

"Maybe once every 100 years does someone emerge from the shuddering mass of humanity who speaks to us with a kind of clarity that is universally profound. Thomas Berry is such a figure. *The Great Work* will, I believe, be remembered as the touchstone, the 'bible' whose wisdom laid the groundwork for our continued healthy existence here on Earth."

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"Great Work indeed! Thomas Berry offers us the benefit of a lifetime of clear-headed, clear-hearted reflection. And by so doing he shows us where our task lies, shows us the particular test that we must face just as our ancestors faced their own great challenges. It's a work to stir the blood."

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"Thomas Berry is the bard of the new cosmology. He unerringly finds the mythic dimension and the moral significance behind the scientific facts."

Theodore Roszak, author of *The Voice of the Earth* and *Ecopsychology*

"How different American society might be if every high school student were exposed to the ideas contained in this book. One can only sigh in gratitude for this comprehensive and cautionary cultural history, and raise a cheer for those members of the human community already engaged in the truly Great Work."

Virginia Baron, *Parabola*

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THOMAS BERRY

*The*

GREAT WORK

*Our Way into the Future*

BELL TOWER  NEW YORK

## About the Author

THOMAS BERRY, a historian of cultures, comes from the hill country of the Southern Appalachians, where he was born at the beginning of the First World War. In 1934 he entered a monastery. He received his doctoral degree in Western cultural history at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in 1948. In that year he went to China to study Chinese language, culture, and religions. After Mao Tse-tung came to power, he returned to the United States to continue his Chinese studies and begin his study of the Sanskrit language and the religious traditions of India. He has taught at the Center for Asian Studies at Seton Hall University and at the Center for Asian Studies at Saint John's University in New York.

He was the director of the graduate program in the history of religions at Fordham University from 1966 until 1979. Founder of the Riverdale Center of Religious Research in Riverdale, New York, he was its director from 1970 until 1995. During this time the Center's major concern was to clarify the role of the human community within the more integral community of the Earth and with the universe itself. He was president of the American Teilhard de Chardin Association from 1975–1987. In 1995 he returned to North Carolina, where he is continuing his writing on ecological issues.

In 1968 he published *Buddhism* and in 1972 *The Religions of India*. He has also published a number of articles on the more significant human issues of the twentieth century. For the past fifteen years his writings have focused on the disturbed ecological situation of industrial societies. *The Dream of the Earth*, published in 1988, won a Lannan Award for nonfiction in 1995. *Befriending the Earth*, a series of conversations on religion and the Earth, with Thomas Clarke, was published in 1991. *The Universe Story*, with Brian Swimme, was published in 1992.

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THE WISDOM of science, as this exists in the Western world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, lies in its discovery that the

universe has come into being by a sequence of evolutionary transformations over an immense period of time. Through these transformation episodes the universe has passed from a lesser to a greater complexity in structure and from a lesser to a greater mode of consciousness. We might say that the universe, in the phenomenal order, is self-emergent, self-sustaining, and self-fulfilling. The universe is the only self-referent mode of being in the phenomenal world. Every other being is universe-referent in itself and in its every activity. Awareness that the universe is more cosmogenesis than cosmos might be the greatest change in human consciousness that has taken place since the awakening of the human mind in the Paleolithic Period.

This earlier awakening of the human mind took place in a spatial mode of understanding. The universe, as originally experienced by the human mind, moved in an ever-renewing sequence of changes that easily coordinated with the changes in the natural world, with the daily cycle of dawn and dusk, with the yearly cycle of the seasons. In this context the great journey toward life fulfillment is the journey portrayed in the mandala symbol where the human journey toward fulfillment is toward the center where the divine, the cosmic, and the human worlds become present to each other in mutual fulfillment. The small self of the individual reaches its completion in the Great Self of the universe.

A constant awareness of this spatial context of life gives to human life a deep security, for this ever-renewing world is both an abiding and a sacred world. To live consciously within this sacred world is for the personal self of the individual to be integral with the Great Self of the universe. To move from this abiding spatial context of personal identity to a sense of identity with an emergent universe is a transition that has, even now, not been accomplished in any comprehensive manner by any of the world's spiritual traditions.

This change in human consciousness had its beginning in the sixteenth century with Copernicus. At this time both the value and the difficulty in the work of Thomas Aquinas became apparent.

Copernicus and his followers such as Kepler and Galileo could not have done their work with such confidence unless Thomas had authenticated the reasoning function of the human mind in Western tradition. The difficulty was that Thomas had done his work too well, for he had established Christian revelation so fully within the scientific perspective of Aristotle that it now appeared that any discoveries made that opposed the view of the universe as described by Aristotle must necessarily be false. If they were false then they could not be coherent with revealed teaching, since one of the perspectives of Thomas was that any error concerning the natural world would endanger the authentic understanding of the world of faith.

Because the religious commitment to Aristotle was so intense it was unavoidable that a conflict should occur once such new developments in science began to take place. It was not simply a commitment to the science of Aristotle, it was a commitment also to the deductive processes of reason that tended to dominate all such earlier thinking. Only very late in the history of human thinking did the full appreciation of empirical research science come into being. When it did come into being it reacted with understandable intensity against traditional deductive processes. The reaction was not only to the mode of thinking and to the structure of the world presented, but it was extended even to the denial of the spiritual realm.

For the first time in human history the spirit world, the world of soul, was considered an unreal emotional or aesthetic experience of the human psyche. As a subjective illusion, without acceptable evidence it had no objective validity. Scientists took over both the intellectual and moral guidance of the society through their control over the human mind in the educational program. By its inventive genius science also brought forth an endless number of new technologies that gave to humans amazing power over the phenomenal world.

Francis Bacon, in the early seventeenth century, proposed that through experiments with nature, we could learn more about just how nature functions and through this knowledge we could control nature

rather than be controlled by nature. While this was a profound encouragement to the idea of experimentation, it was not Francis Bacon but Galileo Galilei who first performed thoroughly controlled and mathematically measured experiments. His work, together with that of Johannes Kepler, who had first observed that the planets move in elliptical rather than circular orbits, set the background for the work of Isaac Newton who came to understand the laws of gravitation in relation to the movement of the heavenly bodies. His description provided the dominant Western concept of the universe until the time of Albert Einstein and Max Planck in the twentieth century.

Newton, however, had no idea of the evolutionary nature of the universe. This insight came later through continued studies of the universe, but also of the geological structure and biological systems of Earth. These studies eventually led to an awareness that not only Earth but the entire universe had come into being through a long sequence of evolutionary transformations over an immensely long period of time. The important thing about all these discoveries is that they led to an awareness of the unity of the universe within itself and with each of its components. It also led to a realization that each component of the universe is immediately in contact with each of the other components of the universe. In this manner it could be said that in a scientific as well as a religious sense the small self of the individual finds its Great Self in the universe. These somehow exist for each other.

Because this story is a single story and the components of the universe are so intimately related, the story must account for human intelligence. If we consider that human intelligence is a psychic faculty, then the universe from the beginning must be a psychic-producing process. To find a place for the human is the difficulty of those who would maintain that the universe is simply a material mode of being without an intelligent dimension.

If the unity of the universe is one aspect of the wisdom of science, another aspect is the emergent nature of the universe. The third is the existence of human intelligence as an integral component of the uni-

verse. The story of the universe becomes the epic story of our times. It narrates something that can be considered in analogy with the epic of the *Odyssey* and with the other epic stories such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* of India, or the *Nibelungenlied* of the Germanic world.

AFTER CONSIDERING the wisdom of indigenous peoples, the wisdom of women, the wisdom of the traditions, and the wisdom of science, it seems quite clear that these all agree in the intimacy of humans with the natural world in a single community of existence. The human emerges from the larger universe and discovers itself in this universe. This we find expressed throughout the life and thought and ritual of indigenous peoples. In the wisdom of women it is found in the description of the universe as a mutually nourishing presence of all things with each other. Such is the view of the universe presented in the Goddess figure and other symbolisms. After being excluded from so much of the human world over the centuries, women are revealing the disaster of androcentrism to our society for the first time in Western history.

So too in the classical traditions, the basic teaching in all of the traditions is the fulfillment of the human in the larger functioning of the universe. This we find in Hinduism in the unity of the individual self with the *Atman*, the Great Self of the universe. This is also present in the Buddhist teaching that every mode of being participates in the Buddha Nature. In the Chinese expression of the "One Body" we are told by Wang Yang-ming in the sixteenth century: "Everything from ruler, minister, husband, wife, and friends to mountains, rivers, heavenly and earthly spirits, birds, animals, and plants, all should be truly loved in order to realize my humanity that forms a unity, and then my clear character will be completely manifested, and I will really form one body with Heaven Earth, and the myriad things."

In the Western world the unity of humans with the other components of the universe in a single integral-entity universe finds

expression most clearly in the cosmology of Plato as expressed in the *Timeaeus* (par. 36e), "Now when the creator had framed the soul according to his will, he formed within her the corporeal universe, and brought the two together and united them, center to center." Yet it was the Stoic philosopher, Chrysippus, with his idea of the great city of the universe, the *Cosmopolis*, that most clearly expressed this Western sense of oneness of the universe within a single community of being by a political analogy. Throughout the medieval period the unity of humans with the larger universe was founded more on the creation story of Genesis and on the cosmic dimension of the Christ presence in the universe as expressed by Saint Paul in his *Epistle to the Colossians* where he indicates that in the mystical Christ "all things hold together."

A new basis for the unity of humans with the larger earth community is found in the discoveries of modern science. The more clearly we understand the sciences and their perceptions of the universe, the more clearly we appreciate the intimate presence of each component of the universe with every other component. This unity is realized both in our studies of the large-scale structure and functioning of the universe and in the geobiological systems of the Earth.

A similar unity is found in the science traditions of the Western world. The more clearly we understand the sciences and their perceptions of the universe, the more clearly we understand the intimate presence of each component of the universe with every other component. This unity is realized in a unique manner in the geobiological systems of the Earth.

It becomes increasingly evident that in our present situation no one of these traditions is sufficient. We need all of the traditions. Each has its own distinctive achievements, limitations, distortions, its own special contribution toward an integral wisdom tradition that seems to be taking shape in the emerging twenty-first century. Each of the traditional modes of understanding seems to be experiencing a renewal. For the first time the indigenous traditions are accepted as setting the basic model for

human presence to the universe. We need such intimacy with the natural world as that presented in the Great Thanksgiving Ceremony of the Iroquois Indians as they made formal recognition of their existence as the gift of the various powers of the universe. The Harvard-based Forum on Religion and Ecology, which grew out of a three-year series of conferences on the world's religions and their views of nature, is an important new direction for examining the wisdom of the religious traditions for guidance into the next century.

For the first time also we begin to understand that the human project belongs in the care and under the direction of both women and men. This was a movement out of a patriarchal society into a truly integral human order. So too the traditional Western civilization must withdraw from its efforts at dominion over the Earth. This will be one of the most severe disciplines in the future, for the Western addiction to economic dominance is even more powerful than the drive toward political dominance.

Then, finally, there is the epic of evolution, the contribution of science toward the future. The universe story is our story, individually and as the human community. In this context we can feel secure in our efforts to fulfill the Great Work before us. The guidance, the inspiration and the energy we need is available. The accomplishment of the Great Work is the task not simply of the human community but of the entire planet Earth. Even beyond Earth, it is the Great Work of the universe itself.