunter-gatherer communities in the Upper Paleolithic Period; the establishment of agriculture communities