

*Thomas Berry and the Interfaith Movement*

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In 1956 Thomas Berry was living at the Immaculate Conception Monastery in Jamaica, Queens, New York and had been denied permission by his superiors in the Passionist Congregation to either accept an assignment in Japan or to teach. He wrote to his sister Ann, “I keep scribbling now and again. Too bad I am involved in such vast areas of study. ‘Twere simpler to be a specialist in some little area of study – or to be a poet. The worse curse of all is to [be] a historian interested in the whole world of nations from creation until today.”<sup>1</sup> This consciousness of the totality of being and the hunger to learn and understand reality comprehensively is an essential, driving motive of Thomas Berry’s character and vision. “The whole world of nations,” or the global context, is located within the far vaster cosmic context indicated by “from creation to today.” The global context propels us into the encounter of the world’s religions and the life of interfaith, while the cosmic context catalyzes our perspective on the human as an evolving species among countless other living beings in the Earth community. Both are aspects of the panhuman. In what follows I will reflect on their interrelation and the role Thomas played in their recent history, some of which I shared with him.

From his childhood Thomas had been aware of the cosmic context through his experience of the sacred mystery or numinous presence in the natural world. In seminary he was formed by perception of “the continuity between the cosmos and the human” in the monastic cycle of prayer corresponding to the times of night and day and the seasons of the year. He later said, “Despite all the trivialization observable in the [Catholic] tradition, something immensely significant was still available in the carrying out of the age-old effort of humans to bring human life into accord with the great liturgy of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim and Andrew Angyal. *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 65. I draw on this biography for the narrative of Thomas’s life.

universe. That the universe itself was the primary liturgy just as it was the primary scripture, I never doubted.”<sup>2</sup> During these same seminary years, inquiring into human history through intense study he had read not only Western philosophical and religious works deeply – certain ones repeatedly – but also studied the Upanishads and the Chinese classics (this was in the 1930s and early 40s). At Catholic University he wrote a dissertation “On the Interpretation of History in a World Religious Context” “examining the philosophy of history in Hindu, Buddhist and Confucian frameworks;”<sup>3</sup> this was turned down by his advisor as too broad and he had to write a second dissertation, which was on Gianbattista Vico. Immediately following completion of his doctorate in 1948 he traveled to China. Although he was there for less than a year it was a life-changing experience, and the beginning of his friendship with William Theodore de Bary on that journey would immeasurably enhance his ongoing study of China. On return from Army chaplaincy in Germany and finally receiving permission to teach, he taught at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Seton Hall University beginning in 1957. In 1959 he began Sanskrit studies at Columbia.

In 1956 he had published an essay in *World Mission*, “Our Need of Orientalists”<sup>4</sup> and in 1961 the lead article in the inaugural Issue of the new journal *International Philosophical Quarterly*, “Oriental Philosophies and World Humanism.” This was the same year that Mircea Eliade’s “History of Religions and a New Humanism” opened the first issue of *History of Religions*; Thomas mentions the work of Eliade with appreciation. In this lengthy, masterful, rich and almost encyclopedic essay, Thomas begins by affirming that “Oriental philosophy arises from a series of unique spiritual experiences,” adding that the dependence of Western philosophy on spiritual experience has been inadequately recognized in a stress on rationality. He discusses Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Zen from their beginnings up through the modern period. In closing, he calls for a “pluralist world humanism” and states that “The challenge to philosophers is essentially the same as the general challenge to mankind in the twentieth century, that of giving universal order to human life in all its aspects,” and that “A total human experience of reality belongs to no one society but to the world

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<sup>2</sup> Tucker, Grim and Angyal, 35-36.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> *World Mission* 7 (Fall 1956): 301-314.

community itself.” No one tradition is comprehensive in itself, but taken together the traditions offer complementary visions which complete each other to illumine reality more fully. He also observes that having neglected Asian philosophy, “the West itself is deeply puzzled about the formation of a world philosophical tradition which is now a necessity imposed upon us.” But more hopefully he says, “Diversity is no longer something that we tolerate. It is something that we esteem as a necessary condition for a livable universe, as the source of earth’s highest perfection.”<sup>5</sup>

1961 was also the year that the University Seminar on Oriental Thought and Religion was founded at Columbia, in which Thomas would offer many papers. I first met him in 1973 when I became the graduate student secretary of the Seminar and Thomas was its Chair. By then a new chapter in scholarship on the world’s religions was well under way. The expansion in scholarship was partly a result of the Second World War, in connection with which governments had promoted study of different cultures. For some of those who had been posted in Asia in the military, interest in “the Orient” became their life’s work. Events during World War II also influenced the start of a new phase in interfaith life in the West, as Jules Isaac (1877-1963), a distinguished French Jewish historian, asked Christian leaders to enter dialogue with the Jewish community to transform those aspects of Christianity that had expedited the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup> This led in time to *Nostra Aetate*, the historic statement in 1965 of the Second Vatican Council on the relation of Christianity to other religions. As well as growing scholarship and re-examination of the relations among established religions, there was an increase of organized interfaith programs including centers and councils at the local level.

The time was marked also by spiritual search turning East, burgeoning in the 1960s with a number of spiritual teachers coming to the West from India and East Asia. They built on the pre-war influence of Swami Vivekananda and the Vedanta Society, Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki and Paramahansa Yogananda, author of the *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Vivekananda and Suzuki are both mentioned by Thomas in his *World Mission* essay as he attends to evolving currents of American spirituality. Thomas spoke of religions “entering their macrophase.” For the first time in history all knowledge about all of the religions is in principle available to all, and the religions begin to be fully

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<sup>5</sup> *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 1 (1) (February 1961): 5-33; 25-26, 29, and 31.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://julesisaacstichting.org/a-short-introduction-to-jules-isaac/>

present to one another. This elicits the deepest and most numinous elements in each by a psychic attraction and in their meeting they enrich each other. I would here like to emphasize that the interplay and at times the convergence of these three developments – scholarship, organized interreligious relations and spirituality – is of great historical importance. Thomas was one of the first to understand this process as well as to mold it. The global interfaith movement, today made up of thousands of groups, programs and activities internationally, is a distinctive development of our time and is one aspect of “The Great Work.”

In the conclusion to his *Religions of India*, first published in 1971, Thomas articulates a powerful interfaith vision when he says, “The global spiritual past is the only adequate context for the present understanding of the human even though this effort at universal awareness is thwarted by exclusivist attitudes that still exist in the world. Even now, however, the futility of such exclusivism is widely recognized. All live currents of thought seek to encompass the full dimension of the human.../... Within this larger world of mankind the multiple spiritual and humanist traditions implicate each other, complete each other and evoke from each other higher developments of which each is capable. These traditions implicate each other, for each has a universal mission to humankind. Each is panhuman in its significance.”<sup>7</sup>

Thomas joined the faculty of Fordham University in 1966 and established the History of Religions program. Ewert Cousins became one of his colleagues and in 1971 President of the new American Teilhard Association, as in the early 1960s Fordham had become a center of the study of Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>8</sup> In addition to his interest in Teilhard and theological scholarship, Ewert had a vocation to interfaith dialogue and in 1968 had co-founded the Center for Spiritual Studies with Swami Satchidananda, Eido Tai Shimano Roshi, Rabbi Joseph Gelberman, and Brother David Steindl-Rast.<sup>9</sup> Thomas succeeded him as President of the American Teilhard Association when in 1975 Ewert became one of the main organizers of Spiritual Summit Conference V of the Temple of Understanding, which had been founded in 1960 by Juliet Hollister. This extraordinary

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<sup>7</sup> *Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).194.

<sup>8</sup> See Winifred McCulloch. *A Short History of the American Teilhard Association* (Chambersburg, PA: ANIMA Publications, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Kusumita P. Pedersen, “A Tribute to Ewert Cousins and Thomas Berry,” American Teilhard Association Annual Meeting, April 17, 2010.

gathering took place at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the United Nations with some of the world's most renowned spiritual leaders including Mother Teresa, Sufi Master Pir Vilayat Khan, and Hopi Elder Grandfather David Monongye. I cherish the photograph of my own teacher, Sri Chinmoy, offering the opening meditation of the final session in the Dag Hammarskjöld Auditorium at the UN.

The encounter of the religions calls forth from each other their deepest insights and gives rise to something more than the sum of their parts – a global spirituality, as Ewert Cousins would call it. This was now taking place for Thomas within the cosmic-Earth context. Teilhard had been a portal into this context philosophically. Thomas gave importance to three positions in Teilhard's thought: the reality of the psychic as well as physical in the ontology of the cosmos, the identity of the human with the cosmological order in the process of evolution, and a shift in religious focus from redemption to creation.<sup>10</sup> For Thomas, no knowledge can be true if it is partial, and if not true it is not life-giving – or not “effective,” a word he uses often. Defective knowledge cannot provide meaning, fulfillment and values for human life in any of its domains, whether social, economic, cultural or religious and spiritual. Partial knowledge is “trivializing” and incoherent knowledge is dysfunctional, producing cognitive dissonance. Knowledge must be complete and encompassing, and as Thomas would also say, “integral” or unifying, embracing the different dimensions of life. If Earth and the natural world are neglected, knowledge and experience are not effective and their failure to be so leads directly to the conscious or unconscious destructiveness that is the root of the current ecological crisis.

The primary referent of all knowledge systems must therefore be the one that is most comprehensive – the universe – and is thus the most true, the most meaning-filled and most life-giving. Thomas is speaking of worldview or cosmovision, a crucial concept in understanding culture and religion and he recognizes that story has always been for humans a central means of conveying worldview (some call such primal story “myth”). Traditional religions have surely spoken of the universe, its creation and the vast reaches of time and space, but in the West at least they have tended to portray a static natural order. The vision of evolution provided by modern science discloses that the physical

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<sup>10</sup> Tucker, Grim and Angyal, 213.

cosmos is itself a process of change – the universe is an ongoing story. Yet secular empirical inquiry has excluded the numinous, the interior, psychic or spiritual dimension from its account of this process. The convergence of the cosmological narrative with the age-old power of myth, integrating consciousness and matter is set forth in Thomas's path-finding 1978 essay "The New Story." There he says, "a reversal has begun, and the reality and value of the interior subjective numinous aspect of the entire cosmic order is being appreciated as the basic condition in which the story makes any sense at all."<sup>11</sup> He says elsewhere, "We are in a new position where we can appreciate the historical and the cosmic as a single process."<sup>12</sup> Thomas calls us to unite the ethical, the cognitive, the affective and the spiritual within the most total context, that is, the cosmic context. This vision is integral and complete in accepting both the inner and outer aspects of reality as well as contemplating the unfolding nature of the universe as narrative or story in deep time.

As mentioned, Thomas had been concerned with the relation of the world's religions since seminary and thirty years later in the 1960s and 70s was becoming acquainted with the nascent interfaith movement. As mentioned, I had first met him in 1973 and we continued to meet at the Seminar, the Teilhard Association and his lectures. In 1983 I quit my job in the Theology Department at Notre Dame and returning to New York became the Executive Director of the Temple of Understanding. After the Temple of Understanding's 1984 Spiritual Summit Conference VI at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the Church Center for the United Nations, James Parks Morton, then Dean of the Cathedral, became its President. He asked Thomas to join the Board as well as Roshi Bernie Glassman and Rabbi Wolfe Kelman. I then began to see Thomas in the course of the work of the Temple of Understanding as well as other settings.

Thomas and his ideas were by now important in certain circles but would soon become more and more widely known; his essay collection *The Dream of the Earth* was published in 1988. This was the same year as the Oxford conference of the new Global Forum of Spiritual and Parliamentary Leaders on Human Survival, which was co-founded in 1985 by the Temple of Understanding and the Global Committee of

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<sup>11</sup> *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 135.

<sup>12</sup> Edited and with a Foreword by Mary Evelyn Tucker, *The Sacred Universe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 75.

Parliamentarians on Populations and Development. The 300-plus participants were members of the world's Parliaments, spiritual leaders of many traditions and scientists including Carl Sagan, Wangari Maathai and Yevgeny Velikhov of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Mother Teresa, The Dalai Lama, Cardinal Franz König of Vienna, the Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie, future Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams (then Dean of Christ Church), the Rev. C. T. Vivian, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, Karan Singh, Sivaya Subramuniaswami, Baba Wande Abimbola, Chief Oren Lyons and Thomas Banyacya all were there. The film of the conference records Thomas saying, "We have to move from democracy to biocracy."

In the fall of 1989 in Seattle an interfaith conference on the environment was held called "Earth and Spirit." When Thomas Berry appeared on the stage before an audience of one thousand, he was received like a rock star. People from across the continent who had read his writings and now saw him in person were thrilled and enraptured. The American Indian Elders present spoke of him as a sage. He was the central figure at the conference. I became aware that his message and his influence were spreading and penetrating into our culture in a way I had not fully appreciated until that moment. His ideas and his vision were energizing a movement. Yet Thomas never sought adulation or celebrity in any way. He did not care even for recognition, but only for truth, for the Earth and for the communion of subjects that is the universe. It is perhaps because of his *kenosis*, his self-emptying, that his vision attained its revelatory power and that he was able to participate consciously in the community of all life. His constant and uncompromising quest for the most comprehensive, deepest and most numinous knowledge and experience went hand in hand with an ascetic spirit of self-renunciation he had embraced early in life – and progressed to an ever-expanding sense of personhood over the arc of his life, as Mary Evelyn and John say in their biography.

In 1993 Thomas attended the centenary in Chicago of the Parliament of the World's Religions, with more than 8,000 participants (the closing session in Grant Park addressed by the Dalai Lama had 20,000). As John Borelli has clarified,<sup>13</sup> Thomas did not take part in the Assembly of spiritual leaders who signed (and in a few cases did not

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<sup>13</sup> Personal communication October 2019.

sign) the historic “Declaration Towards a Global Ethic.”<sup>14</sup> He did give a paper on “Religion in the Twenty-first Century” in which he states the great importance of the interfaith movement and of the concerted work of the world’s religions for the protection and restoration of the Earth. I give him the concluding words of this presentation.

Thomas says: “A recovery of the sublime meaning of the universe could lead both to a greater intimacy of the human with the manifestation of the divine in the natural world and to a greater intimacy of the different religions among themselves. Restoration of the sense of the natural world as divine manifestation has a special urgency because of the devastation that we are presently causing to the natural world... Only the religious forces of the world with their sense of the sacred can evoke the psychic energies needed to transform a declining Cenozoic Era into the emerging Ecozoic Era... To initiate and guide this next creative moment of the great story of the Earth is the Great Work of the religions of the world as we move on into the future.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> As erroneously stated in their Introduction by Wayne Teasdale and George Cairns, eds. *The Community of Religions* (New York: Continuum, 1999), 12.

<sup>15</sup> In Teasdale and Cairns, 182-188, and *The Sacred Universe*, 80-87.



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