

THE COSMIC VISION OF  
TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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## INTRODUCTION

When I was in my early twenties, I began reading the works of the Jesuit geologist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), prompting my lifelong interest in science and religion. From 1966 to 1970, I studied theology at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and while working on my doctoral thesis, I began teaching part time at Georgetown University across town. After getting my degree in 1970, I joined the regular faculty at Georgetown. In the early 1970s, I developed a course for undergraduates on science and religion and taught it almost every year until I retired from teaching. I was not trained as a scientist, so I had to do a lot of reading in physics, cosmology, biology, and other disciplines for which most theologians do not usually have the time.

Connecting a scientifically informed cosmic awareness to our spiritual lives was Teilhard's main preoccupation throughout his adult life, and it has become my own as well. Had it not been for Teilhard's influence, my own theological and academic life could have gone in other directions. I first encountered Teilhard's cosmic vision soon after graduating from college in 1964 and was immediately swept away by the power and freshness of his thought. I did not realize fully at the time that my excitement was due also to the fact that I was becoming dissatisfied intellectually and spiritually with the medieval theological worldview presupposed by my religious education up to that point. Before encountering Teilhard, I had been studying in a Catholic seminary where I had been schooled in Scholastic philosophy, much

of which I was required to read and memorize in the original Latin. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to study medieval thought, including that of Thomas Aquinas. I began to realize long ago, however, that Thomas's prescientific philosophy, ingenious and adventurous as it was in the thirteenth century, cannot fully contextualize contemporary science—although some Catholic philosophers and theologians are still attempting to forge such a synthesis. I appreciate the effort and good will behind these attempts, but I believe they are intellectually and spiritually inadequate given what we now know about the universe in the age of science, especially after Darwin and Einstein.

In any case, I left the seminary soon after the Second Vatican Council and began immediately to pursue a career in academic theology as a layperson. My decision to take up theological studies was a consequence not only of my reading of Teilhard but also of my earlier exposure to the writings of Karl Rahner and contemporary biblical scholarship, including especially that of my teacher, the Johannine scholar Raymond Brown. To this day I am grateful for the historical-critical understanding of scripture since it liberates theology from the anachronistic impulse to seek scientific information in the Bible. This is a lesson that countless Christians and most anti-Christian evolutionists have yet to learn.

As I recall, however, it was mostly due to the excitement I had felt in my growing acquaintance at that time with Teilhard's Christian vision of nature and evolution that I found myself drawn to a life in systematic theology. From the start, Teilhard has been an inspiration to me both intellectually and spiritually. I am not as uncritical of his thought today as I may have been when I was younger, but I still draw upon the audacity of his cosmic vision.

When I first explored his writings, Teilhard's bold ideas had already influenced some of the theological reflection that would make the Second Vatican Council such an important event in

the history of the church as well as in my personal life. Teilhard had begun developing his ideas on God, cosmology, and evolution in *The Human Phenomenon* and *The Divine Milieu* while he was living in China—where he became one of the most highly esteemed geologists of the Asian continent. Because of church censorship, however, Teilhard was never given the opportunity to expose his work to the critique of other experts. No doubt, then, there are deficiencies in his writings that could easily have been avoided and corrected had his beloved church allowed for the circulation of his ideas.

After Teilhard's death in 1955, at any rate, his lay friends fed his manuscripts to hungry publishers who marketed them widely. Some of these were immediately devoured by theologians who helped shape the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Teilhard's hope for the future of humanity and of our need to take responsibility for "building the earth" greatly influenced one of modern Catholicism's main documents, *Gaudium et Spes*. This is ironic because, in 1962, the same year the council met for its first session, the Holy Office of the Vatican issued an admonition advising seminary professors and heads of Catholic colleges and universities to "protect the minds, particularly of the youth, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and his followers." Fortunately, I was one of those who escaped the efforts to protect the tender minds of young Catholics.

Because of the theological ferment fostered by Vatican II, my own theological understanding began to evolve during my time at Catholic University. It was then that a developing sense of the cosmic future started to become the main preoccupation of my theology. With Teilhard, I maintain that, in the light of geology, evolutionary biology, and contemporary post-Einsteinian cosmology, theology needs to begin with the observation that the cosmos remains a work in progress. For if the cosmos is still coming into being, we may entertain the thought that

something of great importance may be starting to form, at least vaguely, up ahead, and that human technology and morally chastened engineering will be increasingly essential to the shaping of the terrestrial future, perhaps in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

Concern for the cosmic future and for what is going on in the physical universe has not yet become a major theme in Western theology. Classical Christianity and its theologies first came to expression at a time when people took for granted that the universe is fundamentally fixed and unchanging. Today, however, especially because of developments in the natural sciences, theologians can no longer plausibly ignore the fact that the whole universe, not just life and human history, is still in the process of becoming. A sense of the universe as a still unfinished drama of awakening has yet to settle deeply into Christian spiritual and theological sensibilities. Theology and religious instruction still tend, for the most part, to nurture nostalgia for a lost Eden, or else they look skyward toward a final heavenly communion with a God who is thought to exist timelessly, apart from natural history and the cosmic future. Meanwhile, intellectual life, philosophy of science, and journalistic culture remain tied to a deadening materialist pessimism that undermines any hope that the cosmos can somehow be rescued from the jaws of meaninglessness.

With Teilhard, I believe that Christian hope needs to be channeled into a common human concern for a cosmic and not just human salvation. In other words, religious expectation may look forward not only to everlasting communion of human persons with God but also to the fulfillment of an entire universe, as Pope Francis affirms in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*.<sup>1</sup> The God of Abraham who arrives from out of the future when it seems that everything has reached a dead end may now be sought by looking in the direction of a new future not only for individual souls but also for the cosmos. Abrahamic faith in the age of science anticipates not only human and personal

redemption but also the transfiguration of the whole universe into wondrous beauty saved everlastingly in the heart of God. Science's fresh picture of the cosmos as an unfinished drama rather than a fixed design gives new significance and wider scope than ever to the ancient Abrahamic expectations.

Both as a scientist and as a religious thinker, Teilhard sought to make sense of evolution. Evolution, as he understood it broadly, is a process in which the natural world is becoming more, giving rise to fuller being over the course of time. But at each stage of its journey, the cosmos becomes *more* only by organizing itself around successively new and higher centers. Teilhard called this recurrent cosmic trend "centration." Centration occurred very early in cosmic history when subatomic elements organized themselves around an atomic nucleus. Centration happened later when large molecules clustered around nuclear DNA in the eukaryotic cell, and still later when the "central" nervous system took shape in vertebrate evolution.

At present, the latest dominant units in terrestrial evolution are human persons, and they too can be centrated—brought together socially into higher organic syntheses—only if there exists a powerfully attractive unifying center that is also personal. Human persons cannot be fully alive or moved to "become more" except by surrender in faith to the reality of a magnetic, transcendent, promising personal Center to which the whole universe may still be in the early stages of awakening. In the following chapters I ask what this cosmic awakening means by looking with Teilhard at a variety of topics: the cosmos, the future, hope, humanity, morality, spirituality, God, life, suffering, religion, thought, and transhumanism. In a final chapter I respond to several criticisms of Teilhard's thought.



Ordained a priest in 1911, Teilhard became a stretcher-bearer during World War I and received awards for his courage in battle. It was especially during his life in the trenches that his cosmic spiritual vision began to take shape. After the war and the completion of his studies in Paris, he journeyed to China, where he became one of the most respected geologists in the Far East. It was there that he began to compose his great synthesis of science and faith, *The Human Phenomenon*. Both the Vatican and Teilhard's religious superiors, however, forbade its publication. It appeared in print only after his death in New York in 1955.

Snubbed by his own church during his lifetime, this great scientist and visionary has arguably turned out to be the most important Christian thinker of the past century. For those interested in the relationship of faith to thought and action, I am convinced that no spiritual writers have more to offer even today. Only time will assign Teilhard his proper place in the history of ideas. But those of us who believe that Christianity—for the sake of its credibility and even its survival—must eventually come to grips with science, and especially evolution, Teilhard continues to shine forth as a model of honesty, openness, and courage.

It is true that Teilhard draws less attention today than he did fifty or sixty years ago, but his thought is by no means obsolete. As theologian Jean Lacouture commented a half century ago, "The Catholic Church is in great need of the abrasive, energizing breath of a new Teilhard. Or in the interim (why not?) a return to Teilhard? Or, quite simply, a welcome for Teilhard?"<sup>2</sup>

During the Great War (World War I), having already studied geology as a seminarian and young priest, Teilhard became increasingly convinced that the evolutionary sciences require a new understanding of almost everything, starting with the universe itself. Each chapter of this book, therefore, brings out some of the changes in our understanding of God and the universe

that Teilhard was beginning to consider essential in the light of evolutionary biology and cosmology.

These chapters are not intended to be an exposition or condensation of Teilhard's thought. Instead, they are an application of some of his main ideas about the cosmos to questions that still arise today when we reflect on the universe, life, thought, God, and other topics. Given the major shifts in cosmology that have occurred after Einstein, how is Christian theology going to approach the question of whether there are good reasons for our hope? What is the meaning of human existence? Will there be opportunities after Darwin and Einstein for the renewal of spiritual life? What shall we mean henceforth by the word *God*, if anything at all? What is the meaning of life, suffering, morality, religion, and the amazing phenomenon of thought?

Since Teilhard's death in 1955, new developments have taken place in biology, cosmology, and other scientific fields. So, one cannot expect that his books and essays will respond perfectly to all the questions we raise today about the religious and theological implications of science. Nevertheless, Teilhard left us with "lines of thought" whose general drift remains as exciting and liberating today as ever. The present book is not a scholastic reproduction of his ideas but a set of reflections on what his main ideas about the universe can mean for those who have felt the spirit of his powerful ideas. Let us begin by looking with Teilhard at how the cosmos has become the greatest story ever told.