

Preface

My work on *The Garden of God* actually began about thirty years ago. I was a young physicist working for Boeing at their home plant in Seattle. For the most part, I did fairly routine work investigating mechanical problems occurring in a variety of Boeing's jets. One day, however, I was assigned to a project shrouded in secrecy. All I saw of the project was a computer monitor inside a trailer. That computer, however, had a large cable that went out from the trailer and traveled almost a mile to a hangar at the end of the field, ominously guarded by what looked to be Air Force servicemen with guns.

As I entered the trailer the first time, I was puzzled as to why I had been given this assignment. I had an entry-level job, after all. Nonetheless, I stood as I booted up the computer. In front of me flashed four letters that quietly entered my consciousness but soon began screaming in alarm—A L C M. It suddenly hit me. This was the Air Launch Cruise Missile project I had heard so much about! The sudden realization led me to a powerful experience unlike any I have ever had before and, after all these years, to writing this book.

I fell into a kind of waking dream, a mystical-like experience. The black tarmac outside the trailer began to envelop all of Boeing field and I could see, smell, and hear the flame, smoke, and roar of a terrible conflagration. I knew as a physicist the destructiveness and toxicity of nuclear forces. I had gone into science for my love of the beauty of nature. Now I was seeing, feeling the dark side. After being overwhelmed by this vision of hell, the consequences of continuing to work on this project began to sink in. I would be helping bring hell to earth. I sat down heavily on my chair and asked myself the question, Do I really want my life to be marked by using my skill, my knowledge, and my will to bring about the possibility of such a conflagration? How many would die because of what I do here today? What sort of science is this that can bring hell to earth?

These questions still linger within me. I am now a theologian, but I have struggled with integrating that experience into my theology. Mystical visions are supposed to be moments of great ecstasy. What does one do with a mystical vision of hell? I found an answer in the works of the great Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin. Theology, he saw, was intrinsically cosmic. Salvation for the human has high stakes. It not only involves the human but the entire universe. The universe and humanity are connected because the human is a phenomenon in the universe. We were not created outside of the universe and then put into it but are of the universe and for the universe. Indeed, in a more radical way than any other creature, the universe is meant to be home to the human. Thus part of the human phenomenon consists in calling the universe home. Can we humans as seemingly insignificant creatures be truly where the universe is heading? Can the human as phenomenon of and for the universe be the key to the universe's salvation? Teilhard believed so and through his eloquence he led me to believe the same.

I see my experience now as one that a prophet, if not a mystic, might experience. It was a vision, I now think, of what is at

stake when science is divorced from the spiritual and theology is divorced from the cosmic. *The Garden of God*, paradoxically, grew out of this mystical experience of hell. It is my answer to the question that a view of hell on earth raised within me. As such, *The Garden of God* is an intensely personal book for it actually tries to describe a conversion experience.

My experience of hell on earth brought me to my knees before the Lord of the whirlwind. I learned to become innocent again both before the facts of nature and the dogmas of theology. What is missing in the contemporary Christian tale of salvation is the human place in the cosmos. I can never see theology again without this cosmic lens. Only a cosmic theology of heaven and earth can truly answer the questions raised by a human hell.

Thus, I see *The Garden of God* as a prophet might. It is not only a theological proposal but also a call to repent. We must fall in love with the earth if there is to be a heaven. The key to such a romance are the most beautiful, endless forms that define what we mean by *cosmos*. In such beauty is found the true intersection of heaven and earth. Here the two “hands” of God—Christ and the Spirit—are shaping a new cosmos. It is also in that intersection where the key to the human phenomenon is to be found. That key, I believe, is a place, a place of beauty—indeed, a garden.

These passionate words can get lost in a book too tightly concerned with scholarly details. It is my intention to move the heart so as to guide the mind. For this reason, I have tried to keep the scholarly work as much as possible in the background. More important, this “manifesto” for a theological cosmology crosses many academic disciplines. Much has been said about the proper way to write across disciplines. I plan to use a method I call aesthetic insight that uses a technique called “interlacing.” Interlacing is based on a suggestion by Charles Peirce that an alternative way to build an argument is by “reasoning [that]

should not form a chain which is no stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibers may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected.”¹

“Interlacing” is the artful weaving of various perspectives across disciplines to gain an insight greater than any of its components. It reveals at the same time the fragility of our vision while offering us a greater vision than before. Moreover, “interlacing” deftly weaves across perspectives but is not a perspective *per se*. The end goal of “interlacing” is aesthetic insight, not a new perspective.² By aesthetic insight I mean something similar to what Josiah Royce, the great nineteenth-century philosopher, meant by religious insight.³ An insight, according to Royce, is marked by breadth of perspective, coherence of vision, and personal touch.

An aesthetic insight has all these qualities. It achieves them, however, through what Christopher Alexander, the well-known architect, calls “centers” (about which I will have a lot more to say in the last chapter). A “center” is that nexus of relationships which makes a whole out of many parts. It is not the whole itself. Neither is it the parts. It is that which accounts for an experience of beauty by allowing the parts to be seen as a whole. Aesthetic insight through the technique of “interlacing” discovers the “center” in which many perspectives find a unity that moves the heart. It grasps unity within complexity, but it does so through an experience of beauty. I will be using “interlacing” and aesthetic insight as a method throughout the book as I seek to find the “centers” that make a theological cosmology.

Such a method leads to a certain style of writing that not everyone finds to be their cup of tea. They find the style beautiful but imprecise, saying too much and saying too little, compelling yet irresponsible. To critics of my method and style, I beg forgiveness for giving offense. Yet I believe whole-heartedly that we must begin to see the interconnectedness of the world, to grasp its complexity, even if our intellectual traditions have conditioned us to seek a different type of grasping.

“Interlacing” and aesthetic insight, for all their weaknesses, have this as strength. They seek the insight of interconnections, not the strength of demonstration. If our question is whether we are at home in the cosmos, then I do not know any other method more oriented toward helping us find an answer. For the answer to this question requires grasping a staggering complexity of relationships. It is the nature of that grasping that is the most radical proposal in *The Garden of God*. I begin with the beautiful rather than the true or the good. Beauty, I have found, grasps complexity in a way no other starting point can match.

How the beautiful is grasped, however, is elusive and the subject of the field of aesthetics. Nonetheless, while the nature of beauty may elude us, its experience is accessible to all. Beauty, furthermore, brings a kind of knowledge known only by being enjoyed. This is the nature of the grasp of that which is complex. As such, a book that has such grasp as its goal is a deviation from the academic style of demonstration and argument. Thus, I beg the reader’s patience. I am after grasping the immense web of fragile human interconnectedness with one another and with the rest of the cosmos. I believe “interlacing” disciplined perspectives toward gaining aesthetic insight can help us grasp this complex interconnectedness by discovering the “centers” that bring about a place of Beauty on Earth. It is a method, I believe, proper to a garden.

Aesthetic insight is needed if we are to discover the garden of God in the cosmos. As I hope to make clear, gardens are not manufactured but cultivated, their craft a collaboration between ourselves and the earth. They are not so much designed but discovered. The key to cultivating the garden of God is the discovery of those “centers” which issue forth beauty as abundant life. In the course of the book, several centers will emerge from the method of aesthetic insight interlacing elements from the natural sciences, scholastic and contemporary philosophy, art theory, aesthetics, and the theology of Teilhard de Chardin.

These centers include place, heaven and earth, beautiful form, cosmic sacramentals, dynamic formal causality, the “whereness” and “what-ness” of place, the twin human helix of human frailty and abundant life, the fully cosmic Christ and the equally cosmic Holy Spirit. All these will be discovered and developed in what is to follow.

Discovering anew the importance and location of the intersection of life-giving relationships is crucial if Christianity is to meet the challenge of the twenty-first century. That challenge comes to us not as a problematic future but as the re-discovery of our home in the cosmos. To seek that home in the future is misguided. It is already here. Nonetheless, it must be discovered and cultivated.

As such, a theological cosmology is also a spirituality, a falling in love with the earth. Such a love issues forth abundant life and marvelous creativity. Indeed, creating such a garden will mean engaging the most spiritual of our human activities, that is, our creativity. It is my fervent hope that this call for a theological cosmology will be heard by others who are not theologians. In the end, *The Garden of God* may perhaps be best seen as a prayer. May a new collaboration of theology with other disciplines bring about a new kind of spirituality that will discover the road back to our true home in the cosmos—the garden of God.