

**“But What Does It Mean?”  
An Appreciation of Father Thomas Berry, C.P.”**

**Daniel P. Sheridan, Ph.D.**

**Thomas Berry’s Intellectual Journey: Cultures, Religions, Ecology  
Thomas Berry and the Great Work**

**Georgetown University  
October 30-31, 2019**

I meet people who laud Thomas Berry [1914-2009] as the “bard of the new cosmology.” Each seizes some facet of the accomplishments of this great man. I was privileged to know him both as Father Thomas and as Thomas, as a teacher and mentor, and as a peer. I owe him a deep debt of gratitude. Thomas married me and my wife and baptized our first son. He was the great master in our intellectual journey. For forty-two years until his death in 2009, we talked about books he encouraged me to read. I met Thomas in 1967, roughly half-way through his journey as a scholar. I met him as he was building the intellectual foundations for *The Universe Story*, co-authored with Brian Swimme [1992], and then *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* [1999]. Attending to these foundations deepens understanding of his later work. I wish I had known him earlier in the more formative years when he read his way through Augustine, when he was deeply informed by the Thomists of his youth, Joseph Gretd and Aimée Forest, and by the Thomistic historian, Etienne Gilson. I wish I had been there when as a young teacher, at the same high school seminary I later attended, he tried unsuccessfully [?] to get seminarians to read the *City of God* and *The Communist Manifesto*. On the day we met, while I was a college junior, we talked about the relationship of religion and culture found in the works of Christopher Dawson [1889-1962]. It gave me a leg up that I had already read Dawson.

As he did for many, Thomas encouraged me to study the religions of Asia. Thus, four years later, he guided my doctoral study in the history of religions. I was also appointed his assistant at the foundation of the Riverdale Center for Religious Research. I remember the hot afternoons when in wash tubs we moved his library to clear the old house for renovation as the Riverdale Center. Thomas and I, under the supervision of Fr. Ernie Hotz, spent days knocking down old plaster walls. During that first summer with him in 1971 each morning I studied Sanskrit. Each evening he brought me books: McNeil’s *The Rise of the West*, Beckett’s

*Endgame*, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, Augustine's *The City of God*, Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipeligo*, van der Leuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Fung Yu-Lang's *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Neumann's *The Great Mother*, and de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. His attention was already on the environment. We read Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* and Dubos' *So Human an Animal*. I helped Thomas plan his week-long summer conferences: "The Counter-Culture," "Symbolism," "New York as Sacred City," "Energy: Its Cosmic-Human Dimensions."

In class, Thomas introduced me to Lady Murasaki, Confucius and Mencius ["no one should call themselves educated if they have not read Mencius"], Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Śāṅkara and Krishna, Black Elk and Teilhard [somehow he missed Muhammad; I think it was deliberate!]. He encouraged me never to forget Thomas Aquinas. He directed my dissertation on the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. He stressed the importance of divine affectivity, and how to make comparisons in similarity and difference. He persistently asked, "But what does it mean?" Amazingly, and still to my surprise after all these years, he affirmed me as a young scholar; he told me to write my entire dissertation before showing it to him. It took four months of translating and writing. He encouraged my career as professor of the history of religions. From 1984 to 1996, each winter, I spent two weeks with him translating and writing. At the close of the Center in 1997, he gave me a good portion of his library on Hinduism and Buddhism. For our last meeting, my wife MaryAnn, Brian Brown, and Amarylis Cortijo visited him in Greensboro, North Carolina. He had had a stroke and was aphasic. He couldn't read, but he could remember. He remembered passages for me to read aloud from Aquinas' *Summa Contra Gentiles*.

As an historian of religion, I learned three things from Thomas.

(1) The world religions have conflicting "soteriologies." They include not only contraries, but contradictories. Thus, Thomas never spoke of convergent "ways to the center." For the next forty years, this conclusion placed me at odds with prevailing currents in the theology of religions. Only with the emergence of comparative [and contrastive] theology, under the influence of Fr. Francis X. Clooney, S.J., have countervailing assumptions been given a hearing. As Thomas said, "If God were to speak, why would he always say the same thing?"

2) Culture and religion are inextricably entwined. Thomas worked from the style of

cultural history of Christopher Dawson.<sup>1</sup> He maintained that the problematic of the present is cultural and religious, not just theological. There was nothing basically wrong with the classical theology of God. Characteristically, he bragged he had never read anything by Karl Rahner.<sup>2</sup>

(3) I learned: go deeper in theology and the study of religion, and not to innovate when not necessary. Ewart Cousins also taught me that Paul Ricoeur was naïve about second naïveté, since there was nothing naïve about first naïveté. Depth need not be achieved by innovation. Thomas' point was that the specific was as important, more important, than the generic. His later development of an ecozoic spirituality, which, while not completely dismissive of, is at least inattentive to, the redemption, I am more wary of.

I think it is unfortunate that those encountering Thomas Berry in his later years, after his retirement from Fordham, may not know Thomas' intellectual development from the thirties to the seventies. His later vision had a foundation. Augustine's *The City of God* is central to Thomas' historical perspectives with its emphasis on the biggest picture possible, on convergent historical factors, and on cultural impact.<sup>3</sup> He loved its Latin periodic sentences. With Augustine Thomas searched for the broad unfolding of human, and of cosmic, history. He encountered the entanglement of the divine and the human. He wanted to know where history was going. This emphasis on Augustine explains why Dawson influenced him, although he rarely cited him. Dawson understood that religion was the key to understanding culture. When Thomas called himself a cultural historian, he meant culture in the sense that Dawson did, not in the anthropological sense of Kroeber and Kluckhohn, or of the French *Annales* school of cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> See Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1948, p. 37: "Therefore from the beginning the social way of life which is culture has been deliberately ordered and directed in accordance with the higher laws of life which are religion. AS the powers of heaven rule the seasons, so the divine powers rule the life of man and society, and for a community to conduct its affairs without reference to these powers, seems as irrational as for a community to cultivate the earth without paying attention to the course of the seasons. The complete secularization of social life is a relatively modern and anomalous phenomenon. Throughout the greater part of mankind's history, in all ages and states of society, religion has been the great central unifying force in culture. It has been the guardian of tradition, the preserver of the moral law, the educator and the teacher of wisdom."

<sup>2</sup> This is ironic because, when Fr. Thomas told me that, I was working with Fr. McCool on *The Rahner Reader*. My contribution was to provide the index.

<sup>3</sup> See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, translation by Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 1091: "And now, as I think, I have discharged my debt, with the completion, by God's help, of this huge work. It may be too much for some, too little for others. Of both these groups I ask forgiveness. But of those for whom it is enough I make this request: that they do not thank me but join with me in rendering thanks to God. Amen. Amen."

history. His dissertation at Catholic University in 1948 on Giambattista Vico [1668-1744] illustrates this. Basically, an exposition of Vico's thought,<sup>4</sup> it might not pass muster these days as a dissertation. But it shows the direction of Berry's thought, and his practice as a cultural historian. In the early fifties he studied the great neo-Confucians, especially Chu Hsi [12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.]. This is important because Thomas juxtaposed neo-Confucian cosmic humanism dialectically with Augustine's and Aquinas' monotheism of creation. In the later fifties he discovered Teilhard who synthetically pulled the two strands together. From this convergence Thomas derived the basis for his environmental and ecological work, even while he was very critical of Teilhard.

Thomas in the forties and fifties should be situated as a historian of thought, and then from the seventies on as an essayist of genius. He had found his genre. Unfortunately, Thomas never produced a major historical work. Nonetheless, his insights are shaped by the "essay" which may be the perfect vehicle for what he wanted to say, for the audience he wanted to reach, and for the way he wanted to impact that audience. He appreciated other essayists: Emerson, Annie Dillard, Rene Dubos, Wendell Berry, Teilhard, etc. The essay, with its carefully crafted prose and poetic resonance, channeled and focused his thinking. What he wanted to convey, he wrote in lucid prose that he reviewed again and again. He also delivered these essays in spoken form. Usually he stayed close to the text. His phrases and modes of thought were repeated, even as they unfolded over the decades. He was not into the academic games of publication and scholarship, nor into the intricacies of detailed research. He read foundational texts directly, Augustine in Latin, Chu Hsi in Chinese, the Bhagavad Gita in Sanskrit, the Communist Manifesto, Teilhard, Jung, etc. Many of the dissertations of his doctoral students were about significant Hindu and Buddhist texts, and about Native American myths and rituals, and what they now mean. This approach allowed him to read the ancients as if he and they were contemporaries. Their thought addressed him directly in the present. Thus, he did not get bogged down too much in historical contextualization. This is both a gain and a loss. It means that his major conclusions may be on the mark, but his historical illustrations may fall short. Historians may be impatient with him, from a more focused historical point of view rightfully so, but in terms of the big picture perhaps not.

---

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Berry, *The Historical Theory of Giambattista Vico* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949).

Thanks to Kathleen O’Gorman, in the eighties Thomas came to Loyola in New Orleans over six years to teach weekend graduate courses for the Institute for Ministry. We celebrated there his eightieth birthday. In 2000 all the faculty at Saint Joseph’s College of Maine received copies of *The Great Work* and a required course for all students was introduced, “Ecology and the Environmental Challenge.” During the nineties, at Riverdale, Thomas and I discussed Thomas Aquinas’ philosophy of the analogy of being and creation out of nothing. These discussions show that in his last years, in private conversations, he was very interested in the most important questions from his earliest studies as a seminarian: is the universe self-explanatory or not? Yet he rarely alludes to this question in his later essays. Creation was a *doctrina arcana*. As a historian, he developed the thesis that Christianity since the Black Death, the Reformation, and the Counter Reformation overemphasized redemption at the expense of creation. This, he thought, contributed to the ecological crisis. In my judgment, the thesis is stated but never demonstrated with convincing historical evidence according to contemporary historiographical criteria. I am not sure I support this thesis. In fact, I know I don’t. However, I think it can be sorted out of his thought without losing its overall value and impact. [He would not have agreed with me about this!].

This is the strength and weakness of Thomas Berry as an historian. He was an “essayist” and direct reader of texts. He was a humanist in the classical sense like Vico and Dawson even as he resituated the human project into the Universe Story: “the basic mood of the future might well be one of confidence in the continuing revelation that takes place in and through Earth.” In this last he joined Teilhard in fundamental Christian hope.