

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Science and Mysticism in Teilhard de Chardin

R. F. ALDWINCKLE

ALMOST EVERYONE has heard by now of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and since his death in 1955, with the words "I go to meet him who comes," an increasing number continue to read his posthumously published works, with appreciation or irritation according to their several points of view. The English translation of *The Phenomenon of Man*, with an enthusiastic foreword by Sir Julian Huxley, and the Fontana edition of *Le Milieu Divin* have introduced him to a growing and appreciative circle of readers. A Frenchman, born in Auvergne in 1881, a Catholic and a Jesuit, and a palaeontologist of distinction, he presents a somewhat baffling combination of personal qualities and interests which make any true assessment extremely difficult. This is evidenced by the sharply contrasting reactions of different people to his work. Julian Huxley's preface is not to be taken as an endorsement of de Chardin's Catholic theology but it is a remarkable tribute to him as a man and a scientist. From Canon Raven's *Teilhard de Chardin, Scientist and Seer*, published in 1962, it is evident that he regarded de Chardin's work as a most important contribution to that synthesis of scientific thought and religious faith for which modern man desperately yearns. The fascination—and the scandal—of Teilhard's life and work, according to Raven, consists in the fact that he succeeded in living in the worlds of both science and faith without a trace of schizophrenia and with complete integrity. On the other hand, Professor Medawar, speaking as a scientist, declares of his work: "The greater part of it is nonsense, tricked out by a variety of tedious metaphysical conceits, in the tradition of *Naturphilosophie*, a philosophical indoor pastime of German origin—tipsy euphoric prose poetry which is one of the more tiresome manifestations of the French spirit."¹ Clearly a balanced judgment is not going to be easy.

There is no space in this article for an account of Teilhard's intellectual and spiritual development, or of his interests as a palaeontologist, which took him to the most remote spots of the earth's surface. In any case, this task has been done for us with meticulous care by Claude Cuénot, the son of Teilhard's palaeontological friend Lucien Cuénot.² In his book there will be found an account of Teilhard's share in the discovery of the early fos-

1. P. B. Medawar, in Neville Braybrooke (ed.), *Teilhard de Chardin: Pilgrim of the Future* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964), p. 123.

2. Claude Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin: A Biographical Study* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965).

silized man known as Sinanthropus, and of his many travels in Egypt, the Middle East, and China. Teilhard's own *Letters from a Traveller* gives a graphic account of his journeys and reveals in a striking way how his scientific and mystical interests developed *pari passu*.³ It is well known that the Roman Church gave him no encouragement during his lifetime to publish his writings. His relationships with his own Jesuit order were obviously strained. At no point, however, does Teilhard ever seem to have considered leaving his order, or still more, the possibility of abandoning his Catholicism. He is a rare combination of humble obedience, dictated by fundamental religious loyalty, and intellectual and spiritual independence of mind in pursuing what seemed to him the imperative claims of truth.

Whether de Chardin's thought should be called mystical will obviously depend on what is meant by the term, and recent studies by men such as Stace, Zaehner, and Ninian Smart show how difficult it is to arrive at a satisfactory definition. However, the present writer is inclined to share the judgment of Professor D. M. Mackinnon that "the future may well see the great achievement of Teilhard to lie (his technical articles apart) in the field of spirituality"⁴—not that we have the right to dismiss his *Naturphilosophie* with contempt. Anyone with an English background cannot fail to see important similarities and points of contact with the attempt on the part of such men as Samuel Alexander, A. N. Whitehead, Lloyd Morgan, F. R. Tennant, Canon Raven and the late William Temple (in his *Nature, Man and God*) to present a philosophical interpretation of the total natural process. Although the recent dominance of philosophical analysis and the preoccupation with language have tended to make such attempts look silly in the eyes of some men, the pendulum may well swing back some day and perhaps has already begun to do so. When this occurs, the problems that concerned these men, and also Teilhard, will once again come to occupy the centre of attention.

By virtue of his anchorage in the Catholic tradition and in the Christian understanding of the created physical order as good because the handiwork of God, Teilhard appears to have had from his earliest days not only a positive attitude to matter but a mystical sense of his kinship and unity with the physical world as such. Even as a boy, he tells us how the solidity and hardness and incorruptibility of a piece of iron deeply impressed him with its everlastingness, and how bitterly he shed tears when he discovered that it could rust and was subject to change and decay.⁵ However, this love of rocks, stones, and minerals, acquired in his beloved Auvergne, remained and developed into his intense sense of affinity with the material world. This was to be deepened and reinforced in later years by his meditation upon the eucharistic miracle in which Christ becomes united and identified

3. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveller* (London: Collins, 1962).

4. D. M. Mackinnon, "Teilhard's Achievement," in Neville Braybrooke (ed.), *Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 60.

5. Cf. Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin*, p. 3.

with the substance of the bread and wine. The miracle of the Mass, however, becomes the pointer to the role of the cosmic Christ in uniting in himself, and at the same time fulfilling, the fundamental tendencies at work in the physical universe. As early as 1917, Teilhard had written in *Le Prêtre*: "When Christ, extending the process of his incarnation, descends into the bread in order to replace it, his action is not limited to the material morsel which his presence will, for a brief moment, volatilize: this transubstantiation is aureoled with a real though attenuated divinizing of the entire universe."⁶ This attitude is given powerful expression in his mystical vision of the universe transformed in Christ in his "Christ in Matter," and in "The Mass on the World," prompted by an experience in the Ordos desert on a scientific expedition where it was impossible for him to offer Mass. "I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world."⁷ It is surely evident that apart from this experience Teilhard would never have been able to develop his later view of the Omega point—the point of convergence of all the forces of the universe, when they will find their goal and fulfilment in the cosmic Christ who is both the origin and goal of the process. Protestant readers, who may have serious reservations about the role of the doctrine of transubstantiation in this experience, may perhaps be reminded of a not dissimilar idea in William Temple's sacramental universe—an idea that is not dependent upon such a precise doctrine of the Eucharist but which nevertheless sees the final unity of all things in Christ. Whatever our exact views on the Eucharist may be, there is little doubt that such ideas of cosmic fulfilment are also to be found in the Apostle Paul. No doubt some readers, for whom such experiences are strange and alien, especially if they stand outside the Christian tradition, will already have become uneasy and prepared for the worst. The mixing of this kind of mystical spirituality with metaphysical speculations about the universe must end in a curious hybrid which, though clothed in scientific language or new-fangled terminology, can have little in common with sober science or sane religion. Before we jump to this conclusion, however, we owe it to this remarkable man to study his claim that his interpretation of nature springs inevitably from the scientific evidence itself. Teilhard was not so naïve as to think that one could jump from anthropology straight to his vision of a world consummated in Christ, apart from any properly religious experience of what it means to be in Christ as a member of the body of Christ. Yet he did believe that the scientific facts cried aloud for an explanation which only such a vision could give.

Some critics have hinted that Teilhard was not an exact scientist in the proper sense, and that palaeontology by its very nature must lack the precision and exactness of true science. This, however, is a double-edged weapon for the critic to use, since such sceptical doubts about the "science" of the past, if carried through, cannot fail to call in question the whole scientific

6. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe* (London: Collins, 1965), p. 14.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

picture of man's evolution; few scientists would wish to go this far. If such criticisms are intended as a slur upon Teilhard's competence in his chosen field of science, then Cuénot's biography offers conclusive and overwhelming evidence to the contrary. There is no reasonable doubt, among those competent to judge, of Teilhard's ability and standing in the world of science. There is obviously room for sincere difference of opinion in matters of interpretation, but to impugn his scientific competence is another matter.

In his early years, Teilhard does not seem to have been deeply concerned with the problem of reconciling evolution and Christian faith. His French and Catholic background had acquainted him with "le transformisme" as a possible explanation of the biological process, but not necessarily with its established truth. In due course, however, he became firmly convinced of the fact of evolution, i.e. of the emergence of man as the result of a long process of complexification, ranging all the way from the molecular structure of the inorganic to the threshold of consciousness and the final "hominization" of the individual. Protestants often speak as if the theory of evolution had already been integrated successfully into their theology, and as if it remained for Catholics to catch up. This is obviously an oversimplification. There are increasing signs in all denominations that the tension between science and religion was not simply a storm in a Victorian teacup, and that fundamental questions of interpretation will arise again in the near future. Protestant conservatives have always been suspicious of any form of evolutionary doctrine, but those who have adopted it have tended to shy away from problems concerning origins and ends, sin and the fall, and to evade them by taking refuge in interpretations of the fall as the "fall" of Everyman rather than as an event in the past. As to the future of the human race on earth, or whether it has a future worth considering in the light of God's purpose, this issue too has been evaded by uncritical but vague ideas of progress or, by reaction, by an excessive preoccupation with eschatological realities, which seems to make significant historical progress on earth either unnecessary or meaningless. Teilhard's concern, therefore, is neither irrelevant to, nor remote from, the problems with which both Christians and non-Christians will increasingly have to grapple.

It is in *The Phenomenon of Man* that he attempts to depict the world process as scientific study reveals it, and to ask questions about its interpretation. Can one even make scientific sense of the process on the assumption that it is completely fortuitous and unguided, a fluke or the result of the chance interplay of purely material forces or energies? Teilhard questions the legitimacy of this view on the basis of the scientific account itself. It is a scientific fact that *consciousness* has emerged out of a process that seems at first sight purely physical. Yet once we concede this, we must also concede that there is a "within" of evolution and that when, with the appearance of man, we pass the threshold of reflection, however unexplained and mysterious this transition appears to be, a new dimension of existence has been reached. Furthermore, this event is the clue to the whole process,

which now is seen to be a cosmogenesis, a biogenesis, a noogenesis. The total forces at work converge upon the appearance of the human race, which is not only biologically one, but is now at an ever more rapid pace becoming planetized and developing a common mind and consciousness (the noosphere).⁸ According to Teilhard, the question whether the human race has progressed biologically since our remote ancestors is often asked in the wrong terms. Finding no evidence for acquired characteristics transmitted through physical heredity through the modification of genes and chromosomes, scientists have ignored the revolutionary consequences of social heredity. Man has not developed new physical organs since remote times, but consciousness, reflection, education, and its social transmission have in fact resulted in science, a product of such consciousness and reflection, and science has in our time produced a planetized and technologically united race. In spite of political, national, racial, and even religious divisions, such unification is proceeding apace and is being forced upon us whether we like it or not. Teilhard refuses to admit that this can possibly be the result of chance. All the forces that science studies converge on this point and, therefore, it must represent a fundamental tendency in the nature of things.

If the technological unification of the race through applied science seems inevitable, we are obliged to ask what type of unity constitutes the goal of the evolutionary process. The alternatives ahead of the race seem limited. Unification could end in uniform communities based on instinct, analogous to those achieved in the insect world by ants, bees, etc. On the other hand, there might result a totalitarianism of a political kind, which would use scientific power to enforce a unity of tyranny. Teilhard has the courage to see in modern Fascism and authoritarian Communism a true insight into the necessity of transcending an atomistic individualism, contrary as that is to the basic tendency of evolution.⁹ Yet he also sees with crystal clearness that there is another option if the human race will take it. It is possible to foresee a kind of socialization that is neither conformity through instinct nor collectivism by force but true community of persons in love. This would render possible a collective consciousness on the level of intellectual and spiritual unity, while preserving true individuality and personal freedom. Is this hope a mere utopian dream or have we reason to think that all the converging forces of nature and evolution point in this direction? It is at this point that Teilhard introduces the idea of the Omega point—the end or goal that both sums up and gives meaning to the whole process.

In *The Phenomenon of Man* he is concerned chiefly with the scientific aspect of the matter. He contends that a science, dominated by materialistic and positivistic assumptions, tends to depersonalize all that it touches and transforms the personal into the impersonal. But why should the evolutionary process have produced persons at all if it intends to destroy them

8. Named from the Greek *nous* = mind.

9. Cf. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man* (London: Collins, 1964), ch. XIV, "Turmoil or Genesis?"

or reduce them again to the level of the impersonal? "It is a mistake to look for the extension of our being or of the noosphere in the Impersonal. The Future-Universal could not be anything else but the Hyper-personal at Omega point."¹⁰ By "Hyper-personal" he means a collective racial unity, established by love among persons, and not achieved through their destruction or repression. Such a unity cannot be attained simply by a common striving after scientific and cultural ends. To achieve this goal the energy of love must be released. Here his deep Christian faith supplies Teilhard with the clue. The unity of *agape*-love which Christians even now enjoy in the body of Christ is a foreshadowing of that unity of the whole race for which the age-long evolutionary process has been travailing. Here Teilhard's mystical vision of the cosmic Christ becomes decisive. St. Paul's "God shall be all in all" is the charter for our hope. In Christ all things hold together (Colossians) and the evolutionary process must be summed up in him. When Teilhard died, he left a note that included these words: cosmos-cosmogensis-Biogensis-Noogensis-Christo-gensis-the still-to-come.

What shall we say to these things? Have we not left behind long ago the sober realm of science and have we not been transported into a mystical empyrean, the product of an overexcited imagination? Not so, according to Teilhard. He believed that he had the clue which would give an intelligible account of all that science had so far revealed, and which would at the same time inspire men to toil and labour for the glory still to be revealed. He was realistic enough to recognize that Christian love is incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it, and to many moderns is almost monstrous in its improbability. Yet he retains his robust faith that such love alone holds the key to the future. He raises the very real question as to whether the emergence of consciousness and man's knowledge of his impending death, no longer as an isolated awareness, but as a knowledge possessed by the collective consciousness of the whole race, will not cut the nerve of progress and hope. When the whole race has awakened to a fully sophisticated and critical awareness that death awaits not only the individual but the race, will men still have the faith to labour on? Will not the *taedium vitae* become so overwhelming as to induce a boredom and a hopelessness which will lead the race to seek escape from the very reflective consciousness that the evolutionary process was aiming to produce?¹¹ The only alternative to this prospect is the conviction that, when the goal of evolution is reached in a race unified in Christ, there will be a transition to a new order of reality. Here Teilhard offers a striking reinterpretation of the parousia in mystical terms. When mankind reaches its maturity in Christ, then may it not leave earth and stars to lapse back into primordial energy, while the whole race as the new man in Christ "will detach itself from this planet and join the one true, irreversible essence of things, the Omega point?"¹²

10. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper Torchbooks ed.; New York: Harper, 1961), p. 260.

11. Cf. de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, pp. 145ff.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 122f.

What shall we say to this vision, and how far can it commend itself as an effective synthesis of science and faith? As we have seen, Teilhard has exposed himself by the daring of his thought to attack from various quarters—from the scientist for extrapolating scientific principles into the metaphysical realm, from his own church for departing from traditional statements of Catholic doctrine, and from countless others who neither understand the profound questions the scientific view of the world raises nor sympathize with his mysticism.

Let us look first at the scientific reaction to his work. We have already mentioned Professor Medawar's somewhat condescending criticism. He is not alone among men of science in his reservations, though it would appear that those reservations concern not so much the accuracy of Teilhard's scientific picture as the implications he draws from it. Others overcome their embarrassment by dismissing the Teilhardian vision as not science at all. Professor Maynard Smith, for example, in a recent book, remarks that various theories of creative evolution from Bergson to Teilhard lead to no testable predictions. "As is made particularly clear in Shaw's preface to *Back to Methuselah* the intention has been, not to provide an informative scientific theory, but to formulate an evolutionary myth with moral uplift. They must therefore be judged as epic poems and not as science."¹³ On the other hand, Julian Huxley complains of the narrow logic of some biologists who claim that mind is generated simply by the complexification of certain types of organization—namely brain—whereas, says Sir Julian, "the brain alone is not responsible for mind, even though it is a necessary organ for its manifestation."¹⁴ He admits that Teilhard extrapolated backwards from the human phase and the emergence of personality to the biological, and thence to the inorganic. He also extrapolated to the future, and here Huxley for obvious reasons finds it difficult to follow him to his specifically Christian conclusions. Huxley concedes, however, that though Teilhard's vision involves extrapolation, it springs from "a massive array of fact and is disciplined by logic."¹⁵ Thus, while admitting speculation on the basis of spiritual vision as well as scientific fact, we seem justified in concluding that Teilhard was not simply speculating in an airy and irresponsible manner. Professor Maynard Smith would appear to be too harsh and unfair in suggesting that *The Phenomenon of Man* only shows what nonsense intelligent men, agnostic or Christian, can write when they confuse science and "poetry."¹⁶ Canon Raven, whose scientific knowledge and intelligence are surely not to be despised, takes Professor Medawar and other critics to task because they keep asking "Is this science?" rather than "Is this true?" They refuse to face, so he contends, the fundamental questions posed by a strictly scientific phenomenology of the emergence of man. Indeed, as Professor

13. J. Maynard Smith, "An Agnostic View of Evolution," in I. T. Ramsey (ed.), *Biology and Personality* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), p. 55.

14. Julian Huxley, in de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 16.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Cf. Maynard Smith, "An Agnostic View of Evolution," p. 64.

Macquarrie admits, Teilhard's starting-point was scientific and naturalistic.¹⁷ Teilhard knew that he was extrapolating, but he claimed to be doing so in a disciplined way on the basis of the scientific evidence itself. If his vision is completely false, then are we ready for the alternative—an evolutionary process that neither knows whence it came nor whither it goes? It is plainly inadequate to dismiss the whole Teilhardian vision as poetic myth and no more, unless poetry and myth are being given a very positive interpretation as affording genuine insights into the nature of reality.

But how does it stand with Teilhard and the Christian faith in which he was reared and to which he remained so devotedly loyal? Is he really preserving authentic Christianity in the context of a scientific world-view, or has he lost the gospel and Christian truth in the process? Is the Teilhardian vision really compatible with classical Christian theism and the transcendence of God or is he giving us a mystical pantheism which, whatever else it is, departs from the biblical idea of God and normative Christian doctrine? It seems clear from a careful reading of his works that Teilhard did not intend to be pantheistic in a sense alien to Christian theism. He insists that "the sojourner in the divine milieu is not a pantheist."¹⁸ He is defending, not an absorptionist mysticism, but the truth that "our God pushes to its furthest possible limit the differentiation among the creatures he concentrates within himself."¹⁹ There is no danger that the Christian who plunges into the Teilhardian kind of mysticism will wake up one day to find himself a monist. Furthermore, Teilhard insists that he never departs from the Jesus of the gospels, and that as long as this is the case, his mysticism of divine immanence and omnipresence will never degenerate into that vague pantheism which is destructive of the reality of persons and of the personal God of Christian faith and devotion.

If Teilhard is not to be accused of pantheism in the pejorative sense, the question still arises as to whether his vision of the future is consistent with what revelation has to say about the consummation of the divine purpose, the parousia of Christ, and the final rule of God. Claude Tresmontant points out that Teilhard is not attempting to derive from Scripture a scientific view of the world, but that he does want to say that "la création, dans son travail physique biologique, humain, prépare cette fin surnaturelle à laquelle la Révélation nous invite."²⁰ Teilhard's dissatisfaction with the catastrophic view of the parousia and end of the world springs from the fact that it seems to empty the long travail process of evolution of any real and positive significance. It also seems to deprive us of any future goal which can command the labours and devotion of men within history as we know it. The Kingdom becomes an escape from, rather than a genuine

17. Cf. John Macquarrie, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1963), p. 271.

18. P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, Fontana ed. (London: Collins, 1960), p. 116.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Claude Tresmontant, *Introduction à la pensée de Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1956), p. 85.

fulfilment of, the spatio-temporal process. Of course, one can hold with Bertrand Russell the view that life will be extinguished on this planet when physical conditions are no longer such as to sustain it. Teilhard asks whether such a view does not run counter to all that the convergent forces of evolution suggest. Since "L'évolution cosmique poursuit une œuvre de nature personnelle,"²¹ both science and faith would seem to demand a more positive and meaningful consummation than this. The declarations of Scripture that the world is constituted in and through the Word and the many references to the cosmic Christ deserve in his view to be taken seriously. What prevents us from anticipating a true and physical fulfilment of creation in Christ is, he maintains, the secret manicheism which forgets that "tout a été créé dans le Verbe" (John 1:3).²² Teilhard knows that this vision is the fruit of faith, but he also believes that the strictest scientific account of evolution points in this direction.

There is no space in this article to take up in detail the strictly metaphysical points that emerge from Teilhard's treatment of his theme. Tresmontant draws attention to fairly numerous passages from his writings in which he has difficulty with the classic doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and the radical contingency of the world. The implication of this doctrine, according to Teilhard, is that the world, ontologically speaking, is superfluous; if this is so, how can one speak of man co-operating with God in any significant way in the creative evolutionary process of which he is a part? Tresmontant sympathizes with his difficulty, but is inclined to think that he has fallen, albeit unwittingly, into a doctrine of emanation, according to which God realizes and fulfils himself in the process of creation. This takes us back to mythical, gnostic, and philosophical views of the world from which the biblical doctrine of creation had rescued us. Since Teilhard was not primarily a metaphysician, it is perhaps legitimate to accuse him of views that might lend themselves to an exaggerated doctrine of immanence, but there is little doubt in my opinion that his intention was to be theistic in the full biblical and theological sense.

Last but not least, how does Teilhard deal with the perennial problem of evil? He tells us that evil in all its forms—"injustice, inequality, suffering, and death—ceases theoretically to be outrageous from the moment when, Evolution becoming a Genesis, the immense travail of the world displays itself as the condition or price of an immense triumph."²³ Is this not like a theological justification of the doctrine that the end justifies the means? What of those who die before the Omega point and the Christogenesis? It seems clear that Teilhard is not compelled on his premises to reserve the joys of fulfilment only to those alive when the Omega point is reached. He envisages a transition at the end to the eternal realm and, as far as I can discover, there is nothing that compels him to deny to those who die

21. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

22. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 94.

23. de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, p. 90.

before the consummation a place in that eternal realm. "The extraordinary adventure of the world will have ended in the bosom of a tranquil ocean, of which, however, each drop will still be conscious of being itself. The dream of every mystic will have found its full and proper fulfilment. *Erit in omnibus omnia Deus.*"²⁴

In a period when both theology and philosophy have been preoccupied with the problem of transcendence, the significance of the immanent God finds eloquent expression once again in Teilhard. What he has to say must surely find a place in any balanced and adequate Christian theology which believes that the scientific account of man must be seen as integral to a proper understanding both of God and of man. "Men of little faith, why then do you fear or repudiate the progress of the world? . . . We must try everything for Christ: we must hope everything for Christ. *Nihil intentatum.*"²⁵

24. *Ibid.*, p. 308.

25. de Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin*, p. 154.