INTRODUCTION

“For better and worse, we now occupy a human planet, one in which most evolutionary forces are guided or misguided by our hand.... Human agency will alter the fate of all living beings because no part of the planet is unaffected by our activity.” —Paul Hawken

Five centuries ago, following the great voyages of discovery, and of conquest, a new era began that involved an unparalleled increase and stabilization of communication and exchange between inhabitants of all of the world’s continents. At the same time, thanks to Copernicus and his followers, European intellectuals started to accept the idea that the Earth, along with the other heavenly wanderers, is a planet (from the Greek, *planetes* = wanderer). Thus began the Planetary Era.¹ The intercontinental exchange was material (gold, silver), biological (plants, animals, viruses), technological, and more broadly cultural. Though obviously one-sided—an inevitable corollary of colonial domination—this communication and exchange has led to increasing economic and more generalized interdependence, to a growing sense of the complex human fabric that, however thin and prone to tearing, continues to weave itself around the planet. And though much thinner than the atmosphere or the rest of the biosphere, this new planetary layer is bringing about the end of another, geological, era—the Cenozoic—that has lasted for the last sixty-five million years.¹ The Mesozoic—along with its most famous inhabitants, the non-avian

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¹ The three main ages of animal life on the planet are the Paleozoic: 543 million to 248 million years ago; the Mesozoic: 248 to 65 million years ago; and the Cenozoic: 65 million to the present.
dinosaurs—was brought to an end by the cosmic catastrophe of a massive meteorite smashing into the Earth and radically altering its climate. By contrast, the end of the Cenozoic—and with it the world’s sixth mass extinction underway and accelerating in our time—is due entirely to human agency, especially since the beginning of the twentieth century with the deadly combination of the global population explosion and the unconstrained, empire and capital driven techno-industrial complex.²

Thomas Berry has suggested the term *Ecozoic* to describe the new age destined to follow the Cenozoic.³ We shall have to wait to see how appropriate this proposed term turns out to be. The geological community, for its part, is debating whether or not to call this new age the *Anthropocene*, in recognition that humans are the principal drivers in bringing the Cenozoic to a close. There is no doubt, however, that the Earth community is in the grip of a series of overlapping and mutually reinforcing crises. There is, as a kind of persistent and deepening drone beneath the others, the ecological crisis represented by the destruction and possible collapse of the biosphere as it has existed for countless millennia. Most obvious at the time of writing are the global financial crisis and the chronic and regionally exacerbated sociopolitical crises. Though more entrenched in the world’s hot spots or “fracture zones,” like the Middle East, these crises are increasingly non-local, which is to say global, in their spheres of influence: witness the so-called war on terror and the global impact of the collapse of the American financial system.⁴ Subtlest of all, and pervading the planetary anthroposphere like an invisible miasma, is a psycho-spiritual crisis of consciousness, a crisis of meaning and imagination. Our dominant habits of mind are not adequate to—and are arguably responsible for bringing about—the complex global poly-crisis in which we find ourselves in this sixth century of the Planetary Era. We cannot—or do not wish to—see where we are heading. We have forgotten the path that has led us to where we now stand.
I am aware of several potential challenges facing the sympathetic reception of the ideas presented in the following pages. To begin with, it requires a certain facility in multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary modes of thinking.* In contrast to the dominant mode of over-specialization and disciplinary fragmentation, I draw freely from, and try to show the coherence of throughout, the full spectrum of the history of ideas: from philosophy, theology, and religious studies, from psychology (particularly depth and transpersonal), from the history and philosophy of science, and from political and cultural history. In this I have been guided by the example of such panoptic thinkers as C. G. Jung, Karl Löwith, Arthur Lovejoy, Jean Gebser, M. H. Abrams, William Irwin Thompson, Ken Wilber, Edgar Morin, and Richard Tarnas (key works of whom are listed in the References).

Related to this first, transdisciplinary challenge is the widespread suspicion in academic circles of grand (or “meta-”) narratives, particularly when these assume or assert an intelligible pattern and intentional goal to the movement of history. The catastrophes of the twentieth century and the present planetary crisis certainly give the lie to any triumphalist or even unambiguously progressivist view of history or the evolution of consciousness. Though I assume no such view, I do discern a pattern and intuit a goal, the nature of which, however, I cannot articulate with the same degree of confidence or certainty as do Hegel, Aurobindo, and Teilhard, for instance, upon whose broad shoulders I am nevertheless forced to stand.

A third challenge concerns what can appear as a blatant occidentocentrism. If the main subject is the Planetary Era, how justify a focus

* The idea of multi-disciplinarity is self-evident. While inter-disciplinarity might be said to involve a focus on data, theories, or issues that overlap two or more disciplines, or as involving the application of models or methods from one discipline to another, trans-disciplinarity involves inquiry at the level of root or paradigmatic assumptions or principles that structure (usually unconsciously) any discipline.
on the West? The larger portion of humanity, after all, lives in the East and the South, and despite the dominance of the U.S., Europe, and the former Soviet Union in modern times, most analysts point to China and India as the global giants of the twenty-first century. Aside from the fact that, given my personal situatedness, a Western perspective is the only one directly available to me, it is the case that the imperialistic drive (discovery and conquest) that initiated the Planetary Era, as well as the scientific, industrial, and political revolutions that shaped the modern global landscape, all arose in the West. Hence the justification for an occidental focus in this treatment of the birth and transformation of the Planetary Era.

If I were to imagine a considerably expanded version of this book, I would include excursions on the vital contributions of the East—of China during the Enlightenment, for instance, of India and China during the Sixties Counterculture. And there would be much to say of the glories of Muslim culture during the Middle Ages and its critical role in mediating the development of the Western mind. My main purpose, however, has not been to provide an all-inclusive, planet-wide history of ideas, but instead to trace the evolution of the dominant Western worldview along with a particular stream of countercultural perspectives out of which it arose and with which, in fact, it has continued to be complexly related.

I propose that we can see the relation of the dominant to this countercultural stream of the Western worldview as an expression of a deep, dialectical/dialogical and evolutionary pattern. This pattern can be described as a spiral embedded in an arc, or more precisely, a series of ever smaller arcs. The spiral reproduces the triphasic pulse of the arc (beginning, zenith, end), with each iteration happening in a shorter time span: a tightening spiral. The largest arc corresponds to the movement from the Alpha of human origins to an Omega that promises the possible stabilization of a truly planetary culture.

* The terms dialectical and dialogical are elaborated on in chapter 2.
The next shorter arc shares the same end but begins with the historical period. The third arc, always with the same end, begins with the Axial Period. First proposed by the philosopher Karl Jaspers, the Axial Period, in its principal phase, ranges from 800 to 200 B.C.E. In a manner resonant with the mysterious origin itself, this period saw the roughly simultaneous emergence of almost all of the world’s great traditions of deep and abiding wisdom, including the first Greek philosophers (from Thales and Pythagoras to Plato and Aristotle), the Buddha, Mahavira, the writing of the Bhagavad Gita, Zoroaster, Confucius and Lao Tsu, and the great Jewish prophets (from Isaiah to Ezekiel).

It is with a particular tracing of this third arc—one more or less coextensive with what Jung calls the Christian Aion (also the astrological age of Pisces)—that the bulk of the following pages is concerned. It begins during the last flowering of the Axial Period in the Middle East, which is to say between East and West, as also between North and South, with the origins of what will become the chrysalis (to use Toynbee’s expression) of the dominant Western worldview until late modern times. Again, given the catalytic role of the West in the birth of the Planetary Era, I beg the reader’s indulgence for perhaps seeming to privilege the largely Christian West over other cultural complexes. While I maintain the hermeneutical appropriateness of my focus (which only my extended argument can hope to bear

* For a more recent substantial treatment of the idea of Axial Age, see Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions.*
out), it should be obvious that I am in no way arguing for the cultural or spiritual superiority of the West.*

In fact, it is a special virtue of the dialectical quality of the pattern in question (the movement from a simple identity, through a differentiation, to a more complex identity) that it not only allows for, but actively encourages, an internal critique of the symbolic forms through which the pattern is enacted. These forms cut across the main lines of cultural expression, including religious doctrines, scientific theories, and political ideologies. My appeal later in these pages to Blake’s notion of the Bible as the “Great Code” (the most relevant incarnation of the fundamental pattern for our purposes) therefore follows the visionary poet’s example of underlining the critical distinction between the living core of the religious symbols and their dogmatically codified, and often co-opted, counterparts. The same holds for the analogous distinction between the nobly Promethean aspirations of modernity—notably, the ideal of freedom—and its shameful history of exploitation.

Both the diminishing span of the arcs and the tightening spiral point to the acceleration of the time sense that is so familiar and often disquieting to us as we age. This sense of acceleration, however, has become epidemic in Western, and increasingly global, culture at large. Does this mean that the culture is growing old and nearing its end? Many believe so, and even wish it to be so, given how unsustainable it has become. As we shall see in the later part of this book, there are compelling reasons to accept that we are indeed already upon the threshold that marks the end of the overlapping but increasingly shorter trajectories leading to our present moment: the historical period as a whole (5,000 years),† the period coinciding with the rise

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* Writing from within what he calls the Christian sapiential tradition, Bruno Barnhart has worked out his own three-phase arch of the evolution of Western culture, which dovetails nicely with my proposal (see Barnhart, 2007, 102f.).

† By the end of the historical period, I am obviously not claiming that time is coming to an end, or that significant events will cease to transpire, or that histories will
of the West (1,000 years), modernity (500 years), the age of unchecked industrial growth (200 years).

Because they all involve a movement toward a zenith followed by a decline, these trajectories or arcs suggest the analogy of the apparent course of the Sun, which in many cultures has symbolized the mythic voyage of the hero. We shall consider this voyage in the first chapter. For the moment I would point out that the set of nested arcs (excluding the largest arc, from Origin to Goal) describes not the overall rise and fall of the solar principle as such, but more precisely this principle as it has manifested in association with the dominance of patriarchy throughout the historical period. During this period, the masculine principle has been traditionally associated with such qualities as competitive striving, independence or separativeness, dominance, and in later periods with a certain inflection of consciousness and rationality that stresses certainty, closure, and rigidly hierarchical thinking. If not necessarily expressive of masculinity as such, these qualities are widely recognized as typical of the masculine within patriarchal culture.

Can we then expect a rise or return of the “feminine”—that is, a greater emphasis on such qualities as cooperation, relatedness, and...
more embedded, holistic, fluid, and lateral thinking—on the other side of the threshold? Given the extremity of our current situation, we can only hope that this will be the case. We can at least say this much about the path(s) covered thus far: with the initiation of each new arc, and with each new turn of the spiral over the last two millennia, the countercultural impulse leading to the birth of a new phase of consciousness and culture (the origins of Christianity during the late flowering of the Axial Age, the birth of the modern, the Romantic–Idealist movement, the Sixties Counterculture, to name the four most well-known turns) drew from or emphasized such typically feminine qualities as cosmic or organic embeddedness, universal sympathy, and symbolic or analogical thinking. Though the dominant cultural context has been and remains solar–patriarchal, the periodic resurgence of countercultural impulses can be seen to have aimed at an as yet unconsummated coniunctio or marriage of the masculine and (both repressed and oppressed) feminine principles. The evolution of the Western mind, as Tarnas has noted,

can be seen has having been marked at every stage by a complex interplay of the masculine and feminine, with significant partial reunions with the feminine having occurred in coincidence with the great watersheds of Western culture from the birth of Greek civilization onward. Each synthesis and birth has constituted a stage in the larger overarching dialectic between the masculine and feminine that I believe comprehends the history of the Western mind as a whole.5

Less sophisticated versions of this view of the masculine/feminine dialectic are now quite widespread in spiritually inflected varieties of alternative culture. One of the major conduits of the view is Jungian psychology, to core insights of which I shall have occasion to appeal throughout these pages. This view has a much older pedigree, however, stretching through the Romantics back to medieval mysticism (with Julian of Norwich, for example, who evoked God as both
Father and Mother) and the esoteric traditions (especially alchemy, with its vision of the androgyne as symbol of the philosopher’s stone).∗

If it is the case that, however unwittingly, the rise of the (solar-masculine) West initiated the Planetary Era, the survival, not only of a planetary humanity, but of the majority of the world’s species now depends upon the full consummation of this (both longed-for and long-resisted) marriage.

The biblical mythos that has so deeply informed Western culture features not only the symbol of the sacred marriage (notably in both the Song of Songs and Revelation), but also that of the path or journey, which, after the Fall, is figured as a journey back home. This home is not the lost Garden, but the “New Heaven and New Earth” whose margins, as we have glimpsed them, have always receded as we move. “Wo gehen wir denn hin?” asks Novalis. “Immer nach Hause.” (“Where then are we heading?” “Ever homeward.”)†

∗ In keeping with the alchemical vision of the coniunctio, Tarnas has more recently come to see this dialectic as intimately interwoven with that of another pair of archetypal principles—the solar and lunar—that, though overlapping in some respects with the masculine and feminine, remain nevertheless distinct. “I now consider the masculine-feminine dialectic,” he writes, “as complexly intertwined with the solar–lunar dialectic, so that the solar masculine in patriarchy can be seen to have elevated itself at the expense of the lunar feminine (the caring mother and supportive wife), the solar feminine (the independent and assertive woman), and the lunar masculine (the relational, sensitive, sensuous, intuitive man).” Instead of the masculine and feminine, “the solar–lunar is the underlying dynamic at work in the hero’s journey and the evolution of consciousness” (Richard Tarnas, personal communication. 12/2008).

† These lines are from the unfinished Heinrich von Ofterdingen. In his notes for the continuation, Novalis writes: “It is at the end the primal world, the golden age./ Men, beasts, plants, stones and stars, flames, tones, colors must at the end act and speak together as a single family or society, as a single race.” (ibid., 252.) The receding margins from the preceding sentence is an echo of Tennyson’s “Ulysses”: “I am part of all that I have met; /Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough /Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades / For ever and for ever when I move.”