

# Ultra Physics: new key to the cosmos?

JAMES TOLHURST

As far back as Heraclitus, in the fifth century BC, there have been attempts to discover a unifying explanation for all existence on our planet. In July 1983 a new exhibition entitled 'A Synthesis of Spirituality, Theology and Physical Sciences' took place in the Chapter House of Westminster Abbey, paying tribute to the work of the French Jesuit, Marie-Joseph Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955).

De Chardin, who is known especially for his two books, *Le Milieu Divin* and *The Phenomenon of Man*, had an early grasp of the vital energy which he saw latent in the heart of the matter, spreading upwards in an increasing complexity to embrace man and the spiritual creation. He was to write in 1936: 'I should be happy to see you do what I am trying to do, that is, penetrate still further into spiritual and human questions by the use of methods of science, substituting for the metaphysics of which we are dying, an ultra-physics (the real *physikē* of the Greeks, I imagine), where matter and spirit would be embraced in one single, coherent and homogeneous explanation of the world.' Teilhard was no armchair theorist—he saw the horror of the trenches first hand, and spent much of his life engaged in archaeological digs around the world. His frustration at the closed system which excluded science from a religious synthesis has been shared by many innovators challenging the ramparts of institutional dogma. His fellow Jesuit, Jean Daniélou, was to say: 'If St Thomas [Aquinas] had had Husserl or Merleau-Ponty at hand, he would have extracted from their works all that he could have obtained in terms of their particular insights, and he would have known how to expand upon all that is fruitful in their thought, while eliminating erroneous elements.' The need was there, and Teilhard sought to answer it in *The Phenomenon of Man*.

It was obvious for most of the century that a realignment of religion, to take into account the vast scientific insights, would have to be put in hand. It would need to express the traditional understanding of matter in terms of atomic theory, instead of hylomorphism. But does one start from there and evolve a theory which reaches to the heavens themselves, even to God? It is a most attractive proposition, which Teilhard thought that he had solved in his principle of 'complexity consciousness'. In effect, he was to say that both life and spirit are manifestations of matter, which in the spiral upwards to God are transformed into spirit.

Unfortunately the theory has serious flaws, not the least of which is its unscientific basis. If one accepts the existence of a spiritual order, one would agree that it is essentially free and undetermined. Matter, however, is subject to strictly conditioned laws, which although they are of great complexity, as Crick and Watson demonstrated, nevertheless have fixed and determinable principles. Teilhard claims that just as water turns to steam at boiling-point, so matter is converted to spirit-energy as its complexity increases. But steam is not a different order from water—it obeys clearly defined rules, so the argument limps badly. If we start from the other angle and consider the fallen nature of mankind, Teilhard would maintain that this was a defect woven into the strain, which gradually works itself out as mankind becomes more spiritual. But this either means that mankind was from the beginning a flawed creation, and that contradiction was written into a good creation (the Manichaean position), or that we are only really dealing with imperfection during mankind's ascent to greater spirituality. Such a view can hardly commend itself to those who have survived the Nazi concentration camps, or those who are still paying the price of their lack of perfection in the outposts of the Gulag.

Teilhard will be remembered for his vision of matter which comes to grips with traditional philosophy and sets it in the context of the new physics. But the atomic theory which should be applied to our assessment of all matter does not pretend to explain the spiritual order, which of its nature eludes investigation from a purely physical standpoint. This does not mean that a synthesis cannot be achieved, but Teilhard, in his desire to unify the whole of creation, oversimplified the process. We can and should place mankind in the context of an evolutionary spiral which links him with the unfolding complexity of matter on this planet. Yet this is only one half of the equation, because we should also start from the spiritual order and work down towards man, so that we achieve a synthesis which harmonizes with all the facts and explains the controlled sequence in the whole of matter and the perfect balance that takes place in man himself at the summit of creation.

Nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, John Henry Newman argued in favour of a system which would 'attract to itself those who are willing to make a venture and force difficulties for the sake of something higher in prospect.' We have many of the basic ingredients and the investigative skills to perfect the synthesis, but we also need the sense of vision to develop the *ultra physics* that is essential to the equation.

**THE REVD DR JAMES TOLHURST** is the Theological Adviser for the permanent diaconate of the RC diocese of Southwark, London.