

“Religious Education as an Expression of the Great Work”

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*“The great work...
is to carry out the transition
from a period of human devastation of the Earth
to a period when humans would be present to the planet
in a mutually beneficial manner.”* Thomas Berry

Introduction

This paper is inspired by Thomas Berry and informed by his latest book entitled The Great Work, focusing on its relevance to the particular work of religious education. I expect that most who read it are familiar with the writings and thought of this distinguished cultural historian and scholar of world religions and with the meaning he assigns to the phrase, the great work. For those with less acquaintance with this self-identified geologist¹, the paper offers a brief introduction to the man and an overview of his comprehensive and challenging vision. A transcribed video interview with Thomas Berry, conducted for the purposes of this paper, follows the introductory sections. The paper concludes with my reflections on understanding and relating the great work to religious education.

I submitted the proposal for this paper about a month before attending the June, 2001 EarthSpirit Rising conference in Louisville, Kentucky, with some 1,100 others, who had come together to celebrate the legacy of Thomas Berry and commit themselves to the great work. The gathering of religious sisters, environmentalists, first nation peoples, scientists, spiritual leaders, United Nations representatives working on an initiative called the Earth Charter, artists, musicians, and educators embodied diverse expressions of the great work already being enacted in small intentional communities throughout the United States and beyond. The event intensified my own commitment to the great work and affirmed its relevance and appropriateness as a subject to be explored with my colleagues at our annual meeting.

In this spirit and within this context I offer my reflections on the implications of Thomas Berry’s thought for the field of religious education. I believe that we have a distinctive role to play in the realization of the vision that animated the conference, the vision so identified with Thomas Berry that the conference participants were, in fact, completing his sentences. This vision sets us at an historical

juncture of epochal proportion, demanding that we work out of a commitment and concern that is as vast and comprehensive and fundamental as the very universe itself. It illuminates a perspective that renders our human presence and activity a mere blip on a radar screen within the comprehensive context of universe space and time.

I offer these reflections with the conviction and expectation that a commitment to the great work will infuse religious education with new vigor, purpose, and influence. I share them with the hope of arousing curiosity and interest in an inclusive and expansive interpretation of religious education whose curriculum includes every mode of being, every life form, every experience, every revelation. And finally I write out of a concern that the relevance, credibility, authenticity, and efficacy of religious education in the 21st century will be measured by the extent to which it shares this vision and makes its own unique and significant contribution to the great work.

Introducing Thomas Berry

It is more than a little challenging to try to introduce Thomas Berry and his thought to those who, as yet, do not know him. I say as yet, because I believe that his intellectual legacy is only now beginning to seep into the awareness of many within our cultural and religious institutions. An indication of this appeared in a recent edition of the National Catholic Reporter² with Thomas Berry as its cover photo and feature story. The issue devotes three pages to a presentation of his thought and account of his legacy with specific reference to the EarthSpirit Rising Conference. Those seeking a basic introduction to Thomas Berry would find the article a helpful place to begin.

Born in the hill country of North Carolina in 1914, Thomas Berry entered the Passionist Order in 1934 and earned his Ph.D. in cultural history at the Catholic University of America in 1945. He often explains that he went into the monastery so that he could think, to immerse himself in the background and influences that lay behind the events and mindsets that constitute the development and structures of western civilization. His early monastic years were devoted to the study of theology and a reading of the classic texts associated with the patristic and medieval periods, particularly, the works of Thomas Aquinas.

He chose history as the focus of his doctoral study. It was, however, a different school of historical research and interpretation, a history that was broad and comprehensive in its sweep and analysis. Unlike the more traditional orientation which focused on one or another part of the human story, Thomas Berry was trained to consider the whole or what we might describe as the big picture. His study of history transcended national borders, military regimes or conquests, political configurations, and the accomplishment of any group or individual, choosing instead to take an expansive view that could only be measured in epochs and eras, or words ending in“-lithics.”

Not surprising, his training as a cultural historian included further study in religion, which led to his scholarly competence as an interpreter of the religious traditions of the world from the earliest indigenous nature-based oral traditions to the classical forms that have arisen throughout the world in the past four thousand years. He has written books on Buddhism and The Religions of India³ as well as numerous essays on the subject of religion. He also taught courses in world religions at several Catholic universities, developing and administering the first and only doctoral program in the study of religion at Fordham University

After leaving Fordham, Thomas established the Center for Religious Research on the Hudson River, which, for some 25 years, sponsored conferences, lectures, and became an informal school attracting such gifted and accomplished students as Brian Swimme and Miriam Mc Gillis who came to speak and study with him. It was at this time that the ecological and cosmological issues began to figure

so prominently in his thinking and historical interpretation. Such an orientation was not new to him however, for he describes its hold on him from his boyhood years. His earliest and life-defining experience was an experience of encountering a meadow in bloom of which he writes,

This early experience has become normative for me throughout the entire range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances the meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; whatever opposes or negates this meadow is not good. My life orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive.⁴

Simple, yet so profound. Incidental and particular, yet so all-encompassing. Formative, yet so empowering. Instructive and so obvious in its meaning and significance. Here lies the seed of inspiration and insight that still flowers in his thought, his writing and his speaking.

An Inclusive and Compelling Vision

I became acquainted with Thomas Berry in 1988 through his acclaimed book, The Dream of the Earth.⁵ Reading it led me to the realization that I had been in search of such a vision my whole life. For as long as I can remember I had sought a worldview within which all the pieces of my education and experience would find a place, in which all the seemingly disparate pieces would fit together in an integral interpretative frame. I found what I had been searching for in the thought of Thomas Berry. Here was a vision that not only included all people, it included the whole planet--the land, water, animals of every type and stripe, insects, birds, meadows, trees, and whales, hurricanes, floods, sunsets, and seasonal variation; it acknowledged the sweep and continuity of time and the expansiveness of space; it included the whole universe. The human was set in context, within its larger setting and story. And the Earth process was set within the whole universe process. His was indeed a rare and uniquely comprehensive historical perspective.⁶

Such a transformed orientation recontextualized everything included in the process. Its poetic and inspiring prose distinguished the primary from the derivative, and how each member of the phenomenal world related to the other. Instead of setting the natural world as an addendum to human history, he set the human interpretive framework or what he calls the human project in its context of origin, in the evolutionary process and in so doing recontextualizes every aspect of western culture and interpretation. In a word Thomas Berry sets the human in context, within the life community and process that brought forth the human in the first place and in so doing, sets everything that derives from the human, all interpretation, activity, and value in proper relation and context. This was the first time I encountered a world view which shifted the center of meaning and value from the human to the whole of creation, to the larger arc of the universe process. This was my first encounter with a perspective that offered such a clear and well-reasoned critique of anthropocentrism.

What further distinguishes this worldview from others that we might call systemic or wholistic is Thomas Berry's identification of a numinous or spirit or soul dimension of the phenomenal world. Thus, his vision not only is inclusive and comprehensive in terms of its scope, it is inclusive of all dimensions of being as well. In his words, everything is a subject, a subject who speaks itself, a subject with a unique contribution to bring to the whole, a subject who relates to all other subjects, a subject to be communed with. He sums this up in his oft-repeated sentence, "The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." Such a qualitatively different and transmaterial understanding of the natural world! One that implies and affirms spiritual depth, dimension and significance. One that discerns the sacred heart of matter. One that gives new meaning to our understanding of spirit, subjectivity, and communion

What makes Thomas Berry's vision so unique and comprehensive is its creative and faithful identification and integration of three vital dimensions: the western, Christian tradition; the nonwestern religious and cultural traditions that comprise the larger human story, including the spiritual traditions of indigenous peoples; and the knowledge of the natural world derived from inductive, empirical, scientific investigation. Few, if any, Christian thinkers, historians, or theologians have achieved such a sophisticated grasp of the universe in its unfolding and expanding dynamics and discerned their interplay in a single, evolutionary universe story as has Thomas Berry.

A Conversation with Thomas Berry

Having had an opportunity to speak with Thomas Berry about what I was attempting to do in this paper, I decided to transcribe and include his responses (TB) to my questions and comments (K).

K: Tell me why religious education needs to be understood and practiced within the context of the universe?

TB: "The universe is the only self referent mode of being in the phenomenal world. That's where everything starts. Everything within the universe is universe referent. Our fulfillment is in the universe. How did we lose our awareness of this? Here's where the traditions, particularly the Christian tradition, has lost the substance of what it should be about. Because it became alienated from its role in the universe. Ultimately Christianity exists as a fulfillment of the universe; the universe has a prior status. The universe doesn't exist to fulfill humans; humans exist for the fulfillment of the universe, of the planet Earth. That is the world of meaning.

"The phenomenal world is a manifestation of what we can only refer to as mystery. We can only know the transphenomenal reality through its manifestation in the universe. The difficulty is that the different religious traditions don't experience the presence of the absolute in the universe, in the phenomenal order, in the world about us.

"Here is the primary revelation. So that all particular revelation has to go back constantly to the universe itself, to its cosmological basis. And Christianity particularly, has this out of a very unique revelatory experience that has a sublime dimension, but tends toward a preoccupation with redemption experience that overlooks the significance of creation.

K: What do you mean by the great work?

TB: "The great work is that larger work of a generation or community. We have our individual work, our particular work, but there is also our common work. The great work to which everyone is called, all the professions are called, is to fulfill a role in the universe. That's why cosmology is the primary context of meaning with regard to everything that we do. And within the universe, the planet Earth is the more immediate context in which we find meaning. The Earth is the fulfillment of meaning as regards every member of the planet Earth.

"The great work then is to recover the cosmological context of all that exists, of the cosmos, of the order (cosmos refers to order) of the universe.

"Consider the great work of the Medieval Period, the passage from the classical to the medieval period made possible the establishment of a Christian world. The great cathedrals were built. Thomas Aquinas wrote his Summa Theologica. Universities were established to preserve and pass on the wisdom of the arts and humanities. The people of the 10th, 11th, and 12th centuries were caught up in the great

work, expending enormous intellectual and creative energy, a phenomenon observed and noted by the early American historian, Henry Adams, who wrote that humans were never so active in the full range of activities as they were in the 13th century. This was their great work.

“And so with us. We have a great work to do which is to move from a profoundly disturbed planet to a planet where humans are present to the Earth community in a mutually-enhancing way, where the other life forms as well as the human can prosper because neither can prosper without the other now. At one time, the other-than-human could prosper without the human, but no longer. The great work that we need to take up is more urgent than that demanded of earlier peoples for the great work to which we are called is nothing less than the survival of life itself as we know it. For we will go into the future as a single sacred community or perish on the way.

K: “What is the particular work of religion, of those who understand their role as mediators or representatives of a spiritual path or tradition?”

TB: “What I’m concerned with as the great work is that the foundations of religion, the foundations of human survival are being destroyed in their physical and their spiritual dimensions. What is needed is for religion to recognize the numinous presence that is conveyed and carried by the natural world. To miss this, to lose sight of it, is to lose revelation itself so that if we destroy the natural world, we destroy our souls. We lose our souls if we lose the splendor and wonder of the natural world. So the great work for religion is to restore a sense of this so that we stop destroying the planet; it is the effort toward restoration and renewal of the planet Earth. We have to save the planet earth before we can save ourselves in both physical and spiritual dimensions.

K: “What is religion’s contribution to the great work?”

TB: Religion needs to function out of an integral understanding of the social, ecological, and cosmological meanings of globalization. They need to function out of a self-awareness of their two-dimensional influence: their formal practice by their constituents and their larger sphere of influence in the entire human community. They also need to work together in a global sense to address human needs and agenda. And third they need to realize that the ecological and cosmological bases of religion need to be preserved for the survival of the planet, the human, and religion itself. This third commitment is religion’s specific contribution to the great work.

K: Do we start with the cosmological? Or the critical situation of the planet? Where do we begin to articulate the concern or the context in which the great work needs to be carried out?

T: “Start with the chaos of the present . To the ecological. You could give a number of references related to what’s happening. Cite the information available about water, air, forests, soil, and extinction. But the main thing is that generally we think of this as an economic or aesthetic loss, not realizing that the very substance of what it is to be human is being lost.

K: “I’ve heard you refer to this as a soul loss. and here is a direct tie to religious education. Here’s where my commitment is lodged and evoked. I’m committed to relating this reality to religious education. It seems appropriately located there. Religious education should be, of all education, the most concerned about this and busy addressing it.

T: “ Christianity’s concern for the planet is interpreted through its teaching about stewardship. We have to be concerned with it in a new way. We need a copernican revolution. Because stewardship sees the natural world outside ourselves so to speak and we can’t save the human without saving the natural world.

K: “And that’s the revelation of our times?”

T: “It’s the revelation of **all** time.

K: A heightened awareness of our dependence and interdependence on the natural world?

T: “It is, but we don’t do this because we have undergone such a powerful impact of a verbal revelatory experience and an incarnational experience that has distracted us from real basic knowledge. It’s the whole of creation that is the primary revelatory principle.

K: “It’s really hard to convince scripturally-formed and focused Christian people of this

TB: “The difficulty is that the conception/perception of the natural world has been profoundly altered from a spatial mode of experience and apprehension of an ever renewing process to an emergent, universe going through a sequence of irreversible, transformation episodes and this sequence of irreversible transformation episodes explains what has brought the planet to its present state. It is hard to accept a progressive, processive revelatory experience.

K: “Religious educators are going to ask what this looks like in practice.

T: “First we have to reassert the primordial revelatory presence of the divine in the cosmological order, however you conceive it. This doesn’t negate the verbal revelatory experience; but you have to reassert the cosmological revelation of the existence of the universe itself. Second, we must recognize that the perception of the divine that has been received by different peoples of the world in different forms. But they all share a sense of the natural world as the basis of revelatory experience.

K: “This seems a daunting task in view of the fact that mainstream concerns within contemporary religion are often restricted to ecclesial or theological issues and concerns like the status and role of women or even globalization of humanity. Protestants are scripture-fixated; Catholics are becoming catechism fixated. What you are proposing is so far from the ordinary preoccupations of the field. How might this be discussed in a way that is available to mainstream religious educators? How can it be presented in a way that doesn’t overwhelm them? How to be practical? How to shift the focus of revelation from the institutional agendas and scriptural orientation to suggest what they might do, given the existing structures they are working in? How to work it through the theme of globalization? How can I use the term in a more expansive way? I want to give people models of application, There’s so much theory in all this stuff and it never touches down and for those who really are hearing this for the first time. There’s little to no help in text books.

T: “One of the problems is whether a person wants to bring up the question of the human as a basic referent. What is the basic referent? The human? the tradition? A human context? Whether you can get them to think in a universe context is the issue?

K: “How might I explore the larger meanings and uses of globalization?”

T: “I’d point out that our understanding of globalization is a spatial context, meaning that it refers primarily to the full array of peoples of the planet Earth, the comprehensive view and assembly of peoples, and all their religious, political, intellectual, and economic establishments. When we talk about globalization, we are talking about people coming into interrelationship with each other--through economics, through education, through religion. Religion is also being swept up into this. We are experiencing a great moment of transition in which the human community has access to the wealth of

religious experience to be shared. But while this sharing is good and necessary, it is also necessary that every tradition keep clear about its own basic identity and not to collapse into some great amalgam. What is needed is a special clarity on the part of each as regards its distinctive aspect, but also where it fits into the comprehensive picture without abandoning its confessional identity.

In other words, each religion needs to be clear about its specific confessional context while at the same time that realizing that its teaching must be shared. For instance, Christianity shares profoundly in the spiritual experience of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions without diminishing its own identity. That is it is able to bridge its own contemplative tradition with the insights of the yogi tradition. Most certainly, the practice of a restoration of the practice of Christian meditation has profited enormously by the experience and teaching of Eastern traditions, who in a sense, supported our own tradition just as it was becoming neglected. But in thinking about the globalization of religion we have to think bigger than this. We have to move from an anthropological orientation to religion to a cosmological orientation. This is what is most essential now--that all religions dedicate themselves to preserving the integral functioning of the planet as the primary manifestation of the divine, that all religions come from, the wonder and grandeur of the natural world.

K: "That would seem to be the most authentic and compelling use of the term globalization--literally meaning the globe, the planet, not the community of world religions or the U.N. But it doesn't seem like an easy transition and would seem, at least in the traditional understanding and context of religious education, to require elaboration and perhaps even explanation and persuasion. Because, at first blush, we are not accustomed to hearing or seeing that our religious tradition derives from the wonder and grandeur experienced in the natural world. We understand it to derive from the life and teaching of Jesus.

TB: "I would talk to religious educators about globalization as the human community working for **the preservation and integrity of the planet, which is the primary inspiration for religion**. I would propose that the meaning of globalization related to the religions of the world involves them in a three-fold mission: one that acknowledges and reasserts that the primordial manifestation of the divine; the source of nourishment, the social alleviation of needs can only be carried out if the natural world is preserved in its functioning; one that recognizes and responds to the fact that before we can protect, much less save the people of the world from the destructive effects of the global economic process that is exhausting the native resources of the different nations, we have to save the context of their existence. In other words, religion represents the wisdom that distinguishes that which is primary from that which is derivative. In other words we cannot save people without first saving the context that people need to survive. And one that evokes and supports a life orientation that reverences the natural world for its intrinsic value and functioning.

Recontextualizing Religious Education

If, as Thomas Berry insists, the universe is primary; the human is derivative, it follows that the universe and its more immediate expression, the Earth, is the primary community, school, revelation, lawgiver, healer, the primary experience of the sacred. If the universe is primary, each and every tradition, profession, and institution, however legitimate, wise, beneficent, and esteemed is derivative, derived from and modeled on the structures and activities of the natural world. If the universe is primary, stories, symphonies,, architecture, healing, therapy, parenting, procreation, education, and religion are derivative human responses and expressions of the primordial patterns and processes that bring them into being and sustain their every step.

In this recontextualization religious educators and education have their origins in that primordial religious educator and religious education that is the universe itself. It finds expression in every form of

teaching and learning that enables the human community to recognize, appreciate, understand and respond to its role within the universe, within an ever-expanding, ever-renewing, and ever-emerging evolutionary process. The goal of religious and all education would be to inspire and enable the human community to give themselves to the great work of establishing a mutually-enhancing human-earth relationship. This perspective gives a new and deeper significance to the meaning of Maxine Greene's rich prose that directs educational processes to enabling learners to "fund the meaning" of their lives and experience. One can only imagine that funding of meaning of the Divine, of the sacred, of mystery, of the Christ that emanates from pondering and probing their source and ultimate expression. One can only wonder at the responses that would be evoked if our interpretations of life, grace, sacrifice, redemption, eucharist, baptism, blessing, and liturgy were derived from the whole story and community of creation. Such a vision would infuse religious education with a vitality, relevance, and richness that seems so absent, so lacking in so much of contemporary practice.

Those of us who, like Thomas Berry, take seriously the signs of our times and regard the scientific discoveries of the natural world both inspiring and compelling, recognize that we cannot remain locked within any parochial, particularistic vision and preoccupation in any field, activity, tradition, or profession. What else we might say of the lessons of the 20th century, we seem to have learned (or at least begun to appreciate) that we do not, cannot live independently, isolated from our neighbor, either within our local neighborhoods or as we are learning the hard way, within our global neighborhoods. Herein lies the initial inspiration and impetus in the establishment of the REA and to its promotion of intrareligious respect, dialogue, and collaboration.

Thomas Berry would tell us that as great and worthy a task as this remains, it is not enough. Nor is this what is most urgently and universally needed as we face these times. What he gives us to consider is the recognition that our human neighborhoods cannot, will not survive, much less prosper and fulfill their role in the great story, if we ignore or defy the comprehensive neighborhood which is the precondition and model for the others.

Religious Education's Unique Contribution to the Great Work

Undoubtedly, those who find this vision authentic and compelling will search for and find your own ways of implementing it. Perhaps these suggestions will offer or evoke some starting points:

1. Contextualize your teaching. Take time to set every lesson and emphasize it in its cosmological, ecological, social, world religion, and personal contexts. Give your students a sense of how the particular relates to the whole, the universal. Maria Montessori comes to mind with her instructions to teachers to always relate the part to the whole.⁷

2. Use inclusive language that references the other-than-human, earth subjects in everyday conversation and in the analysis of text books and discussions. I can remember the poignancy and power of an experience with Buddhist monks when one of their company spoke of being in communion with all beings. I don't ever remember the word "beings" serving as a synonym or referent for "the others" in my own religious education or church context.

3. Evoke responses to the mystique and sense of wonder that comes from an experience of the natural world and how these contexts can represent hope and healing in times of suffering and challenge. Infuse celebrations of the natural world into the liturgical calendar. Incorporate readings about the natural world and traditional hymns and prayers.

4. Learn and relate the universe story as our shared sacred story. Give your students a sense of historical scope and the place and significance of the human within the story.

5. Educate your students about the Earth, in its beauty and magnificence, in its vulnerability because of human ignorance, indifference, and destructiveness. Bring other creatures into the classroom and invite them to “speak” to your students. Green your classrooms, congregations, and curricula. Find and use the “Green Bible.”

6. Talk to your students about the great work and invite them to participate in it.

7. Network with others who are committed to establishing a mutually-enhancing human-earth community.

Let’s begin here and now to call our field and profession to this task and bring the rich resources of religious education to the realization of the great work.

Works Cited

¹ Thomas Berry refers to himself as a *geologist* because, for him, the study and exploration of the geosphere is the primary context of all inquiry and understanding. Thus, our meeting with and interpretation of the divine, of the sacred, of ourselves, indeed, of all reality, is predicated on our experience and understanding of the natural world. Thomas Berry would therefore invite us all to be geologists, committed to the study and interpretation of the natural world which he believes is our primary school, our ultimately definitive experience, and most impressive introduction to the world of the sacred.

² “Prophet for the Earth,” the cover story of the August 10, 2001 edition of the National Catholic Reporter. 37:36, pp. 3-5.

³ See Thomas Berry’s The Religions of India. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 and Buddhism, New York: Crowell Company, 1967.

⁴ Thomas Berry, The Great Work. New York: Bell Tower, 1999, p. 13.

⁵ Thomas Berry, The Dream of the Earth. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988. This book won the New York Times Lannan Award for nonfiction in 1994.

⁶ This comprehensive history is the subject of The Universe Story, San Francisco: HarperCollins 1992, which he co-authored with Brian Swimme. It is the first such unified, comprehensive account of the story of the universe, presented as a single, epic narrative based on the empirical, scientific data that was currently available.

⁷ Maria Montessori, To Educate the Human Potential. Oxford: Clio, 1989.
