

Big History and the New Story

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Father Thomas Berry was born in North Carolina in 1914, the third of thirteen children. He joined the Passionist Order in 1933, after his first year of college, and he earned a PhD from Catholic University in 1948, focusing on Giambattista Vico. Berry studied in China in 1948-1949. He developed a lifelong interest in Asian religions, later writing *Buddhism* (1967) and *Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism* (1971).¹ In the United States, Berry taught at a variety of Roman Catholic universities. At Fordham (1966-1981), he helped to create a distinctive religious studies program, teaching courses in world religion and cosmic Christianity.

In 1970, Berry founded the Riverdale Center of Religious Research on the Hudson River just north of Manhattan.² The center promoted human spiritual transformation and reflection on the mysteries of reality. Berry directed the center from 1970 to 1995. From 1975 to 1987, he was president of the American Teilhard Association and editor of *Teilhard Studies*.³ Berry retired to Greensboro, North Carolina in 1995, living in an apartment above a former stable owned by his brother Joe and sister-in-law Jean. He suffered several strokes and moved to a care facility in 2008, dying in 2009.

More than a scholar and a priest, Berry was a "shaman."⁴ As a priest and a scholar, he was trained in theology and in history, culture, ideas, and religion. He described himself variously, using terms like "cosmologist,"

"geologist," and "Earth scholar." In the context of Big History, he might best be described as an "ecothologist" in the spirit of Teilhard de Chardin. Berry promoted ecumenical and interfaith dialogue over his long life and career, notably with a deep interest in indigenous spirituality. More famously still, he promoted the "New Story," a spiritually inflected creation account, epic of evolution, or Big History.

"The story of the universe is the story of the emergence of a galactic system in which each new level of expression emerges through the urgency of self-transcendence," Berry argued in "The New Story" in 1978. His "gospel" message was that the "human emerges not only as an earthling, but also as a worlding. We bear the universe in our beings as the universe bears us in its being. The two have a total presence to each other and to that deeper mystery out of which both the universe and ourselves have emerged."⁵

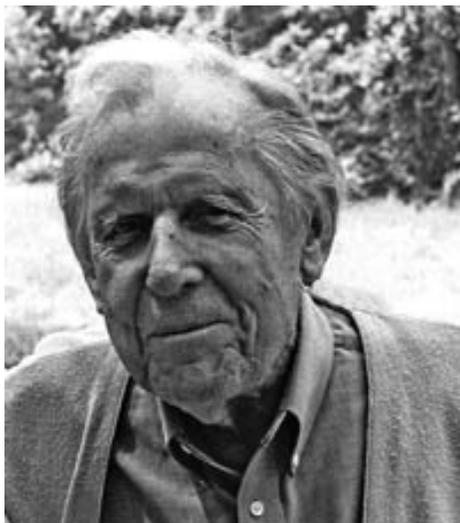
Berry retold this "New Story" in many forms, notably in *Dream of the Earth* (1988), *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (1999), and with cosmologist Brian Thomas Swimme in *The Universe Story* (1992). Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker, in turn, retold it in a book and documentary film entitled *Journey of the Universe* (2011).⁶ Berry's goal was for people not just to learn about indigenous cultures, religious traditions, and modern science, but to learn from them how to live.

This same goal animates Tucker, Grim, and Angyal's biography of Berry.

Readers will learn much about Berry, but the biography also is written to encourage readers to learn from Berry's life and work. It is not a hagiography. Neither is it a work of neutral or critical scholarship. Rather, it is an engaging appreciation of Berry by scholars who were his students and colleagues. This point should not be read as negative. It is to honor the spirit of the book—that readers not just learn about Berry but learn from him about how to understand and live well in the modern world.

Berry defined his calling as closer to that of a shaman than a scholar or a priest—"one who entered deeply into the powers of the universe and Earth and brought back an integrative vision for the community," in Tucker, Grim, and Angyal's words. "It was the shamanic dimension of my own psychic structure that required that I go into some manner of inner experience with the natural world," Berry explained near the end of his life. "This was not simply to enter into some form of the spiritual life but to take on a social role."⁷ That role came in promoting the New Story and the activism it called forth.

Tucker, Grim, and Angyal tell Berry's life as an arc from an old story to the New Story. "From his beginnings as a cultural and intellectual historian"—and his upbringing as a traditional Roman Catholic—"Berry became a historian of the Earth." He "witnessed in his own lifetime the emergence of a multicultural planetary



Thomas Berry. Source: Wikipedia

civilization as cultures came in contact around the globe,” and he wanted to put this story in “the larger arc of Earth history and the evolution of the universe.” Berry “recognized the power of an evolutionary story to engage humans in the great questions: where have we come from, how do we belong, why are we here?” Humanity needed the New Story to meet the needs of a globalizing humanity transforming not just themselves but the planet too. Berry believed that such a transformation was “not only possible but already emerging.” Tucker, Grim, and Angyal argue that the possibility of transformation is “the promise of Berry’s perspective.” The New Story “adds fresh energy to what Berry called the ‘Great Work,’ namely, what each person and community can contribute to a flourishing future.”⁸

Thomas Berry is not structured as a straightforward biography or a life-and-times story. The first two-thirds of the book cover Berry’s formative experiences, the development of his thought, and the major components of his career as a teacher, guru, and activist. The last third of the book, in greater depth, explores both their sources and their evolution. It includes chapters on “narratives of time,” Teilhard de Chardin, Confucian thought, and indigenous traditions.

Nasser Zakariya’s assessment of “epics of evolution” helps to assess where Berry’s “New Story” fits with Big History.⁹ Zakariya explores the tensions, even contradictions, in how ep-

ics of evolution try to weave together scientific fact and explanation with a mythic arc. Like other epics of evolution, Big History blends elements of modern science with philosophical and religious assumptions that are rooted in premodern religious and cultural traditions. Sometimes the blending is implicit and intellectual.¹⁰ Sometimes it is overtly spiritual or religious in character. In this fashion, Berry’s New Story uses modern science but is defined by its spirituality, drawing on Judaism and Christianity, other world religions, and indigenous traditions. The New Story was not materialist, but appealed to primordial experience, mystery, and mysticism. It reflected Berry’s eco-theological interests and his inter-faith sensibility.

Like many Americans, Berry viewed Native Americans as the world’s “first ecologists.”¹¹ One of his influences was Nicholas Black Elk, a Lakota healer-shaman and Roman Catholic catechist. Black Elk lived closely to the land, especially as a boy before the American conquest of the Lakota in the 1870s. He never gave up his Lakota culture and rituals, but he converted to Roman Catholicism and baptized more than four hundred Native Americans. The Church has begun the process of canonizing Black Elk.¹² Black Elk’s life journey was very different than Berry’s, of course, but they shared an inclination to treat traditions not as mutually exclusive but cross-pollinating.

What Big Historians will make of Berry’s New Story depends on whether they are put off by or value engaging with mysticism and religious traditions. Berry described himself among other things as a “cosmologist.” The term can refer to both scientific and philosophical or theological accounts, or a mix of all three. Mythopoetic accounts probably belong in a different, if overlapping, category (e.g., the account in Genesis 1-3 is a quite different genre from a systematically developed cosmology written by a twentieth century theologian). But mythopoetic elements often are woven into epics of evolution, especially popular ones. Even if it is not always clear whether

such weavings are intellectually coherent, they are appealing to people because they offer scientific reference points, cultural rituals, and spiritual and emotional experiences.

Berry’s New Story has been influential among some advocates of Big History and his ideas have been featured at conferences—notably when the documentary film *Journey of the Universe* was screened at the Big History conference at Dominican University in California in 2014. The conference at Villanova in 2018 included New Story-style “liturgy” in its opening and closing sessions—all to some controversy. A conflict between “spiritual agendas” and “science” has been part of discussions at Big History conferences in 2014, 2016, and 2018 and in the pages of *Origins* and the *Journal of Big History*.¹³

Perhaps the greatest value of *Thomas Berry: A Biography*, then, is that it can help the International Big History Association to work through how to engage both Big History scholarship and New Story-style impulses in the Big History movement; for Big History is more than an academic discipline. From the start it has aspired to, in Berry’s words, “the ‘Great Work,’ namely, what each person and community can contribute to a flourishing future.” The conclusion of David Christian’s TED talk (2011) and its popularity, attest to the appeal of this “great work.”

My own view is that Big History’s value is precisely that it is not just meant to teach people about history, but to provide them intellectual tools to live better as individuals and citizens. It exemplifies the holism of a liberal arts approach to learning. Academia does not need yet another new trans-disciplinary movement aspiring to be a new discipline; it needs public scholars who bring together science, politics, historiography, philosophy, and, yes, religion in compelling ways. If so, then it is appropriate to explore the cosmological and eco-spiritual impulses of figures like Berry, both as something to study and critique and as something from which to learn.

This biography, the writings of Berry, Swimme, and Tucker, and similar

writings are a way to explore what intellectually engaged writing looks like that crosses the borders among scholarship, advocacy, spirituality, and popular writing.¹⁴ Whether one agrees with Berry's ideas, or with Tucker, Grim, and Angyal's belief that we have much to learn from Berry, there is intellectual, moral, spiritual, and political profit in engaging a book like this.

Notes

1. Thomas Berry, *Buddhism* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1966); *Religions of India: Hinduism, Yoga, Buddhism* (New York: Bruce-Macmillan, 1971).
2. <http://thomasberry.org/life-and-thought/about-thomas-berry/the-riverdale-center-for-religious-research>
3. <http://teiharddechardin.org/index.php/teihard-studies>
4. This is the term that Tucker, Grim, and Angyal use; see Mary Evelyn Tucker, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, *Thomas Berry: A Biography* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 38.
5. Thomas Berry, "The New Story: Comments on the Origin, Identification, and Transmission of Values," *Teilhard Studies* 1 (1978). It was also published in *CrossCurrents* 37:23 (Summer/Fall 1987): 187-199.
6. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988); Brian Thomas Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992); Brian Thomas Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker told Berry's New Story in a book and documentary film, *Journey of the Universe* (New Haven: Yale University, 2011).
7. Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 38.
8. Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, xviii.
9. Nasser Zakariya, *The Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings* (University of Chicago Press,

- 2017). Note Ken Baskin's thoughtful review of the book in "A Cosmological Crisis?: A Review of Nasser Zakariya, *The Final Story: Science, Myth, and Beginnings*," *Journal of Big History*, III:4 (2019): 171-176.
10. For more on this issue, see my essay, Katerberg, "Myth, Meaning and Scientific Method in Big History," *Origins* V:12 (December 2015): 3-12 (https://bighistory.org/Origins/Origins_V_12.pdf). See also Allan Megill, "'Big History' Old and New: Presuppositions, Limits, Alternatives," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 9:2 (2015): 306-326.
11. Tucker, Grim, and Angyal, *Thomas Berry*, 241. Shepard Krech III has criticized what he calls the mythology of the "ecological Indian," arguing that historic indigenous practices, before and after Europeans arrived in the Americas, included dramatic alterations to the land in their agriculture and hunting, including damage to environments. He also describes how Native Americans in the 1960s-1980s came to weave their traditions together with modern ecological ideas and goals; see *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (New York: Norton, 1999).
12. Kirk Petersen, "Vatican considers sainthood for Black Elk," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 25, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/vatican-considers-sainthood-lakota-sioux-medicine-man> (accessed 22 September 2019). Black Elk's canonization is controversial as is the authenticity of his conversion. The weight of evidence in Black Elk's case and in relationships between Christian and Native spirituality and revitalization movements suggests significant cross-fertilization. For conflicting views of Black Elk, see Joe Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016); and Michael Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997). For an excellent study

of cross-cultural and cross-religious influences, see Louis Warren, *God's Red Son: The Ghost Dance Religion and the Making of Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

13. See my account in Katerberg, "Is Big History a Movement Culture?" *Journal of Big History* 2:1 (2018): 63-72 (<https://jbh.journals.villanova.edu/article/view/2255/2121>).
14. For other examples from Christian traditions, see John Haught, *New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe* (New Haven: Yale, 2017); and David P. Warners and Matthew Kuperus Heun, eds., *Beyond Stewardship: New Approaches to Creation Care* (Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin Press, 2019). Note also the illustrated companion to *Beyond Stewardship* at <https://spark.adobe.com/page/4ddndTy8JoFcT/> (accessed 28 September 2019). Haught is a Catholic's exploration of the boundaries between science and theology; *Beyond Stewardship* is a Protestant effort to develop a "New Story." For more examples of "green Christianity, see Christopher Hrynkow, "Greening God? Christian Ecotheology, Environmental Justice, and Socio-Ecological Flourishing," *Environmental Justice*, 10:3, June 2017 (<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/env.2017.0009>). See the "Faith and Environment" page on the *Earth Day Network* site (<https://www.earthday.org/campaigns/campaign-for-communities/communities-of-faith/>; accessed 28 September 2019) for examples of and "earth keeping" and "new stories" from a wider array of religious traditions.

Reference

- Tucker, Mary Evelyn, John Grim, and Andrew Angyal, *Thomas Berry: A Biography*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.