

Teilhard de Chardin: Evolutionary Mystic

Dinshaw Dadachanji
July 1976



Everywhere on earth, at this moment, within the new spiritual atmosphere created by the appearance of the idea of evolution, there float -- in a state of extreme mutual sensitivity -- the two essential components of the Ultra-human, love of God and faith in the world. Everywhere these two components are 'in the air': generally, however, they are not strong enough, both at the same time, to combine with one another in one and the same subject. In me, by pure chance (temperament, education, environment) the proportion of each happens to be favourable, and they fuse together spontaneously. The fusion of the two is still not strong enough to spread explosively, but even so it is enough to show that such an explosion is possible and that, sooner or later the chain-reaction will get under way. It is one more proof that if the truth appears once, in one single mind, that is enough to ensure that nothing can ever prevent it from spreading to everything and setting it ablaze. ('Le Christique', March 1955)

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, that Frenchman of international repute who lived between 1881 and 1955, was the unique combination of Jesuit scholastic, priest, and paleontologist, who took his vocations seriously enough to synthesize science with religion, thought with experience, thereby producing a unique philosophy which he called "hyperphysics," since it went beyond traditional views of both science and metaphysics. The originality of his ideas no doubt distressed the authorities of his parent church, but there was no denying his earnestness in being loyal to the Christ he loved; and his strong faith in God only drew out his humility when he proposed his theology as being a suggestion rather than dogmatic truth.

Modern man, in becoming more and more reliant on secular science and on his earthly vocation, has been moving away from the religion of revelation. Thus, the importance of the Teilhardian system is that it seeks to resolve the apparent conflicts between the traditional God of revelation and the "new" God of evolution.

The God of Evolution

The most fundamental thread that weaves together the whole philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin is the thread of the theory of evolution in nature. In considering the evolution of the universe as a whole, he saw it to be a single creative process, composed of a sequence of phases: inorganic, organic, and human. Thus, in discerning the apparent historical progression he concluded that the process of evolution takes place along an axis pointing not only forwards but also upwards.

The recorded history of mankind shows a definite development of spiritual consciousness in man. Teilhard made the bold step of coupling this with the prophecy that the evolutionary future of man lies "in association with all other men," transforming mankind into a new unit -- "an organic super aggregation of souls." In this manner, he proposed the model of a cone-shaped evolutionary process, in which the lines of progress are seen to converge at a central point -- the apex of the cone, which he called the "Omega" point, "a cosmic spiritual center, a supreme pole of consciousness, upon which all the separate consciousnesses of the world may converge...." The term "Omega" was biblically inspired (Rev. 22: 13), and Teilhard identified the Omega of evolution with Christ himself: he used the term "Christogenesis" to describe the process of unification of all mankind with God.

Consequently, Teilhard viewed the process of creation as an ongoing development -- a "creative transformation" -- with the Creator being intimately involved in this work. At this point, he drew a distinction from Scholasticism which separates the processes of creation and transformation. But his trend of logic led him into proposing even more sensitive theology.

Thus, although he did recognize God's omnipotence and self sufficiency, he challenged the theological view of *potentia absoluta divina* (the absolute power of God), and said that in a sense God is restricted to the employment of natural laws when He operates in the universe.

Then again, given the premise that the work of God is expressed through the work of nature, he concluded that we can understand God only through purity of heart, and not by pure science. But in disagreeing with those who believe that God would act in unnatural, unscientific ways, he found himself weak in his ability to defend the performance of miracles: he proposed that miracles may occur through the operation of "vital forces" which have been "remarkably augmented in their own direction."

Perhaps the strongest feature in Teilhard's evolutionary theology is the fact that he synthesized his Christian philosophical views with contemporaneous scientific theories, and created a coherent *Weltanschauung* (view of the world) in which all beings cooperate and participate.

The God of Love

"The most telling and profound way of describing the evolution of the universe would undoubtedly be to trace the evolution of love." Thus, Teilhard saw love as a basic agent of all evolution, animate as well as inanimate -- a force which drives the "fragments of the world" to "seek each other," by which the world may come into being -- a force which alone is capable of uniting.

On these grounds Teilhard presented a strong case that God is a personal God of Love. He pointed out that if the unification of humanity can come about through love alone, then the very focal point (Omega point) which draws human beings together must necessarily be the center of love. On the other hand, "if the peak of human evolution is regarded as impersonal by nature, the units accepting it will inevitably, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, see their personality diminishing under its influence."

In seeing love as a higher form of human energy, Teilhard believed that love too is in the process of evolving, so that the ultimate union of man with God would be a union of love. In the case of love between husband and wife, he recognized that the absence of God from such a relationship would only result in a "joint egoism": "Love is a three-term function: man, woman, and God. Its whole perfection and success are bound up with the harmonious balance of these three elements." Then again, he took a strong stand against premature sexual relationships, pointing out that the transformation of love would actually lead to a greater awareness of the "personal divine center," evolving into chastity.

Having considered love between two individuals, the next higher level of love relationships is universal love, and Teilhard believes that it is not only psychologically possible, but "it is the only complete and final way in which we are able to love." His broad vision enabled him to conceive of the impelling power generated through the ultimate unification of all things with God, and he argued that if the love between two units (e.g., two people) has enough power to melt our many perceptions and emotions into one impression, "how great must be the vibration drawn from our beings by their encounter with Omega?" More than that, the warning to us today is: love or perish!

Having said that, it should quickly be pointed out that Teilhard's concept of union with God should not be mistaken for pantheistic theology. Being aware that such a misunderstanding could easily arise, he was at pains to distinguish between pantheism, which implies union resulting in fusion and loss of individual consciousness -- and his Christian mysticism, in which love brings about a true synthesis with "not only the virtue of uniting without depersonalizing, but in uniting it ultra-personalizes." In other words, a union of love with God results in the sharpening of our individualities, instead of diffusing them.

Man and God

As mentioned above, the most fundamental relationship that man has to develop with God was understood by Teilhard to be one of uniting oneself with God and uniting oneself with other beings in God. Thus, his new formulation of Jesus' commandment became: "Thou shalt love God in and through the genesis of the universe and of mankind." He understood that communion with God led to an internal transformation of the human being to whom God became "transparent" in the universe.

For Teilhard, communication with God came through both prayer and performance of one's daily duties. Teilhard himself was a man of intense prayer and meditation, and in recognizing God in everything and everywhere, he found joy in dedicating his external physical labors also to God, and he repeatedly stressed man's responsibility to work for God.

In deepening man's relationship with God, Teilhard advocated the three key virtues of purity, faith, and fidelity. By purity he indicated that he meant not mere abstention from wrongdoing, but actively recognizing God in all things and contributing towards ultimate union with Him. Then again, the faith he advocated was not mere intellectual adherence to Christian dogma, but intense belief and complete trust

in God. By fidelity he meant the active effort of making God part of one's daily work: "Through fidelity alone can we return to God the kiss He is forever offering us across the world."

Teilhard also recognized the uniqueness of each individual, so that he indicated God's relationship with us as a multi-dimensional one -- different relationships with different people; there are many "mansions" in God's heart, as indicated by Jesus. Thus, even interpersonal relationships when centered on God give rise to "as many partial divine milieu as there are Christian souls."

A theology which sees God's handiwork so inseparably connected with the evolutionary development of nature also implies the inseparable grace of God: "the sanctifying grace which the Catholic faith causes to circulate everywhere as the true sap of the world." He likened it to that charity which will one day be "the only stable principle of natures and powers." He also indicated his belief that perception of the "divine omnipresence" could only be attained as a gift from God, and not through a process of human reasoning or through human artifices.

Teilhard had no small reverence for the sacraments, which he felt give us not only communion with God but also take us towards union with Him. In disagreeing with St. Thomas Aquinas and others who think of grace as a quality (an "accident"), he went two steps further by saying that grace is even more intimate to ourselves than is our humanity, and that baptism in "cosmic matter and the sacramental water" makes us more Christ than human!

Christology

As a Catholic priest, Teilhard was naturally committed to the view of God as a Triune Being, and he pointed out that it was only through the view of God as a Trinity that we can think of Him as both subsisting in Himself, without the reaction of some surrounding world, and also creating the world and becoming incarnate in it. He did not expound on the theology of the Holy Spirit, but elaborated much on his novel concept of Christ.

Teilhard often emphasized the attributes of Christ that St. Paul saw in him: "qui replet omnia, in quo omnia constant" -- he who fills all things and in whom all things are held together. By this he concluded that the divine omnipresence corresponds to the total Christ, and the "Omega" point of evolution must be identical with Christ himself. He did not think of Christ as an intermediary separating us from God, but as a medium uniting us with God.

He believed that the action of Christ sanctifies matter, or "christifies" it, thereby constructing a "New Earth," but at the same time he emphasized that "the incarnate God did not come to diminish in us the glorious responsibility and splendid ambition that is ours: of fashioning our own self."

The process philosophy of Teilhard has been compared with that of Whitehead, but Christology is the place where their systems differ. Instead, Teilhard's Christology seems to share much in common with that of the medieval theologian, Duns Scotus (whose philosophy is called "Scotism"). While Scotus starts with God and then seeks the divine intention in decreeing the Incarnation, Teilhard sees the value of the world and then relates it to the Incarnate Word; while Scotus emphasized the pre-existence of Christ relative to all future creation, Teilhard emphasized eschatology, in which earthly history is consummated by Christ.

The evolutionary cone which is so fundamental to Teilhard's theology predicts that Christ will certainly return, and he emphasized that we must have hope in the Parousia, and we must continue to work in the meantime. He also indicated that the Kingdom of God is formed within us, so that when Christ "appears in the clouds," he will only be manifesting a transformation in the heart of mankind. "The history of the Kingdom of God is, directly, one of a reunion. "

The Fall and Redemption

Teilhard was certainly aware of the sin, evil, and imperfections in man. Yet, his great love for mankind made it difficult for him to imagine that God could condemn people to hell: "You have told me, O God, to believe in hell. But you have forbidden me to hold with absolute certainty that any single man has been damned.... I shall accept the existence of hell on your word.... "

He agreed with the spirit of the Bible (and the Church) that the whole world was corrupted by the "Fall of Man," but he found it impossible to believe that sin originated with one specific human couple, because it affected the whole universe. For Teilhard, the name "first Adam" disguises a universal and unbreakable law of reversion or perversion -- the price that has to be paid for progress. Thus, he thought of sin as inevitable in the process of growth, and that it is a "fantasy" to believe that God can create a world without sorrows, faults, and dangers.

Nevertheless, he admitted belief that Christ (the second Adam) was and is only one unique being. In

regarding all the elements of the universe as being organically interconnected, he saw it possible for one person, Christ, to be so elevated above them as to be able to affect them all. Yet he frankly confessed his inability to explain how the coming of Christ at a single juncture in the history of this earth can be reconciled with life on other planets and redemption for all.

The radically temporalistic approach that Teilhard takes in his philosophy allowed him to view Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption as constituting one single "mystery," whereas traditional theologies could separate the three events. By becoming incarnate, God shared in the sufferings and evils "inherent" in the world. Thus, Creation, Incarnation, and Redemption could be seen to be aspects of God's intimate involvement in the world.

Evaluation of the System

The system of Teilhard is a unique integration of the contemporaneous understanding of the evolutionary process with the traditional Christian belief that Christ was before all things, and that all things are consummated through and in him. In weaving scientific theories into his mystical insights of God and man, he inevitably aroused both positive and negative feelings of many scientists and theologians, who have critically evaluated and modified his system.

To be able to show that natural processes are moving in a definite direction, reaching their fulfillment in intimate heartistic relationship with Christ -- that is a noteworthy achievement, indeed! In doing so, he not only argued powerfully for the existence of God, but he also established that God is a personal God, who loves His creation and who is intimately involved in the process of evolution. The main weakness in his system, though, is that he went along with the scientific dogma of his day in coming to the conclusion that the history of the world has corresponded to a uniform evolutionary process as though it were an indisputable fact.

There is no doubt that the theory of evolution is based on objectively proved facts, but the theory itself cannot be said to be an absolute fact, as pointed out even by Dobzhansky, the renowned geneticist and advocate of the evolutionary theory. Thus, while it does appear certain that selective modifications have led to evolutionary-type changes within the same biological species, a serious objection to the theory of biological evolution lies in its failure to satisfactorily explain the breaks in the uniformity of change in crossing interspecies barriers. For instance, while it appears that man himself is "evolving" in the sense of making spiritual and material progress, that apes have undergone changes in their own right, and that man resembles the apes in physical and instinctive traits, it does not necessarily follow that man has evolved from the apes, particularly since the dramatic differences between these species remain a mystery in the world of scientific discovery.

Being a mystic did not prevent Teilhard from being a man of the world. He combined the world of faith with the world of science, exemplified by his own life, so that his philosophical system testified that the salvation of man by God is taking place via natural energies, rather than by mysterious involvement of supernatural forces which rationalists find so hard to accept. While he connected man's free will with the purpose of life, eschatology, and ultimate union with God, yet his rationalizing mind failed to find appropriate mechanisms which could explain miracles and spiritual phenomena except by placing them within the physical realities already known to man.

A psychological advantage to Teilhard's philosophy is that it is a very optimistic one, encouraging man to make his contribution to life. But he relied too heavily on a few quotes of St. Paul about the all-encompassing nature of Christ, which lent biblical support to his theory, at the expense of other quotes which are not so reconcilable. His optimism and his rationalistic tendencies led him to view moral wrongdoing as a simple extension of physical defects and mistakes, rather than as a rupture between man and God, which goes against God's plan. Thus, when his cone-shaped evolutionary model failed to accommodate the traditional Christian view of sin (including original sin), he redefined the concept of sin such that it would fit his model! This constitutes a most serious flaw in Teilhard's philosophy, because it seems to make God the author of sin, while ignoring the existence of evil spiritual forces that traditional theology speaks of.

But despite the flaws in his system, it certainly provides a novel orientation for further philosophizing on the problem of interrelating science and religion. To use his words, "the greater truth always prevails and the greater good emerges in the end."