

The Hours of the Universe

Reflections on God, Science,
and the Human Journey



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Introduction



In the brief span of the last two decades we have experienced a number of major crises, including the terrorist attacks of 9/11, protracted wars in the Middle East, the recession that followed the mortgage crisis of 2008, persistent racism, and more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Each crisis has brought about profound loss, and yet we manage to pick up the pieces and move on, as if these crises were merely interruptions in our otherwise normal lives. In a fragile world of finite limits, the breakdown of systems is not unusual. What is startling, however, is that within twenty short years, the number of human casualties due to catastrophic events has risen exponentially.

Profound suffering can evoke different responses. We may mourn our losses, especially the loss of loved ones to tragedy. But we may also recognize in these disruptions a call to awaken from our cultural stupor to the signs of a new reality breaking forth in our midst. We may long for what we have lost, but are we also able to read the signs of the times? Can we discern a new reality on the horizon?

The New Testament calls our attention to the in-breaking reign of God. The message of Jesus was one of seeing, believing, and trusting in the empowering presence of God. God is doing new things, Jesus proclaimed, but only those with new minds and hearts can see a new world breaking through the cracks of the old. Jesus offered a new set of values, teaching us how to live on the edge of a new tomorrow. We must

make a choice, however, to embrace these new values and to live in a new way. The spiritual masters called this process of change “conversion”: an unlearning of old habits that block the light of the new reality and a turning of the mind and heart in grace in order to entrust our lives to the living presence of God. Only if we believe in a new power in our midst can we let go of the old reins of control and allow the Spirit to draw us toward a new future.

We know the Christian message as a set of instructions, but do we know it as a new way of life? Its basic message is simple: God is doing new things through us; we are the new creation in process. Hence, the most unchristian position we can assume is to block the new creation from taking place. And that is exactly where the institutional church finds itself today, internally divided and defending itself against the cultural winds of change. The marginalization of religion from culture, the opposition of religion to evolution, and the reduction of religion to privatized forms of spirituality have left the world stripped of God, bereft of meaning and purpose. It is a world gone blind, turned inward, satiated with things, and unconscious of its fundamental interdependency. Nothing really binds us together, and we find ourselves in a world of fear and resistance. We are skeptical of any new reality because we fear that rearranging our lives will disrupt the comfortable niches we have come to inhabit. We have a condition of chronic low-level depression driven by fear and distrust. And yet there is also a deep dimension of our lives that wants to transcend this trap of isolation and fear.

What we know today from the modern sciences is that evolution is our fundamental reality. All of nature, in a sense, is summed up in the human person; the principles of nature are the fundamental principles of human personhood. Systems of nature work in tandem with the environment, so that when environmental conditions thwart the optimization of life, the system finds the necessary tools to adapt, change, or rearrange its organization. The maxim of nature is *life seeks more life*. This maxim holds true on the human level as well

as throughout all of nature, except we do not follow the principles of nature. Instead, we seek to control nature and direct its course of action. According to Genesis 1:26–28, we were given dominion over nature, giving rise to the idea that the human person is special and distinct from nature. But the fact is, earth is *the* primary reality and we are derivative of earthly life. God was creating long before we arrived on the scene. We are not meant to control nature, but instead to be its mind and heart as it seeks its ultimate fulfillment. If we seek to manipulate nature, it will rise up against us.

The narrative of nature can be summed up in one word: *evolution*. We are evolutionary nature on the level of self-consciousness. Evolution works according to many factors, far beyond the simple rules of Charles Darwin, and one of the most significant factors is information. Evolution is a function of information and complexity; an increase in complexity corresponds to a rise in consciousness. It is no surprise that we find ourselves today in a massive shift of consciousness. The development of computer technology has drastically increased the amount of information in the human sphere. As a result, consciousness has rapidly complexified, giving rise to new integrated levels that can now be identified as global consciousness and planetary consciousness. While computer technology has enhanced the rate of evolution, most human support systems, including religious, educational, and political systems, are still structured according to a static, fixed model of closed systems, the Newtonian paradigm of the autonomous individual. Hence, the information-driven person who is electronically connected is living from an evolutionary open-system consciousness, while the support systems are individuated, closed systems. To continue this trajectory is to anticipate global breakdown. Newtonian systems can no longer sustain human life. Without rewiring support systems along the lines of complex systems, we are headed for global systems failure.

A seminal thinker whom I have relied on to navigate our unfolding world is the Jesuit scientist Pierre Teilhard

de Chardin. As early as 1917 Teilhard could see a power at work in the physical universe despite the tragic reality of war and suffering. His faith and trust in the immanent presence of God impelled him to see the sufferings of the world as a breaking through of a new reality; neither war, nor communism, nor the loss of his family members prevented him from seeing the world in a dawning light. His optimism was balanced by a moderate realism that evolution must be the starting point for all human thinking, whether in religion, politics, or education. He indicated that dialogue alone is insufficient to move us to a new level of consciousness. What is needed is a new synthesis that emerges from the insights of science and religion. Evolution, he maintained, is neither a theory nor a particular fact but a “dimension” to which all thinking in whatever area must conform. The human person emerges out of billions of years of evolution. To realize that humans are part of a larger process, which involves long spans of developmental time, brings a massive change to all of our knowledge and beliefs.

Teilhard was convinced that the total material universe is in movement toward a greater unified convergence. As life systems unite and form more complex relationships, consciousness rises. Teilhard describes evolution as the rise of consciousness toward a hyper-personalized organism, what he called an irreversible personalizing universe. He spoke of the human person as a co-creator. God evolves the universe and brings it to its completion through the human person. Before the human emerged, Teilhard says, it was natural selection that set the course of morphogenesis; after humans it is the power of invention that begins to grasp the evolutionary reins. The computer, according to Teilhard, has evoked a new level of shared consciousness, a level of cybernetic mind giving rise to a field of global mind through interconnecting pathways. Technology is a new evolutionary means of convergence; it is accelerating evolution by causing humankind to concentrate upon itself through complex levels of information.

Teilhard penned his ideas almost a hundred years ago, yet he often has been dismissed as irrelevant, a charlatan. He sought to redefine faith within a scientific milieu. He challenged the church to accept the implications of the incarnation and to relinquish its otherworldliness. His ideas have been met with skepticism and only partially accepted. The Catholic Church remains fixated on the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas, a brilliant theologian who developed his ideas in the thirteenth century. Although science has undergone three major paradigm shifts since the Middle Ages, the church still relies on medieval theology to explain the mysteries of Christian faith. While Vatican II opened the doors of the church to the world, theology remains distant from science.

Raimon Panikkar, in *The Rhythm of Being*, writes that theology and cosmology are interlocking disciplines. God and cosmos cannot be separated. Reality is radically relational and interdependent, so that every reality is constitutively connected to all other realities, is nothing but relatedness. The world of matter, energy, space and time is our home. There is an organic unity, a dynamic process, where every part of the whole participates in or mirrors the whole, including God. These realities are ultimate and irreducible. There is no thought, prayer, or action that is not radically cosmic in its foundations, expressions, and effects. Hence, there is no sacredness apart from the secularity of the world. The mistake of Western thought, Panikkar says, was to begin with identifying God as the Supreme Being, which resulted in God being turned into a human projection. But the divine dimension of reality is not an object of human knowledge; it is, rather, the depth-dimension to everything that exists. Panikkar called this complex reality a *cosmotheandric whole*, in which divinity, humanity, and cosmos form a trinitarian reality.

By insisting on Scholastic theology as the basis of religious thinking, religion has cut itself off from the related disciplines of science and philosophy. Today we have three

loosely related disciplines—theology, philosophy, and science—each with its own methods, language, and concepts. Instead of having a cosmo-religious myth to provide meaning and purpose to human life, we have independent myths of science, religion, and philosophy. We can study each area and get a degree in one particular area without ever having to think about the other two areas. God remains locked up in Scholastic categories rather than being encountered as the immanent ground of dynamic being and cosmic life. To separate theology from science and philosophy is to destroy the cosmic genetic code. By keeping these disciplines distinct and apart, life cannot develop coherently, as a whole.

We have an urgent need to construct a new religious story today; theology can no longer be content to roam around the Patristic and Middle Ages while importing ancient ideas into the twenty-first century. We have confused history with a living God. A theology that does not begin with evolution and the story of the universe is a useless fabrication. Teilhard de Chardin felt the urgency to articulate his challenging ideas. His cry, “unify or annihilate,” builds on a search for cosmotheandric wholeness in our dynamic world of evolution. His profound insights help us realize that a new story of the cosmos demands a new understanding of God, and a new understanding of ourselves in relation to God. Simply put, we cannot speak of God apart from human evolution, an idea that led Teilhard to state that God and world form a complementary pair. God and world are entangled with one another to the extent that talk of God is impossible apart from talk about nature and creative change, and talk of nature makes no sense apart from God. If a unified God-world relationship is the heart of theology, then theology cannot be done apart from modern science. Without science, theology can easily become idolatry.

This book is a collection of essays written over the last few years to help form a new theological vision for a world in evolution. They were written for a broad, general audience, especially those seeking new meaning and purpose in today’s world. The title of the book, *The Hours of the*

Universe, is meant to convey the idea that the universe is the new monastery, the place to find God. Just as in a monastery the recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours calls to mind the work of God in our lives, from the gift of creation to the sufferings we bear, so too the new monastery is the cathedral of the universe.

Each chapter begins with a poetic introduction that expands the Trinity into the arc of the universe. The name *God* points to the mystery of an unspeakable source of eternal love that flows endlessly from the divine creative heart into the mouth of creation, an eternal divine kiss that is, at once, a deep intimate presence (Word incarnate) and an erotic attraction (Spirit) toward ultimate transcendence and fulfillment.

My hope is that each essay can be a source of prayerful reading, a searching for the depths of God's intimate presence in a world of chaos and change, for we are not alone and have no reason to fear. God is doing new things, and our response in fidelity and love can bring forth a new communion of planetary life.