

But What Does It Mean?

Dan Sheridan

Daniel Sheridan obtained his Ph.D. in Theology/History of Religions from Fordham University under the direction of Thomas Berry. His fields of interests are world religions, the future of the Catholic education, history and the American Civil War. He is an expert on Islam and has an extensive library on the subject. He is the author of *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhagavata Purana*.



I continually meet people who express appreciation for the wisdom of Thomas Berry as the “bard of the new cosmology.” Each seizes on some different dimension of the accomplishments of this great man. I have been privileged to know him both as Father Thomas and as Tom. I cannot begin to express the debt of gratitude that I owe to him as a priest, as a teacher and mentor, and as one of the great masters of the intellectual life with whom for the past forty years I have talked about the books that he encouraged me to read and to study. Since I met Thomas in 1968, roughly about half way through the course thus far of his own life, I first knew him when he was still completing for himself the intellectual foundations for his later *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* and for his work with Brian Swimme, *The Universe Story*. Knowing about these intellectual foundations adds even greater depth to an understanding of his later work. In fact I wish I had known him even earlier in his more formative years when he read his way through the volumes of the *Patrologia Latina*, the great collection of the Fathers of the Church, or when as a high school teacher he tried unsuccessfully to get seminarians to read Augustine’s *City of God* and *The Communist Manifesto*. On that first day we talked about the relationship of religion and culture found in the historical works of Christopher Dawson whom he claimed as one of his inspirations.

As he did for so many, he encouraged me to concentrate my graduate study at Fordham University on the history of religions. Thus four years later, I had the honor both of being his graduate student in the history of religions at Fordham University and his assistant at the foundation of the Riverdale Center of Religious Research. I remember the hot summer afternoons when we moved his collection of books in wash tubs in order to clear the old house in Riverdale for the Center, and then removed old plaster walls for the renovation. Each morning he taught me Sanskrit and each evening he would bring me more books to read: McNeill’s *The Rise of the West*, Beckett’s *Endgame*, Eliade’s *Cosmos and History*, Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipeligo*, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, van der Leuw’s *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Fung Yu-Lang’s *History of Chinese Philosophy*, Neumann’s *The Great Mother*, and de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Even then our attention was on the issues of the environment. Thus we read Commoner’s *The Closing Circle* and Dobos’ *So Human an Animal*.

Thomas introduced me to Lady Murasaki, Confucius, Teilhard, Lao Tzu, the Buddha, Black Elk, and Krishna (somehow he missed Muhammad; I think it was deliberate!). He encouraged me never to forget Thomas Aquinas. He directed my dissertation on the Bhāgavata Purāna, stressed the importance of the divine affectivity, and how to make comparisons in similarity and in difference. He persistently asks me “But what does

it mean?" He is still teaching me. It, in no way, surprises me that Father Thomas even now asks about the "God function," and in his nineties ponders God's creation of the universe out of nothing and the strange role that we humans play in the course of that universe toward its omega.