

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

A JESUIT EXPLORER

HIS LIFE AND SPIRIT

Historical Background

The latter part of the 19th century saw a scientific discovery that brought about a change of worldview so far not experienced in the history of ideas of Western civilization since the beginnings of Christianity. This was the discovery of biological evolution.

Already in the 16th and 17th century, the worldwide sea travels of European explorers had discovered so far unknown races, cultures and societies and these discoveries had suggested to many that traditional views on human nature had perhaps been too narrow.

And now, following upon these travels over the surface of the earth, a new kind of travel, travels in time, caused a new kind of discoveries to be made, even more surprising and disturbing. Geologists and paleontologists, by digging up fossils and studying them, made it clear that life's

history had been much longer and much older than had commonly been thought. Moreover, during that history, animals and plants were seen to have considerably changed. It is easy to understand that the shock caused by the discovery of life's evolution was even stronger than that which resulted from the explorers' discoveries of the centuries before.

In the eyes of many people of the late 19th century, the new vision of life born from the discovery of evolution appeared to conflict with the traditional Christian worldview. There were two main reasons for this. First, the nature of the three first chapters of Genesis, describing the creation of the world and of man, was still poorly understood. Now, if taken literally, the narrative of creation in Genesis obviously cannot be reconciled with what science has discovered. Few people

then understood that nothing in the Bible or in theology required these first chapters to be read literally.

Another reason why evolution was felt to be an attack on Christian faith was that, in the 19th century, scientists like Haeckel in Germany or philosophers like Spencer in England used the theory of evolution as an important support for their materialistic and atheistic view of the world and of man.

Thus for a long time and in the eyes of many people, the discovery of evolution appeared to show that, for science, man, far from being created by God, was merely the latest and highest point reached by primate evolution. Were we “Children of God” or “saru no shison”? A choice apparently had to be made.

Today of course, most Christians know better. They have learned to see in evolution the way God created the living world, including man. The present Pope John Paul II has even stated clearly that theology and the science of evolution should work together

in better understanding human nature and creation.

Among the many Christian scientists and theologians who made this reconciliation between theology and science possible, the French Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, was perhaps the most influential. Not only did he show by his example, as a scientist, how the study of evolution could help us to better understand how God created the world of life, but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a Jesuit familiar with Ignatian spirituality, he was able to End the visage and the hand of God present “in all things” and particularly in the history of Life.

These are the two points I shall first to make clear in the following pages. By way of conclusion I shall then examine in what ways the example of Teilhard may help an Christians to meet the challenges that face the Church, and all of mankind, at the beginning of the third millennium.

The Birth of a Jesuit Scientist

France's Auvergne region, where Pierre Teilhard was born in 1881, is rich in extinguished volcanoes and a paradise for geologists. Pierre's father loved nature and started his interest in the study of the earth and living things. His mother, on her part,

awoke in him a deep devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Thus, in the heart of the young child were sown the seeds both of his work as a scientist and of his following Christ. The rest of his life can be seen as an adventure where he constantly explored how

the call of science and the call of Jesus were two sides of one same vocation.

That adventure began when Pierre entered the Jesuit noviciate in 1899. Shortly after his first vows as a Jesuit he for a moment hesitated. Did not his passionate interest in geology keep him from giving all of his life to Christ? And should he not forget about the "study of rocks"? Fortunately for him, and for the Church, Providence was watching! His spiritual director told him that Jesus not only asked for his heart but also wished him to develop the scientific interests that God had put in his mind.

When religious orders were expelled from France in 1902, he had to go abroad with the community to seek refuge in Jersey. There, while studying philosophy, he was able to give some of his time to his favorite subject of geology. His friends recall that Teilhard never went for a walk without his geologist hammer and a naturalist's magnifying glass.

These scientific interests became even keener when after completing his study of philosophy, Pierre was sent to teach physics and chemistry at a Jesuit High School in Cairo for three years. Not only was this his first contact with a different culture, but during school holidays, he could also collect fossil fish teeth in the Nile Valley and send them to the Geological Society in France. His contribution was well received. Some new fish species were named after him, which confirmed him in the conviction that science

was indeed the way God wanted to be served by him.

From Egypt he was sent to England for theology. There Pierre was ordained a priest in 1911. Encouraged by Superiors, he went to the Paris Natural History Museum, where he became the pupil of Marcellin Boule, the paleontologist known for his study of Neandertal man.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, Teilhard volunteered as a stretcher bearer and served in almost all major battles of the war. His courage in rescuing wounded soldiers on the battle field won him the respect and gratitude of many. Two military medals were given to him, mentioning his courage and his desire to stay always close to his fighting companions, no matter how great the danger.

After the war he returned to study of fossils at the Paris Museum where he received his doctorate in 1922. Named professor of geology at the Institut Catholique, he was invited to China by Father Licent, a fellow Jesuit, who had opened a museum and laboratory in Tien-Tsin. There, Teilhard started work in geological and archeological research. Scientific expeditions soon followed to inner Mongolia and the Ordos desert where he discovered stone tools, evidence for the hitherto unknown existence of paleolithic man in China.

When he got back to France in the

autumn of 1924, an ordeal awaited him, a private note in which he expounded his new vision of the universe was found to contain some questionable theology. His religious superiors had already taken alarm at the boldness of some of his philosophical views, which appealed particularly to the young, and thought it wise to bar him from further teaching in Paris. Deeply wounded but obedient, he returned to China.

There he became increasingly at home as he moved from Tientsin to the intellectual center of Beijing. This was the beginning of a period of intense collaboration with Chinese scientific institutions. These were backed by eminent American and European scholars with whom he became closely associated.

On December 28, 1929, Teilhard and the Canadian Doctor Black sent to the Paris Museum the following telegram: "New Year Greetings. Recovered in Chou-Kou-Tien uncrushed adult skull. *Sinanthropus* Skull is entire except face. Letter follows." This was the discovery of so-called Peking Man. Teilhard's knowledge of vertebrate evolution enabled him to determine exactly the ancient age of that fossil man. He also identified the stone tools found in Chou-Kou-Tien and concluded that Peking Man may well have been responsible for their manufacture. This discovery fired his interest in the study of human origins and evolution.

More expeditions followed in the Gobi Desert, West Central Asia, India, Burma and

Java. He thus became an expert in the field of Asian prehistory, geology and vertebrate paleontology. Though working in close collaboration with European and American scientists, Teilhard also always strove to train young Chinese workers and these felt deeply respected by him.

A Japanese paleontologist, in his souvenirs, gives us an interesting snapshot of Teilhard at the time. He tells us how he once went to meet Teilhard at a hotel in Beijing. But this was the time of the Japan-China war and the hotel staff's cold attitude made it very clear to him that he was not welcome. At that precise moment, however, Teilhard came down from his room and warmly greeted his Japanese visitor. From that moment on, we are told, the attitude of the hotel's staff became much more friendly. They told him "Oh! we did not know that you were a friend of Doctor Teilhard!"

Indeed, wherever he went, Teilhard was well known to befriend all who met him. Exaggerating somewhat this side of his character, a fellow Jesuit once told him jokingly: "Even if you were to meet the devil you would still probably say 'After all, he is not such a bad fellow!'." "

Between 1939 and 1946, the Japanese army prevented foreigners from leaving Beijing. Teilhard used his forced immobility for laboratory research and also for writing. As time went by, more than the study of past

life, it was the implications of evolution for the future of mankind that became his chief concern. His major work *The Phenomenon of Man* dates from that period. Therein he tries to show how research on biological evolution helps us better understand the direction followed by life's history and the place of man in that history.

Returning to Paris after the war, Teilhard found that his scientific work in China had made him well known. When asked for conferences, he always tried to share with people how the discoveries of science had allowed him to better appreciate the width and depth of the Christian vision of the world.

Here is a sample of an article describing his vision of Christ's birth:

The enormous time lengths that preceded the first Christmas are not empty of Christ but penetrated by his powerful influence. The workings of his conception move the masses of the Cosmos and orientate the first currents of the Biosphere. The preparation of his birth accelerates the progress of instinct and the flowering of thought on earth. Let us not be stupidly scandalized by the endless waiting times the Messiah imposed upon us. The tremendous pains of early humans, the restless waiting of Israel and the ever refined wisdom of the Greeks were all required so that the Flower may open up on Jesse's and humankind's twig.

All of these preparations were cosmically and biologically necessary in order that Christ may set foot on the human scene. All of this labor was set in motion by the active and creative awakening of Christ's soul in as much as that human soul of His was chosen to animate the Universe. When Christ appeared in the arms of Mary, he had just started lifting up the Universe. *(translated from the original by the author)*

He also explained in a number of articles how the scientific study of evolution should invite theologians to formulate their explanation of Christian dogma in a language understandable by modern man. This he felt to be the urgent and important task asked from him by God. Close contacts with soldiers during the war, and his many relationships with fellow scientists of various nationalities during his work in China and Asia, made him feel keenly how, for many educated persons today, the worldview of Christianity was poorly understood and seemed less inspiring than the views opened by science.

In the years after the war many people in Europe felt like Teilhard that a great gap separated the Church from large groups in society. Here, they rejoiced, was finally a priest who understood this and who may, thanks to his experience as a scientist, help theologians to throw a bridge over the gap of misunderstanding that made it difficult for

post war Europe to see in Christ the true Light of the World.

Of course, Teilhard had been trained as a scientist, and not as a theologian. In the many articles he wrote, and in some of the conferences he gave, the words he used were not always the most fit to express the contents of our faith. Also, his natural optimism, though fortified by his strong faith in the resurrected Christ, caused him perhaps to underestimate the power of sin in the world and to see less clearly how only the mystery of the Cross could bring true salvation to mankind.

Because of these shortcomings in his writings, some were afraid that the enthusiasm felt by many for Teilhard might lead them astray from true faith. Accordingly, Jesuit Superiors asked him to

write only about science and to leave theology to the theologians. They knew, however, how difficult this would be for him in Paris, where so many requested his spiritual help. They therefore ordered him to spend most of his time in New York.

Thus, forced into exile and far away from his friends, he spent the last years of his life advising scientific research made in Africa by the Wenner Gren Anthropological Foundation. Two trips to South Africa were the occasion for him to help plan further research on the recently discovered *Australopithecus*, better known in Japan as "enjin". There in New York Christ called back to him his good servant on a bright Easter Sunday 1955, just as he had expressed the wish to some of his friends the Sunday before.

Teilhard among Us Today

Dying on Easter Day was also symbolic. Many of Teilhard's writings which, obeying orders received from his Superiors, had remained largely unknown during his life, were soon published by his friends, starting with his main work *The Phenomenon of Man*, written in China, 15 years before.

Soon they were translated in many languages and read by millions of Christians and non Christians, laypeople and priests alike.

Theologians too by commenting on his writing and when necessary bringing to Teilhard's vision the needed corrections and balance, helped to spread the message he had so much wished to transmit: Evolution far from being an obstacle to faith in the Creator deepens our awe before God's creation.

Further, as has often been pointed out, many texts of Vatican II, opened seven years after his death, and particularly the

constitution *The Church in the modern world*, show clearly the influence of the vision Teilhard cherished of a Church present to the hopes of our time.

While Teilhard's work as a scientist terminated with his death in New York, his influence as an apostle of the modern world had then hardly begun. It is still going on today, partly through the work of the theologians who answer his call for a vision as large as the universe, partly also through

the influence his letters and books exert on the spiritual life of many.

As time goes by, science keeps progressing and inevitably the contributions made by Teilhard to prehistory arouse less interest. On the contrary, it becomes ever clearer that the most valuable contribution made by Teilhard to the Church is that to the spiritual life of God's children in our modern times.

Teilhard and Jesuit Spirituality

The perduring influence exerted by Teilhard today, more than fifty years after his death, can best be understood by reading two of his most widely known books, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*. The first book exposes how his work as a paleontologist and geologist nourished his vision of life's history. It shows how that history was a preparation of man's appearance on earth. The second book traces a spiritual journey. It teaches us how to experience the presence and action of God in all aspects of creation as well as in all phases of our own personal existence. In fact, *The Divine Milieu* can be read as a vivid account of Teilhard's spiritual adventure, somewhat like the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. For the widespread influence it has exerted, the

book has even been greeted as the new *Imitation of Christ* for modern man.

The two books together well show how Teilhard's scientific work and spiritual life were both inspired by the *Contemplatio ad Amorem* found at the end of the Spiritual Exercises. In that contemplation Ignatius advises the retreatant to consider how God is present and active around him. All things in nature, stars, plants and animals, are a gift to us from the Creator. All events in the history of the world and in our own life are directed by his loving Providence. Thus enveloped by his Love, our daily life must be a response to that Love.

Since these two books may help us to better understand Jesuit spirituality, a brief account of each follows.

The Phenomenon of Man

Central to the *Phenomenon of Man* is the claim that evolution has a direction. Research on the evolution of mammals had shown Teilhard how, as time progresses, the nervous system, and in particular the brain, became increasingly complex and developed in size. The same tendency, he noted, can also be observed in the history of vertebrate animals. As life proceeded through fish, reptiles, mammals and primates, the nervous system grew ever more important, reaching a climax in humans. Together with brain growth, animals are seen to have become increasingly conscious and gifted with a capacity for spontaneous behavior, choosing their environment and meeting its challenges.

Humans appear in continuity with animal evolution as its summit. Only man, however, is aware of himself and gifted with the free will that makes him morally responsible for his actions and for his future.

Thus says Teilhard experience testifies that over life's long history, complexity, consciousness and spontaneity define the ascending direction taken by biological evolution. Moreover, the line of this ascending movement can be extrapolated in two ways. Geological history shows the

material world, the making of the earth, to have built increasingly complex chemical compounds and thereby to have prepared the birth of life. At the other end of life's history, human societies are seen to have become larger and more complex, from nomadic bands of hunters to settled villages, to towns, cities and nations. Together with complexity, consciousness also increased. The development of technology, writing and other ways of communicating information can thus be seen as a prolongation of the trends already seen in animal evolution. Moreover, as a result of this continuing development, humanity is seen to become more and more unified, leading to what is known today as the *globalization* of our activities on earth.

In short, Teilhard's eyes there is a single force that nothing can destroy and which urges us forwards and upwards towards final union and point Teilhard called *Omega Point*.

His Christian faith taught him that this single force was the creative energy of God at work in creation, the force of creative love calling us to union with Him.

The Divine Milieu

As mentioned earlier, Teilhard had been told, early in his life as a Jesuit, that God not only wanted his adoration and service but also wished the flowering and the fruits of his scientific interests in the study of the earth. Therefore, on the one hand he was aware to be attracted by two forces as by two stars, the impersonal and universal world of matter and the personal love of Christ. Yet he was also told that he should not choose between these two forces. But he was not told how to bring the two stars together in his life. This was going to be his life long task.

The four years of war on the battlefields of France were the occasion given to him by God to meditate and write on the way God is present in all things and even in the darkest and most frightful aspects of war. *Le Milieu Divin* is the short book that brings together the main steps of the spiritual itinerary that began during the war years and took final shape when in China.

In these pages we learn how Teilhard was led, step by step to find God present and active in all things and all happenings around him, how Christ appeared to him as the Center of the Universe that had always attracted him so strongly. In his own words

“This little book does no more than recapitulate the eternal lesson of the Church in the words of a man who,

because he believes himself to feel deeply in tune with his own times, has sought to teach how to see God everywhere. These pages put forward no more than a practical attitude... a way of teaching how to see. Place yourself here, where I am, and you will see how, without mixture, without confusion the true God, the Christian God, will, under your gaze, invade the universe, our universe of today... He will penetrate it as a ray of light does a crystal, and with the help of the great layers of creation, he will become for you universally perceptible and active, very near and very distant at one and the same time.

While “Finding God in all things” best summarizes the experience described in these pages, the book also expresses the very essence of Ignatian spirituality. Notice moreover that this is an apostolic spirituality. Teilhard writes this book as an attempt to let as many people as possible share his vision of creation and also his spiritual experience: “Finding God in all things.”

Here are some of the main themes found in *The Divine Milieu*.

1. The book opens by considering the basic problem faced by him and by many Christians he knew: how to reconcile in our spiritual life the love of God and the devotion to duty in the world of human

activities? "On the one hand, a very sure instinct draws us to the joy of creating and of knowing. On the other hand, a higher will to love God above all else makes us afraid of the least division or deflection in our allegiances." We thus experience the attraction between two forces, two stars. Which of the two ought to be better followed?

2. Stressing only the importance of purifying one's intention in working, fails to satisfy him. The only full answer, he finds, is to experience how Christ is present in the world and in our daily work. In Teilhard's own words:

By virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see. Try with God's help to perceive the connection which binds your labour with the building of the kingdom of heaven; try to realize that heaven itself, through your works, draws you to itself. If your work is dull or exhausting, take refuge in the inexhaustible interest of progressing in the divine life. If your work entralls you, then allow the spiritual impulse which matter communicates to you to enter into your taste for God whom you know better and desire more under the veil of his works.

3. Having thus experienced union with God through action, we must also learn how to

lose ourselves in God, accepting from his loving hands both opportunities for growth and all kinds of suffering that diminishes us: sicknesses, old age and death. While it is easy to find God in the energies of Life, within and around us, that give us the power to grow, to understand and to love, it is much more difficult to discover God's grace in the forces of nature that diminish us. Some limit our activities since our birth: natural failings, physical defects, intellectual or moral weakness, as a result of which the field of our activities and of our vision have always been limited. Others appear suddenly as an accident or stealthily as an illness. All these lead finally to death which is the sum and consummation of all our diminishments. Here is a beautiful prayer expressing how Teilhard discovered God's hands in these diminishments:

It was a joy to me, O God, to feel that in developing myself I was increasing the hold that you have upon me. Now grant that I may recognize you under the appearance of each alien or hostile force that seems bent upon destroying or uprooting me. When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind); when the sickness that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly

awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself; in all those dark moments, o God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself.

You are the irresistible and vivifying force, O Lord, and because, of the two of us, you are infinitely the stronger, it is on you that falls the part

of consuming me in the union that should weld us together. Grant me therefore something precious still than the grace which all the faithful pray. It is not enough that I should die while communicating. Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion.

Summing up all these themes, Teilhard then explains how they help to understand some important principles of Christian spiritual life: how detachment from our small ego frees our heart for bigger things, how the Cross necessarily appears on the road leading to the highest peaks of creation.

A Spirituality for the Third Millennium

Two characteristics of modern man's mentality are probably, first, the expansion of our world vision to the entire cosmos; and second, a common concern about the future of mankind. Teilhard's spiritual vision, briefly considered here, has much in common with this modern mentality and can help us to answer the questions many keep asking.

The cosmic character of Teilhard's vision is well known. For him, human nature could not be understood if separated from its roots in the living world. Also, in our effort to understand and love, it is the entire universe that through and in us becomes somehow warmer and brighter. The same cosmic

dimension colors also Teilhard's spirituality and his faith. This appears particularly well in the pages of the *Divint Milieu* that deal with the Eucharist.

Christians have always believed that, by receiving the body of Christ in the host, their life becomes transformed into Christ's own life. Teilhard makes us aware of how, because of our roots in the living universe, it is the entire universe that, through us and is being penetrated by Christ's life. Therefore, the transformation that happens at each consecration reaches far wider than the small host offered in the Mass. Indeed, through all Masses, up to the end of time, it

is the entire material world that is being slowly transformed by Christ's grace.

Teilhard prays: Grant o Lord that when I draw near to the altar to communicate, I may henceforth discern the infinite perspective hidden beneath the smallness of the Host in which you are concealed. In a true sense, the arms and the heart which you open to me are nothing less than all the united powers of the world which converge upon my being to nourish it and bear it along towards the center of your fire.

The same cosmic dimension appears again at the end of the Exercises when Ignatius wants me to consider how God is present in all creatures: matter, plants, animals and humans. How God is active in all creatures: matter, plants, animals and humans their biological and spiritual qualities. Thereby, Ignatius says, God gives me to understand how much he wants to give me of his own life.

Truly that God is present in all things was not, for Ignatius, the subject of an intellectual consideration. Rather, it was a vision that nourished his prayer and he hoped that we too would learn this kind of prayer so that we may truly "find God in all things."

Modern man's concern with the future of mankind also finds a deep echo in Teilhard's spirituality.

Teilhard once remarked that since

Christian faith rests on an event that took place two thousand years ago (the birth, passion and resurrection of Jesus) one may have expected Christians to live with their eyes fixed on the past. The reality, however, is quite different! As the prayer "Maranatha" (Come Lord Jesus) indicates, from the Church's earliest beginnings Christians have lived with their eyes looking to the future, waiting for the return of Christ when creation reaches its completion and the New Heaven and the New Earth share in the glory of the risen Christ.

Indeed Teilhard stresses that the only true Christian attitude is that of a man waiting for Christ. By this waiting we hasten Christ's coming. "Christ will come soon" wrote Teilhard "only if we wait fervently for Him."

That waiting must therefore be an active kind of waiting. The unity of all creation in Christ we wait for will be reached only as we try to prolong in our lives the trends seen to operate in evolution. For by becoming more conscious, more free and more loving, we also become more one. "Tout ce qui monte converge" loving, we also become more one. "Tout ce qui monte converge" used to say Teilhard. True progress brings us closer together with one another and with all of creation.

When striving to reach that final unity, let us keep in mind that the union we aspire to will be such as enhances our personalities.

True and deep union with others, far from causing our personalities to disappear, as many may fear, will on the contrary make these personal qualities better marked. Indeed, each of us has to bring something unique to the new and final Creation God has been dreaming of. As Teilhard liked to repeat: "L'union differencie," true union makes each one more himself. A model for that kind of union can be found in the mystery of the Trinity, in the loving union of Christ with the Father. This is also the love that Ignatius directs us to ask for as a grace in the final contemplation of the Exercises. True love, he tells us, consists both in giving all I have and all I am to the one I love and in receiving from the loved one all that he wishes to communicate to me. As Jesus was praying to the Father: "All that is mine is yours, and all that is yours is mine" (Jo 17:10)

