

# Thomas Berry and His Study of World Faiths

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Maya Angelou wrote that the overarching task of human life requires us “to be our best selves.” Thomas Berry inspired many who encountered his generosity and wisdom to pursue their dreams, to become their best selves, to become bold and creative following the example of his own pioneering work. In this paper, three of Berry’s early publications on non-western religions will be examined to shed light on the capaciousness of his thought.

## Five Oriental Philosophies<sup>1</sup>

This short book sets forth the basic methodology employed by Thomas Berry in his scholarly pursuits, a combination of historical analysis combined with his own penetrative wisdom. Berry always took the big view, which in the early phase of his work entailed the large scope of human cultural history, and in the later phase of his work, the context of the story of the universe.

Berry was born into a world without instant communications or fast travel, a world dominated by the processes of colonization, not globalization. The European world was distinct and separate from the African and Asian realms that it controlled. However, with the gradual collapse of colonialism worldwide, instigated by Mahatma Gandhi, new realities emerged. Berry notes that, due to the changes in the world-order in the mid-20th century, “western philosophers are being forced to abandon their isolation and to enter into a more universal tradition of philosophical thought” (p. 5). Although Rousseau had heralded the “noble savage” some years earlier, by the 20th century this Romantic notion gave way to a new pragmatism. The thought systems of Asia and Africa, as they threw off their European shackles, began to rediscover their own root origins, particularly with the eventual rise of Ubuntu philosophy in Africa and

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1. Thomas Berry. *Five Oriental Philosophies*. Overview Studies ed. (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1968). Page references in this section are to this book.

the re-discovery of Indian thought and practice on the subcontinent by such luminaries as Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and Sri Aurobindo.

The demise of colonialism in the latter half of the 20th century corresponded with the rise in interest in world civilizations. One of the defining documents of this period, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, shepherded by Eleanor Roosevelt, included wisdom from China as well as India, signaling what Berry later referred to as “a habit of mind responsive to the intellectual content of spiritual traditions” (p. 6). This marriage of intellect and the spirit took many forms in Asia. For starters, Berry notes the pervasive emphasis on the spirit over and against materiality in India: “To prove the existence of the world has traditionally been as difficult for the Hindu to prove as the existence of God is for the modern westerner” (p. 9). For Hindu thinkers, consciousness and mentation are the beginning origin point through which the material world takes shape. By changing one’s awareness, one actively shapes the directionality of intention drawing the senses into contact with particular objects, each individual holding her or his own individual perspective.

Indian schools of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thought developed several complex analyses of cosmology, ontology, and psychology. Berry juxtaposes this emphasis on particularity with the more aesthetic approach to be found in Confucianism: “Our deepest insight into Confucian metaphysics, as into the metaphysics of other Asian traditions, is at times attained through the arts rather than through formal philosophical writings” (p. 22). This aesthetic moment brings about a “profound reconciliation of all being [though which] all things participate in the supreme act of inter-communion or reciprocity” (p. 23).

Berry also commented upon intra-Asian philosophical disputes. Buddhism went afoul of the government authorities in ninth century Tang China, resulting in a massive repudiation of Buddhism and the destruction of many of its temples and monastic institutions. Berry notes, “The instinctive complaint of Confucian literati against the Buddhists has been that they represented a radical denial of life” (p. 24), a denial that required turning one’s back on the

all-important family structure. Taoism, which Berry deemed to be “strictly creative” (p. 32), fared somewhat better, perhaps due to its indigeneity. The rejection of foreign influences in China arises periodically, and Berry writes that “the one important meeting in Asia that has not yet taken place on any extensive scale is the meeting of Confucian thought with orthodox Hindu thought” (p. 36). Even today little appreciation can be found for Indian culture in China, and the reverse.

Berry, considering Zen to be a “major movement in the thought development of the 20th century in both eastern and western worlds” (p. 36), wrote that Zen helped bridge the gap between Asia and the West. The optimism with which thinkers adopted Zen ideas (Gary Snyder, Thomas Merton, William Johnston, and others come to mind), most likely caused Berry to write in regard to Asian thought:

These visions grow more rather than less important. The very differences in these experiences constitute their most valuable aspect, for one completes the others. A total experience of reality belongs to no one society but to the world community itself. These original intuitions are the more precious as they belong to an age that can never be repeated.... Because they came at this early period when the human mind was having its most immediate impressions of reality, they manifest a range of comprehension and a depth of insight which tends to be obscured for us at this later period when the mind is overwhelmed with the accumulated mass of its own speculations. (p. 37)

Originary ideas hold great interest for Berry, who sought to understand the underlying grammar of world cultures.

Berry, ahead of his time, also celebrated variegation rather than sameness. In prescient language, he commented:

Diversity is no longer something that we tolerate. It is something that we esteem as a necessary condition for a livable universe, as the source of earth’s highest perfection. A monochrome world would be a dreadful sight for the eye to be-

hold. So also one identical experience of reality and one single thought tradition would be intolerable to the human mind.... To demand an undifferentiated unity would bring human thought and history itself to an end. The splendor of our multicultural world would be destroyed. Diversity exists for the perfection of the world in the intellectual order even more than in the physical order. (p. 45)

When Loyola Marymount University began to require a course in American cultures as part of its curriculum, recently retitled as a "Diversity Requirement," the above quote was used to advocate for the study of diverse systems of thought and culture. A nearly identical sentiment was echoed in the address of Adolfo Nicolas, Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), to the heads of the worldwide network of Jesuit Colleges and Universities in Mexico City in 2010:

Where do we look for the classics? Is it still Greece and Rome? Or can we look at China, Japan, India? Can we look at the classics of the indigenous communities in different parts of the world—Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere? What we need is to open the whole range of the human mind.<sup>2</sup>

In some ways, the Jesuit order has suggested that we can learn valuable insights from what Berry called "pluralistic Asian humanism" (p. 48).

*Five Oriental Philosophies* sets forth a rationale for the study of world cultures. Berry's other two published works on world religions, *Buddhism* and *Religions of India*, were written as textbooks presenting basic historical, philosophical, and textual material.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Adolfo Nicolas "Depth, Universality, and Learned Ministry: Challenges to Jesuit Higher Education Today," (remarks for "Networking Jesuit Higher Education: Shaping the Future for a Humane, Just, Sustainable Globe," Mexico City, April 23, 2010), [http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423\\_Mexico%20City\\_Higher%20Education%20Today\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.sjweb.info/documents/ansj/100423_Mexico%20City_Higher%20Education%20Today_ENG.pdf), 4.
  3. Though he did not publish books on Confucianism or Native American spiritual traditions, he studied and wrote many papers on these traditions,

Berry spent most of his academic career teaching world religions to both undergraduate and graduate students and these books arise from his grasp of these complex systems. Both books report accurate assessments of their respective material in light of then-current research. Rather than focusing on the content, a few observations are made below of what distinguishes these works as indicative of the Berry approach, specifically his responsiveness to signs of the times, and his emphasis on enduring wisdom.

### **Buddhism<sup>4</sup>**

At the end of the book titled *Buddhism*, Berry makes this observation: “These traditions are developing more profoundly and more soundly than they have developed for centuries. They are entering a new phase of their existence, a new phase of significance...for the whole world” (p. XX). Just as the Catholic Church, rejecting change in Vatican I (1869-70) and embracing change in Vatican II (1962-65), underwent many changes in the 19th and 20th centuries while coping with modernity, so also the Buddhist world awakened from its insularity in the years following the World Wars. The flow of ideas such as Communism from Europe and the rising consumer economies along the North American model clashed in the traditionally Buddhist countries of Asia creating tremendous upheaval and creativity. Around the time of the publication of Berry’s book *Buddhism*, intra-religious dialogue took place for the first time between Theravada and Mahayana adherents. Such figures as the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh began to take their place both as dialogue partners within Buddhism and as world spiritual leaders.

The book *Buddhism* tells a story not only about the major teachings of the world’s four largest religions, but also indicates Berry’s own *sitz in leben* as a Catholic priest and member of the Order of

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which might at a future date merit editing into two different volumes. Thomas Berry never visited India, though he spent time in China and, in the 1970s, engaged in frequent encounters with Native Americans. He also traveled to the Philippines.

4. Thomas Berry, *Buddhism* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1967; repr. New York: Crowell, 1971; New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). Page references in this section are to the Hawthorne Books edition.

Passionists. The book holds the imprimatur of Cardinal Terrence J. Cooke, dated December 1, 1966, and was published in 1967. It also bears the *nihil obstat* given by Censor Librorum, Daniel V Flynn, JCD. These proclaim that the book is “free of doctrinal or moral error.” They also state that those granting approval do not necessarily “agree with the contents, opinions or statements expressed.” While this may seem like a quaint or even disturbing holdover from pre-Vatican days, how remarkable it is that these offices took the time to make an assessment. Those reading the book learned a great deal about Buddhism!

This book from Berry is part of the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. *Buddhism* is Volume 145, under section XV of the *Encyclopedia*: Non-Christian Beliefs. The titles in part, here include:

- 140. Primitive and Prehistoric Religions
- 141. Religions of the Ancient East
- 142. Greek and Roman Religion
- 143. Mohammedanism
- 144. Hinduism
- 145. Buddhism
- 146. Christianity and Other Religions

Let us hope that any 21st Century Encyclopedia will be as inclusive!

When Thomas Berry moved from Riverdale to North Carolina several of his books on the religions of India came to Loyola Marymount University, including his favorite resource for primary sources on the Buddhist faith, William Clarke Warren's *Buddhism in Translations*.<sup>5</sup> In examining Berry's margin notes in this anthology of primary Buddhist sources, we find interesting indications of how Thomas “read” these materials. In the Table of Contents, each of the selected passages is traced back to its location within the Buddhist Canon, indicating, for instance, if it came from the *Jataka Tales*, the *Digha Nikaya*, the writings of *Buddhaghosa*, the *Visuddhimagga*,

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5. Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations: Passages Selected from the Buddhist Sacred Books and Translated from the Original Pali* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1896; New York: Atheneum, 1963).

the *Mahanidana Sutta*, the *Culla Vagga*, the *Dhammapada*, and so forth. Berry paid close attention to the internal categorization systems of any body of knowledge. This proclivity perhaps contributed to the organizational superstructure of his later synoptic descriptions of principles and his densely packed sayings.

In the very first of the *Jataka Tales* contained in the book, the story of the Buddha's birth as a wealthy Brahmin called Sumedha, Berry makes notes that the Buddha indicates his "Divine Status," that the Buddha talks about "water and purification, effort, and the tree of wisdom." His margin notes also include the words "gravity/gravitas, alms, precepts, renunciation, wisdom, courage, patience, truth, resolution, goodwill, indifference, power, tree, hero, ten perfections, wheel, moon, sun, rivers." As students we would be amazed at his ability to gather information and then penetrate and communicate its meaning. In examining the list of words he identified in his reading of the text, one gets a sense of what drove Berry forward: understanding not for the sake gaining facts, but for the purpose of making meaning.

In the later amalgamated story presented by Warren on the life of Siddhartha Gautama, Berry clearly reads the tale through a Jungian and/or Eliadean lens, noting in the margins "sorrow archetype," "heroic struggle," "conversion," "the great struggle," "asceticism," "effort, tree, tree, cosmic wheel, centering, witness of earth," even "Dante at end of Purgation" and "Rafters are Broken" (perhaps alluding to the biblical tale of one of Jesus's healing miracles). Berry notes two of the different types of trees that were important in the days immediately following the Buddha's awakening, writing "Banyan Tree" and "Mucalinda Tree" at the top of the page. When the narrative shifts to the end of the Buddha's life, Berry again notes that this took place under a tree, in this case between Sal trees. The margin notes in the later teaching passages highlight the Palmyra tree (pp.163, 168, 217) and the Asoka tree (p. 164). In the case of the Asoka tree, the Buddha describes its movement from bud into shoot and then leaf as a metaphor for the ripening and falling away of all existence, all form. Berry uses Buddhist ideas to explain the metaphor. However, he also writes such Jungian words in the margins as "serpent, wheel, root."

Although the textbook does not overtly apply a hermeneutical preference, Berry clearly used his studies of image, symbol, and religious history to shape his interpretations of Buddhism. The final words of this textbook on Buddhism reveal Berry's hope in undertaking this project:

Establishing a world context for man's spiritual and intellectual development has just begun. From the Christian side the Second Vatican Council took a great step forward when it established a special secretariat for communication with the other religious and spiritual traditions....This in modern times is a task similar to that of the early Fathers of the Church in establishing a deep communication with the thought, culture, and spirituality on the Hellenic world. A new patristic age...in which all the world traditions will have their finest and fullest expression (p. 184).

Berry expressed great optimism that the exchange of ideas in the latter part of the 20th century would create new avenues for understanding and a broadening and deepening of intercultural communication. In some ways, these predictions have come to pass. Many Americans now have a working familiarity with Buddhist principles and practices, and Asian nations, adapting cell phones and cinema and television and the Internet to their own needs, have absorbed and interpreted advances in European and American technologies.

On the other hand, within academia, it may be said that quite the reverse took hold in the past three decades (1985-2015) after three decades of exploration and creative engagement (1955-1985). Philosophy departments nationwide have generally turned to analytical philosophy. Few of the top-rated programs in the country have maintained their positions in nonwestern traditions. However, counter evidence may also be provided that the study of Asian traditions has flourished and has gotten stronger, not only in academia but also in the public sphere. The strongest department in Asian and Comparative Philosophy, the University of Hawaii, has nearly 100% placement of its graduates. When the Religion in South Asia section of the American Academy of Religion formed in 1979, there



were only 50 scholars present, including Wendy Doniger, Diana Eck, and David Knipe. Now the group has grown to more than 500 scholars. The practice of Thomas Berry's beloved Yoga (see below) has grown to 20 million lay participants in the United States alone, larger than the most robust of mainline Protestant denominations. Loyola Marymount initiated a two year graduate training in Yoga Studies in 2013, a course of study that includes three semesters of Sanskrit study along with anatomical studies, and textual and philosophical studies of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and comparative mysticism. The first year began with a cohort more than 50% larger than anticipated, and the numbers increased for the second year as well with a wait list. Buddhist mindfulness has similarly exploded into national consciousness, with a mainstreaming of this tradition into the military and into Congress itself, with Congressman Ryan of eastern Ohio a prime advocate.

### **Religions of India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoga** <sup>6</sup>

*Religions of India* saw multiple publications. It was first published in 1971 and then reissued in 1992 and again in 2001. The revised version (1992) includes a new introduction that revisits primary Hindu (and Buddhist) texts through an Earth-friendly lens. Berry proclaims, "Absolute transcendence requires total immanence." He writes that the *Upanishads* exhort one to see "numinous presence in every visible form." The *Ramayana* carries a similar panentheistic message of "human intimacy with the flowering plants and with very living form." Berry writes, "In India we find a unique sensitivity to the pathos not simply of the human but of the entire natural world." This theological insight extends into the ethical realm. Berry writes about nonviolence, the core precept of India, as follows: "Ahimsa: belongs to the process of primordial orientations, conscious and unconscious," indicating its primacy within the Indian worldview.

The difference between the 1971 introduction and the 1992

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6. Thomas Berry, *Religions of India: Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoga* (New York: Bruce-MacMillan, 1971; 2nd ed. Chambersburg, PA: Anima Press, 1992; New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Page references in this section are to the Columbia Universe Press edition.

introduction signals the shift in Thomas Berry's own thinking. The original introduction explains the significance of the religions of India within world history. The 1992 introduction expands the context to situate the significance of Indian ideas about intimacy within the discourse of universe history. Although the book returns to the "world history" approach that Berry helped introduce in the 1970s, his insights about intimacy and the role of intimacy in making Earth-human connections resound strongly in the original material. The book gives the big picture within India's history identifying key terms, such as Central Tradition, Hinduism as Process, Non-Aryan and Aryan Components, and Union of Traditions. The books also explores categories such as world-negation, extreme asceticism, puja/worship, yoga, Sanskrit, sacrifice, the unity of Atman and Brahman, Maya, Samsara, Karma, and spiritual liberation (*moksha*). All of this material is presented in the frame of historical unfolding up until, and including, western contact and the emergence of the re-inventors of the tradition, such as Vivekananda and Tagore.

At the core of the book Berry moves from the historical frame into the spiritual and experiential realms with his explication of Yoga. The rhetoric soars. He writes "the whole purpose of Yoga is to provide the specific disciplines and techniques of inner control whereby liberation of this spiritual reality from its confinement is brought about" (p. 77). He notes, "A person studying Yoga must be aware that it is part of the larger whole of Indian life, learning, and spirituality.... Yoga is purely and simply a spirituality" (p. 80) and that "It is taken for granted in traditional India that everyone with a serious approach to life is carrying out a Sadhana, a program of practical spiritual discipline" (p. 93). Berry sets forth and explains the eightfold path of Yoga, beginning with the ethical precepts. He delves into the intent of each one, noting, for instance, that "veracity (*satya*)...covers much more than simply truthfulness. It includes the commitment to what is genuine, to the pure and virtuous, to the honest" (p. 95). He correlates not stealing (*asteya*) to justice and defines nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as "love for all living creatures." Berry's insight into the spiritual aspects of Yoga practices yields elegant prose, including his description of the practice of purity (*sauca*), which he states leads to "a true and lasting cheerfulness of mind

instead of a false and momentary succession of pleasures; a unified mind which cured the intelligence of its dispersion amid the transient phenomena with which it was surrounded” (p. 96).

Following a description of the middle limbs of Yoga, from *asana* and *pranayama* to mastery over the senses, concentration, and meditation, Berry writes about the culmination of Yoga in *Samadhi*. Berry rhapsodizes about this stellar moment:

The world is no longer opaque. It comes together into an ordered cosmos.... The one point of meditation enables the light of the self to permeate the universe. The point on which the mind is fixed becomes simultaneously center and circumference of reality. The whole is known simultaneously as the notes of a melody, successive in execution, are heard simultaneously by the mind. This status of the mind is sometimes referred to as the “cosmic mind.” A new awareness floods the mind (p. 102).

According to Berry, one dwells in a state in which one “lives in a cosmos completely responsive to his [or her] presence” (p. 103). Patanjali, the author of the *Yoga Sutra*, states emphatically in words elegantly rephrased and newly translated by Berry, “The Self does not undergo any change. It knows, but through activities of its own being. It exists in a pure state of consciousness totally undisturbed by processes of knowing. Nothing throws light on the Self; the Self illumines all else” (p. 104). Using one of his favorite descriptions of the nature of God from Thomas Aquinas, Berry writes that the Yogi experiences “the entry into perfect simplicity” (p. 106). Invoking a form of iconoclasm, Berry describes the ultimate religious experience as “a creative shattering of everything in order that the one unique reality be attained” (p. 107). Berry affirms the efficacy of Yoga as spiritual practice.

When Berry writes in his later years about intimacy, one gathers a sense that this connectivity that he evokes and extols mirrors the experience of *Samadhi* in Yoga. At the Harvard Conference on Religion and Animals in 1999, organized by Paul Waldau and Kimberly Patton, Berry wrote:

Our intimacy with the universe demands an intimate presence to the smallest particles as well as to the vast range of the stars splashed across the skies in every direction. More immediately present to our consciousness here on Earth are the landscapes; the sky above, the earth below; the grasses, the flowers, the forests and fauna that present themselves to our opening senses. Each in its own distinctive perfection fills our mind, our imagination, our emotional attraction.<sup>7</sup>

By examining his understanding of the levels of consciousness possible through the sustained practice of Yoga, one can understand the primacy given by Berry to the immediacy and simplicity of experiences engendered within nature.

## Conclusion

During his classroom lectures at Fordham University that I attended from 1976 through 1979, Thomas Berry rued and lamented the rise of trivialization, the blind concern with ephemera, the inability of the human to awaken to the harsh realities that define human existence. Berry spoke often of a need for gravitas.

So much of what he anticipated has come to pass.

The perception of the perdurable nature of suffering set the Buddha on his quest for enlightenment. For Berry that enlightenment must and will arrive, not in moments of personal torment, but will collectively dawn as we, as a species, awaken from the slumber of our cultural entrancement with technology in each and every form that dulls the senses and deadens the mind. To the extent that we remain removed from the meadow, not as archetype but as living reality, is the extent to which we will continue to blindly suffer.

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7. Thomas Berry, "Prologue: Loneliness and Presence," in *A Communion of Subjects: Animals in Religion, Science, & Ethics*, ed. Paul Waldau & Kimberley Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 5-6.