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Earth's Journey into Hope

Reflections on Thomas Berry's Great Work

Brian Edward Brown

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Introduction

In early September 1970, I took a seat in one of Dealy Hall's multiple classrooms on the Rose Hill campus of Fordham University in the Bronx, New York. Although beginning my senior year, I was still undecided about the future. As a double major in both theology and psychology, I was inclined to pursue graduate studies in clinical psychology and had begun to explore programs in that field. But ruminations about that possibility ceded their place just then to my customary anticipation about the course whose professor I was awaiting. The entirety of my theology classes until then had engaged me in some aspect of the Jewish and Christian traditions, so I was eager to explore "The Religions of China," about whose texts and teachings I had no studied acquaintance. Beyond the briefest description in the course catalog, I knew only that the professor was not one of Fordham's

Jesuits but was rather a Passionist priest by the name of Thomas Berry.

As autumn deepened, so did my appreciation for this remarkable voice who guided us with such clarity through the wisdom of the Confucian, Taoist, and Neo-Confucian traditions. In him, the illustrious teachings of Confucius, Mencius, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Chu Hsi, and Wang Yang-Ming all became articulate. My ambiguities about graduate study receded as that graced semester drew to its close. Through his fidelity and dedication to the Chinese ideal of the sage, the teacher-scholar, Thomas Berry had immeasurably expanded the spiritual and intellectual horizon toward which he gestured and I so distinctly now sought to follow.

Since he himself had founded the History of Religions doctoral degree program in Fordham's School of Theology, I was delighted to receive a full scholarship and serve as his teaching assistant during my years of graduate study under his guidance. In that capacity, I was able to observe his ever-gracious demeanor; ever available, ever encouraging, and supportive of all those enrolled in his courses, with particular attention to those concentrating in the expansive field of the History of Religions. While never failing in his personal warmth and pastoral sensibilities for each of his many graduate students, Thomas Berry schooled and held us to the highest standards of academic

excellence, insisting on fidelity to primary texts and mastery of the broad cultural history and respective traditions from within which such texts arose and played their role. A measure of the breadth and depth of his own understanding of global religious history might be reflected in the fact that, until 1970, he was the sole faculty member teaching undergraduate and graduate classes in the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist traditions, as well as the religions of the Indigenous peoples of North America. Even when relieved of teaching classes on Hinduism, through the additional faculty hire, he remained deeply engaged in its exposition by serving as the dissertation mentor and reader for those students who had done most of their doctoral coursework in that tradition under his initial guidance.

Thomas Berry had played a critical determinative role in orienting and broadening my appreciation and interest in religions beyond my native Catholicism during that initial graced moment of encounter in my senior year of undergraduate study. Over the years of graduate course work that followed, his influence remained constant, even if it was less dramatic.

My interest in interreligious dialogue was ever guided by his implicit insistence on attentive listening to the particular religious tradition being addressed through exacting, if not exhaustive, familiarity with the representative texts of that respective tradition.

To attempt otherwise was to subvert genuine mutual understanding at the deepest level and to trivialize the whole interreligious exercise in its most creative potential for further mutual interest and exploration.

He was ever the sage, teaching by his own example; his fidelity to texts as fundamental to respectful and authentic dialogue was exemplified in an account given by the eminent Chinese scholar William Theodore de Bary of Columbia University, who invited Thomas Berry to participate in the university's prestigious Seminar on Oriental Thought and Religion. At one such gathering, Berry presented a paper on the Shingon tradition, the most complex and esoteric school of Japanese Buddhism. Among the scholarly audience sat Yoshito Hakeda, one of the foremost translators of Buddhist texts on Columbia's faculty and who himself had studied to be a monk within the Shingon sect. At the close of Berry's reflection, de Bary noticed tears running quite visibly down Hakeda's cheeks. Upon inquiry, Hakeda explained that, as he listened to Berry, he thought that he heard the voice of his old master back in Japan. This account, which I heard directly from de Bary early in my graduate career and again much later in his eulogy at the memorial service at St. John the Divine shortly after Thomas Berry's death, remains iconic for Berry's capacity to reach deeply into the heart of another religious tradition. It also represents the rubric of that

exacting attention and respectful familiarity with the voice of the other by precise familiarity with their texts.

The choice of texts to study when addressing another tradition is a matter of considered judgment, depending on the particular concept being explored, the metaphysical and psychological framework within which the concept finds meaningful expression, and the beliefs and practices through which the concept shapes and cultivates concrete human behavior. In the History of Religions, these broad considerations, among others, figure prominently in the choice one makes to pursue a particular idea as one's doctoral thesis. Of necessity, the very formulation of one's topic involves extensive and lengthy research before any writing even begins. Many professors who serve as dissertation mentors insist on meeting at set regular times for updates on the progress they expect from their doctoral candidates. Such was not my experience with Thomas Berry.

Having identified my initial interest in studying the concept of the Buddha Nature as the innate potentiality of all sentient beings to attain the supreme and perfect state of Enlightenment, I spoke to him about an initial text that had served as the basis of one of my doctoral comprehensive exam questions. When pressed what would be next, I admitted that I was not yet clear about that but would be in touch as my reading pro-

gressed. He agreed, with his customary warmth, and we parted, he in the doorway of his Riverdale Center for Religious Research on the Hudson River, as I returned to pressing family matters in Brooklyn.

After sending off my younger siblings to school each morning, I would read extensively until their return. Then again after dinner, I would read further into the early next morning. Some months passed before I found a second source text for my thesis. Back to Riverdale I went and explained the importance of the newly found sutra. As ever, after some questions, my mentor approved, and we said our goodbyes.

It would be over a year and a half before I had identified the five seminal texts and their supportive commentarial treatises needed to present a cogent interpretation of the metaphysical, epistemological, and soteriological dimensions of the Buddha Nature. Over the whole of that time, I would see Thomas Berry at occasional gatherings. These were often ones in which fellow graduate students, together with members of the American Teilhard Association, would congenially mingle after Thomas Berry, longtime president of the association, would present a penetrating reflection on some topic related to the famed Jesuit's prolific writings.

These wine, cheese, and potluck salons held at the Riverdale Center were filled with Berry's mirthful laughter, and he would never make even the

slightest, however discrete, reference to the status of my research. He simply waited for me to bring forth whatever respective text my reading would next discover and present its cogency to the slowly emerging thesis. He never asked to see notes or provide written summaries of the texts I presented. He only made some brief inquiry or general observation and would encourage my continued reading.

It was an utter grace from Thomas Berry that I was able to pursue my interests at my own pace in that initial extensive period, formulating a coherent thesis and discovering the sources upon which my explication would rest. Without imposing artificial time constraints or requisite written drafts of chapters in progress, he implicitly vested me with the trust to keep listening intently to the texts whose wisdom would reveal the full contours of the concept I sought to understand more completely. So heartened was I by his confidence in my fidelity to the texts that, when the actual process of writing came, I asked that we might continue in the same pattern: I would show him the dissertation when I was done. When he inquired if I meant that I would show him each individual chapter as I finished it, I clarified that I intended not to show him any writing until the entirety of the thesis was complete. And so it was that, with his ever-generous and gracious agreement, Thomas Berry returned me to my familial Brooklyn horarium to begin the slow

pace of composing my study on Buddhist enlightenment, woven of sutras, sastras, and my commentary upon them.

After two years, with my youngest sibling happily settled into college but with four chapters of my thesis still to be completed, I found myself drawn to the possibility of continuing my project at the Riverdale Center for Religious Research, where Berry lived at the time with John Grim, another doctoral candidate in Fordham's History of Religions program. They were joined by Valerio Ortolani, a Jesuit from Mexico also engaged in doctoral degree studies. When I spoke to him about the possibility of a year's residency at the Center, with its inspiring vista of river and Palisades as a welcome change from the confines of the shadowy darkness of my alley-facing bedroom, he wryly asked if he would be permitted to see more of my writing if I were living under his roof. I politely demurred that it was an integral piece and that I was fully expectant of his criticism and editorial demands when there was a finished manuscript for his consideration. With that, he gave one of his characteristically engaging laughs and asked when I was ready to move into the second-floor room that he had waiting for me.

So began what Thomas Berry would regularly describe as his "golden year," an enchanted time in which we would spontaneously come together for

daily lunches and dinners, whose simple fare and for whose casual preparation John and I shared responsibility, while Berry assisted in the washing of pots, bowls, and plates. These meals were relaxed affairs in which Berry might share the core idea of a certain paper he was preparing to deliver, or report back on a conference where he might have offered the keynote address. John might discuss an aspect of his dissertation as it neared its completion, or his experience honing his nascent craft of teaching at a nearby college. For my part, I was content to sit, absorbing wisdom's light, like one of the many potted plants in the sunroom porch with its worn dining table around which we gathered. There was always laughter and the low background strains of a Beethoven trio or Schubert quintet, always the spontaneous quiet that eventually returned us to our respective pursuits of the afternoon or the darkened remains of the day.

I had come to the Riverdale Center to immerse myself more intensely in the Buddhist texts of my doctoral thesis, yet I was again the beneficiary of an immense intellectual horizon to which my esteemed teacher oriented my thought, much as he had in that initial graced encounter in my senior year of undergraduate study. Then, it was the rich heritage of Chinese thought that schooled my mind and heart. Now, a much vaster cosmic panorama summoned my attention.

Even as I sought fidelity to the art of sensitive listening and precise interpretation of the texts that figured prominently in my study of the Buddha Nature, Thomas Berry was attentively listening to the voices of Earth in the exigency of its waters, soils, atmosphere, and communities of flora and fauna. Here, he read the neglected text of the wayward human, lost in the fixation of its own technocratic conceit, oblivious to the immense harm it inflicted on the integral functioning of the planetary body. Even as I focused on the idiom of ancient Indian and Chinese Buddhist texts, my esteemed teacher was mastering the grammar of the universe story through his study of cosmology, astronomy, geology, chemistry, biology, and psychology. These would be the disciplines of Thomas Berry's study and reflection as I increasingly heard him tell the cosmic narrative, the great story, as we sat in that sunlit porch, under the branches of the great red oak just outside the door, with the tidal flow of the Hudson down the hill, and the glacial, tree-covered Palisades on the opposite shore.

Only the story of cosmogenesis, an astounding creativity unfolding over the immensity of time and extension in space, could restore the human from the morass of its present perdition. Moving in the integrity of its early particle structure, through its atomic, galactic, solar, and Earth emergence, the universe vested the human with the hopefulness of self-aware-

ness, that we might recognize the lineage from which we arose and the nobility to which we are yet called in the great work of restoration and celebration of all to which we are related. Such is the gifted beneficence of Thomas Berry that, twenty-five years after their publication, his essays remain so instructive, his hopefulness still so vibrant.