

Thomas Berry's Intellectual Journey

From his academic beginning as a cultural historian, Thomas Berry has evolved over the last thirty years to become a historian of the earth. He sees himself not as a theologian but as a geologist. The movement from human history to cosmological history has been a necessary progression for Berry. In his own lifetime he has witnessed the emergence of a planetary civilization as cultures have come in contact around the globe, often for the first time. At the same time, the very resources for sustaining such a planetary civilization are being undermined by massive environmental destruction.

Thomas Berry began his academic career as a historian of Western intellectual history. His thesis at Catholic University on Giambattista Vico's philosophy of history was published in 1951. Vico was trying to establish a science of the study of nations comparable to what others had done for the study of nature.

Influenced by Vico, Berry has developed a comprehensive historical perspective in periodization, an understanding of the depths of contemporary barbarism, and the need for a new mythic wisdom to extract ourselves from our cultural pathology and deep alienation. Berry has described contemporary alienation as especially pervasive due to the power of the technological trance, the myth of progress, and our own autism in relation to nature. With the *New Story* and the *Dream of the Earth*, Berry hopes to overcome this alienation and evoke the energies needed to create a viable and sustainable future. This effort to create a new basis for human-earth relations he is calling the Great Work.

When Berry set out for China in 1948, he met Columbia professor Wm. Theodore de Bary on the boat leaving from San Francisco. De Bary was on his way to China as the first Fulbright scholar of Chinese studies. Berry intended to study language and Chinese philosophy in Beijing. Their time in China, while fruitful, was cut short by Mao's Communist victory in 1949. After they returned to the States they worked together to found the Asian Thought and Religion Seminar at Columbia. Berry's friendship with Ted and Fanny de Bary has lasted nearly 50 years. Discussions with Ted spurred Berry's interest in Asian religions, especially Confucianism. Likewise, Fanny has supported Berry's ecological thought through her work with the American Teilhard Association of which Berry was President for the decade of the 1970s. Berry taught Asian religions at Seton Hall (1956-1960) and St. John's University (1960-1966) and eventually moved to Fordham University (1966-1979). Berry founded a Ph.D. program in the History of Religions at Fordham and wrote numerous articles on Asian religions in addition to two books, one on *Buddhism* (1966) and the other on *Religions of India* (1971). Both books are now distributed by Columbia University Press.

What distinguished Berry's approach to religion was his effort not only to discuss the historical unfolding of the traditions being studied, but also to articulate their spiritual dynamics and contemporary significance. Equally important in Berry's approach has been

his effort to highlight the distinctive contributions of both the Western traditions and the Asian religions. In addition, he has shown a long-standing appreciation for the spirituality of indigenous traditions in both Asia and the Americas. In a short monograph published in 1968, Berry demonstrates the originality of his interpretations of the spiritual dynamics of Asian religious thought. Titled *Five Oriental Philosophies*, it describes the phenomenological essence of these traditions as well as their historical unfolding. He includes Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Zen in his discussions.

Berry has been able to appreciate the deep spiritual impulses and devastating human sorrows which have given rise to the world's religions. From this perspective he has discerned which spiritual resources are needed to create a comprehensive multicultural perspective within the earth community. For Berry, tolerance of diversity of religious ideas is comparable to protecting diversity of species in the natural world; human diversity and biological diversity are two aspects of a vital ecological whole.

Confucianism has had special significance for Berry because of its cosmological concerns, its interest in self-cultivation and education, and its commitment to improving the social and political order. With regard to Confucian cosmology Berry has identified the important understanding of the human as a microcosm of the cosmos. Essential to this cosmology is a "continuity of being" and thus a "communion" between various levels of reality--cosmic, social, and personal. (This is similar to the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, and other contemporary process thinkers.) In addition to a remarkable ability to appreciate the diversity and uniqueness of the great world religions, Berry has a lively interest in and empathy for native religions. His own research, writing, and teaching in the field of Native America religions has been extensive. Berry's appreciation for indigenous traditions and for the richness of their mythic, symbolic, and ritual life has been enhanced by his encounters with the ideas of Carl Jung and Mircea Eliade. Jung's understanding of the collective unconscious, his reflections on the power of archetypal symbols, and his sensitivity to religious processes has made him an important influence on Berry's thinking. Moreover, Mircea Eliade's studies in the history of religions have been enormously useful in Berry's understanding of both Asian and native traditions. This is due in large part to Eliade's ability to interpret broad patterns of meaning embedded in comparable symbols and rituals across cultures.

Within this larger framework of interpretive categories, Berry is able to articulate the special feeling in native traditions for the sacredness of the land, the seasons, and the animal, bird, and fish life. Native peoples respect Creation because they respect the Creator. They have a deep reverence for the gift of all life and for humans' dependency on nature to sustain life. They have perfected some of the ancient techniques of shamanism, i.e., using ritual fasting and prayer to call on the powers in nature for personal healing and communal strength. They have cultivated an ability to use resources without abusing them and to recognize the importance of living lightly on the earth. This is not to suggest that native peoples were the ideal ecologists. As in the Chinese case, abuses certainly have occurred. However, for Berry these two traditions (Confucianism and Native American religions) remain central to the creation of a new ecological spirituality for our times.

In formulating his idea of the *New Story*, Berry is much indebted to the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In particular, Berry has derived from Teilhard (and from other writers such as Loren Eiseley) an enormous appreciation for developmental time. As Berry writes frequently, since Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* we have become aware of the universe not simply as a static cosmos but as an unfolding cosmogenesis. The theory of evolution provides a distinctive realization of change and development in the universe that resituates us in a huge sweep of geological time. With regard to developmental time, Teilhard suggested that the whole perspective of evolution changes our understanding of ourselves in the universe. For Berry, the *New Story* is the primary context for understanding the immensity of cosmogenesis. It is similar to what Loren Eiseley refers to as *The Immense Journey* or *The Firmament of Time*.

From Teilhard, Berry has also derived an understanding of the psychic-physical character of the unfolding universe. This implies that if there is consciousness in the human and if humans have evolved from the earth, then from the beginning some form of consciousness or interiority is present in the process of evolution. Matter, for both Teilhard and Berry, is not simply dead or inert, but a numinous reality consisting of both a physical and spiritual dimension. Consciousness, then, is an intrinsic part of reality and is the thread that links all life forms. There are various forms of consciousness and, in the human, self-consciousness or reflective thought arises. This implies for Berry that we are one species among others and as self-reflective beings we need to understand our particular responsibility for the continuation of the evolutionary process. We have reached a juncture where we are realizing that we will determine which life forms survive and which will become extinct. We have become co-creators as we have become conscious of our role in this extraordinary, irreversible developmental sequence of the emergence of life forms.

Berry's approach has been much more inclusive in terms of cultural history and religion, while Teilhard's has been remarkably comprehensive scientifically. These two approaches have come together in Berry's book, written with the mathematical cosmologist Brian Swimme, called *The Universe Story*. Here for the first time is the narration of the story of the evolution of the solar system and the earth along with the story of the evolution of homo sapiens and human societies and culture. While not claiming to be definitive or exhaustive, *The Universe Story* sets forth a model for the telling of a common creation story. It marks a new era of self-reflection for humans, one that Berry has described as the "ecological age" or the beginning of the "ecozoic age." Berry's ideas on the *New Story* began in the early 1970s as he pondered the magnitude of the social, political, and economic problems we were facing in the human community. He first published the *New Story* in 1978 as the initial booklet of the Teilhard Studies series. Berry opens his essay by observing, "We are in between stories." He notes how the old story was functional because "It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose, and energized action. It consecrated suffering, integrated knowledge, and guided education." This context of meaning provided by the old stories is no longer operative. Berry proposes a new story of how things came to be, where we are now, and how our human future can be given some meaningful direction. In losing our direction we have not lost our values and orientation for human action. This is what the *New Story* can provide.

Berry states that to communicate values within this new frame of reference of the earth story we need to identify the basic principles of the universe process itself. These are the primordial intentions of the universe towards differentiation, subjectivity, and communion. Differentiation refers to the extraordinary variety and distinctiveness of everything in the universe. No two things are completely alike. Subjectivity or consciousness is the interior numinous component present in all reality. Communion is the ability to relate to other people and things due to the presence of subjectivity and difference. Together these create the grounds for the inner attraction of things for one another. These are principles that can become the basis of a more comprehensive ecological and social ethics that sees the human community as dependent upon and interactive with the earth community. Only such a perspective can result in the flourishing of both humans and the earth. As Berry has stated, humans and the earth will go into the future as one single multiform event or we will not go into the future at all.

This New Story is born out of Berry's own intellectual formation as a cultural historian of the West, turning toward Asian religions, examining indigenous traditions, and finally culminating in the study of the scientific story of the universe itself. It is a story of personal evolution against the background of cosmic evolution, and of one person's intellectual journey in relation to Earth history. It is a story awaiting new tellings, new chapters, and ever-deeper confidence in the beauty and mystery of its unfolding. This story provides a comprehensive context for orienting human life toward the "Great Work" of our time. This phrase *The Great Work* is the title of his most recent work which challenges humans to reinvent their role at the species level as they search for that particular niche in the evolutionary process. As Thomas suggests, history calls us in the early 21st century to create new, life sustaining human-earth relations. The life, beauty, and diversity of the planet need to be preserved and enhanced for future generations. This is the Great Work to which we are each called by Thomas Berry.