

THE IMPORTANCE OF THOMAS BERRY

Thomas Berry (1914-2009), was a cultural historian, philosopher, human ecologist, and a self-described geologist. He was among the first to observe that the effects of human activity have become so great that Earth is undergoing a change in geo-biological eras. He identified the “Great Work” of our time as the task of moving on from a terminal Cenozoic era to an emerging Ecozoic era . . . a task in which everyone is involved and no one is exempt, and one that is more difficult and complex than any ever before undertaken.

He gave an assessment that Earth’s life systems are in grave peril and that ecological integrity provides the overarching context for meaningful action in the future. He provided a historical analysis of how the present crisis arose. He offered a cultural critique of the globalized Western civilization. And he set forth a vision of a viable future for humans and nature, guidelines for cultural and institutional reform, a new mythic story for people to understand their places in the cosmos and to guide their activities in meaningful ways, and an understanding of the spirituality of Earth.

He was a prophet, a visionary, a teacher, and an Earth saint.



Thomas Berry’s primary contributions were made in the 20th century. His original contribution in the 21st century concerned Earth jurisprudence. He was among the greatest of people of his time. He affected the lives of thousands of people while he lived, many of whom changed the direction of their lives because of his teaching.

His work was singular and of enduring value. His original written works, as primary sources, need to be studied, widely taught, further-developed, and applied.

Key Teachings

Thomas Berry's primary teaching is that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects."

In *The Great Work*, Thomas Berry gave two basic observations about history. These are (1) the "central flaw" in human development is our "mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and [has bestowed] all rights on the humans"; and (2) "[t]he historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience."

Key Writings and Resources

Berry's three key works are: *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), *The Universe Story* (co-authored with Brian Swimme) (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), and *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999). *The Great Work* may provide the best introduction to Berry's work for new readers. *The Dream of the Earth* is important as the original, and most comprehensive, statement of Berry's thought.

Additional essays by Berry are contained in *Evening Thoughts*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth*, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), *Sacred Universe*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), and *Thomas Berry: Selected Writings on the Earth Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014). A dialogue between Berry and Thomas Clarke, SJ, was published as *Befriending Creation* (Mystic CT: 23rd Publications, 1991).

Early versions of many of Berry's published essays are contained in *Riverdale Papers*, 11 Volumes. Berry's work on Earth jurisprudence is covered in *Evening Thoughts*.

CES published a *Tribute to Thomas Berry* in 2009, which contained 151 tributes to Thomas Berry by many of the people who were closest to him.

Anne-Marie Dalton's, *A Theology for the Earth: The Contributions of Thomas Berry and Bernard Lonergan* (1999) gives an intellectual biography of Thomas Berry.

A series of essays on Berry's work was published as Heather Eaton, ed., *The Intellectual Journey of Thomas Berry*, ed. Heather Eaton (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

The Thomas Berry Archive is maintained in Environmental Science and Public Policy Archives. Harvard College Library.

Additional information on Thomas Berry is available at www.ThomasBerry.org.