

# **THOMAS BERRY: Reflections on His Life and Thought**

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## **Introduction**

Thomas Berry was born November 9th, 1914 in Greensboro, North Carolina where he spent his early childhood and where he returned when he was 80. It was there that he died peacefully on June 1, 2009. Named William Nathan after his father, he was the third child of thirteen of which four siblings remain. He entered the Passionist Order in high school and, upon ordination, he took the name Thomas after Thomas Aquinas whose writings he admired, especially the *Summa Theologiae*.<sup>1</sup>

After completing his doctorate from Catholic University with a thesis on Giambattista Vico, he studied in China from 1948 to 1949. There he met Theodore de Bary who was to become a life-long friend and one of the most renowned Asian scholars in the West. Along with his wife, Fanny de Bary, Ted was among Thomas' earliest supporters. During many an evening at their home in Tappan NY, Thomas and Ted would discuss the spiritual dimensions of the Asian traditions, especially Confucianism. Fanny shared Thomas' interest in Teilhard and always arranged delicate spring flowers for the annual American Teilhard Association meetings in New York. At Columbia University, Ted established a groundbreaking Asian studies program highlighting the classical texts and the history of India, China, and Japan. He and Thomas shared a life long interest in Asian religions and together they founded the Asian Thought and Religion Seminar at Columbia. Theirs was a rich and sustaining friendship at a time when few understood Thomas' studies and teaching of Asian traditions. Thomas authored two books on Asian religions, *Buddhism* (1967) and *Religions of India* (1971).

From 1970 to 1995, Thomas directed the Riverdale Center of Religious Research along the Hudson River. From 1975 to 1987, he served as President of the American Teilhard Association. In 1978, Thomas initiated the *Teilhard Studies* series with his essay, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification and Transmission of Values." Here he called for the articulation of a new story of evolution and the emergence of life. The work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a major inspiration for Thomas in developing his ideas for a universe story, especially Teilhard's feeling for the great sweep of evolution from lesser to greater complexity and consciousness.

Thomas was also an outspoken advocate for the environment. Early on, he called for the restitution of habitat for biodiversity, not simply as a conservation measure but in recognition of the intrinsic value of nature. His vision of a flourishing Earth community gave him an unparalleled drive. In fact, some of his most insightful work occurred after he was sixty years old. Even at the end, he encouraged Mary Evelyn, who was attending the first climate change conference at the Vatican in 2007, with the simple advice: speak up!

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<sup>1</sup> Sections of this essay are adapted from the "Introduction" to Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009); and from *The Ecozoic: A Tribute to Thomas Berry*, published by the Center for Ecozoic Studies, 2009.