CONSIDERING THE LEGACY AND FUTURE OF THOMAS BERRY’S WORK ON THE FIFTH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

By Herman Greene

It seems there are multiple ways to appropriate the work of Thomas Berry. Common ways are in terms of the Universe Story, meaning the scientific account of the evolutionary development of the universe; eco-communalism, meaning low-tech, organic, localism and sharing economies; spiritual ecology, meaning intimacy with the natural world and the sacredness of the universe, Earth and all its beings; and an imperative to care for Earth/save Earth now! Another common way is reverence for Thomas Berry as an exemplary life and as a spiritual companion. For some, Berry’s work stands for the marriage of religion and science.

Thomas Berry’s influence has spread throughout the world and has given birth to many initiatives, yet he and his work remain very well known in a small circle but little known in the world at large. He is most associated with spiritual ecology and the Universe Story and, perhaps next, Earth jurisprudence. Some feel his work has been most widely received by Catholics and especially Catholic religious women’s orders. This is difficult to know and it is unclear how any survey could be conducted.¹

¹Some sense of where Thomas had his impact can be gained by considering which institutions gave him degrees and awards:

Among Thomas’s awards are eight honorary doctorates; the US Catholic Mission Association Award (1989); the 1992 James Herriot Award of the Humane Society of the US; Honorary Canonship of the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine (1992); the 1993 Bishop Carroll T. Dozier Medal for Peace and Justice; the Catholic University of America Alumni Award for Research and Scholarship (1993); the 1992 Prescott College Environmental Award; annual Thomas Berry Lecture Awards established by Mt. St. Vincent College on the Hudson, and, in Washington, DC, by the Center for Respect of Life and Environment and the Humane Society of the US; and a Thomas Berry Hall and Thomas Berry Seminars at Whidbey Institute, Whidbey Island, near Seattle, Washington.

Margaret Berry, Thomas Berry Obituary, The Ecozoic, No. 2 (2009), 303.

Berry’s honorary degrees were as follows:

2003 Honorary Doctorate of Theology. The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, Illinois
1997 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, California.
1993 Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters. California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, California
June 1, 2014, will be the fifth anniversary of Thomas Berry’s death and November 9, 2014, will be the hundredth anniversary of his birth. Over the remainder of this year, we invite our readers to submit comments, short or long, for potential publication on the legacy and future of Thomas Berry’s work. In addition, we are co-sponsoring two events discussed below, the Thomas Berry Colloquium, May 28-30, 2014, and the Piedmont Bioregional Festival, May 30-June 1, where consideration of the legacy and future of Thomas Berry’s work will be central.

I would offer as a focus for this consideration the adequacy of his framing of the Great Work, that is the task of bringing about the transition from a terminal Cenozoic to an emerging Ecozoic era in the history of the planet Earth, and how his work has and may contribute to that task.

This is a bit difficult to express—Thomas Berry’s work no longer belongs to him. While most of his copyrights are owned by the Thomas Berry Foundation, neither his work, nor the interpretation of his work belongs to this foundation or to any other person or entity or group of persons or entities. His work belongs to the world and to history. In evaluating his work and its potential future contribution, it should stand and be studied and interpreted on its own merits. A consideration of its potential for the future should include, in part, a review and critique of how his work has been appropriated to date.

Further, understandings and applications of his work should not be limited to what he intended or how he understood his own work. His work does not need to be tied to his persona, though certainly it must be tied to his person. Great texts become living texts that are re-understood and re-interpreted continually. It is this ongoing ferment that keeps them alive and influential.

From the first time that I read Thomas’s work I felt he was a seminal thinker. At the time, I understood the word “seminal thinker” as a thinker who wraps things up . . . gives the final word on things. Now I realize such a thinker would better be called a “terminal thinker.” The word seminal comes from the word semen and connotes origination and creativity that is a seed for further development. This meaning better fits my original intuition and how I think we should come at Thomas’s legacy.

Thomas’s work is not contained within how it has been appropriated thus far. It is a living legacy, one subject to free and open inquiry and further development.