

Thomas Berry's Pivotal Influence

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I met Thomas Berry at one of the first *Religion and Ecology* conferences, *Lon Confucianism*, held at the Harvard Center for the Study of World Religions in June 1996.

I had read about the conference series in the *Harvard Gazette*, with each conference focusing on one religion and its theology, traditions, values and practices that relate to the natural world and the environment. I called John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker at the Center, who told me more about Thomas and sent me a copy of his prepared text, giving me the opportunity to learn more about his ideas before meeting him.

Thomas, of course, deviated from his text, riffing on perhaps every other paragraph, all of it absolutely fascinating.

His vision was not at all connected to the legal and business world in which I worked. It was refreshing, open, worldly in a cosmic sense rather than a materialistic sense, and challenging.

I found it so stimulating that I encouraged the Trustees of the V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation to meet Mary Evelyn to learn about the conference series and perhaps fund them, which they indeed did, several times and generously; always and continuously supporting the seminal work of Thomas, Mary Evelyn and John.

Wendy and I then participated in the 1997 *Spirituality and Sustainability* Conference in Assisi, sponsored by Saint Thomas University in Miami and the Center for Respect of Life and the Environment. I had of course met Rick Clugston in connection with the Harvard Conferences, and he played a key role in organizing and supporting them, as he did with the Assisi Conferences.

In Assisi, Thomas was his usual self, intellectually and morally dominating. His wry comments and probing questions made us all think in a different way, and inspired all of us to challenge the current dominant mindset of materialism, growth and short-term thinking. He inspired us with an optimistic vision that we could change much of that and preserve an Earth as a biosphere for all living species, and not one simply for the benefit of human beings, bent on its destruction, whether they knew it or not.

Wendy and I became good friends and admirers of Thomas, Mary Evelyn, John, Rick, John Hoyt, Vittorio Falsina, and many others at the Assisi Conference.

Mary Evelyn and John had projected that the ten conferences on Religion and Ecology at Harvard would run over a period of five years, but I rather strongly encouraged them to complete the series in three years as the issues were so crucial, and the momentum would be important. Indeed, it all worked out that way, leading to culminating conferences in October 1999 at the United Nations and the American Museum of Natural History.

Following the closing session, we drove to the Harvard Club for a cel-

eboratory dinner. I was in a large car with Thomas, Mary Evelyn and John. Mary Evelyn expressed great relief that the conference series was completed, and now they could finish publishing the volumes. She stressed that the short time frame nearly killed them, and that they only did it because of my insistence.

At that point Thomas, the person who had guided both Mary Evelyn and John for years and had presided at their wedding, intoned, somewhat dismissively but lovingly: “Well, it worked out fine. It was right to push to complete them in three years, because it is so important, and you got it done. Besides that, you survived.” So much for the loving support of Thomas, always an inspiration to all who know him, but always with a sense of humor and affection as well.

Thomas remains an inspiration to me; not just in the primary field of his thinking and writing, but in his attitude to life as well—always questing for a better future.