

Teilhard--The Phenomenon

CONRAD PYLE

PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN uses "phenomenon" as a summarizing word for what he thinks can be significantly seen in the studies of the universe, specifically, the evolution of man. Scanning the current excitement over Teilhard one must consider Teilhard himself a "phenomenon" of considerable magnitude. This might not have surprised him for he yearned to have the ear of the world. In his *Letters To A Traveler*¹ one discovers his conviction that he has truth. Teilhard published thirty philosophical and religious works during his lifetime. At least ten more have been published posthumously and at least eleven works about him have been written. Many small pamphlets and articles about him have had wide distribution in various languages. From the French four of his books have been translated into English.

Teilhard was a conspicuous phenomenon in the Roman Catholic Church long before his death. His superiors refused to allow him to return to France for any long periods and denied him publication on his favorite theme of evolution. Since his death the "Friends of Teilhard" movement has energetically promoted the man and his ideas. This European organization has an American chapter, concerned mainly with publishing his works in this country. The word Teilhard has, in fact, become an adjective. Teilhardian thought and Teilhardian scholars exist. People in casual conversation will iden-

tify themselves as Teilhardian or non-Teilhardian.

The most energetic promotion of Teilhard is coming from Fordham University. Members of the Philosophy Department have set up a "Human Energetics Research Institute" which in theory is broader in scope than Teilhardian thought but is limited presently to exploring Teilhard's ideas. Its avowed function is to be a research program comprising a community of scholars from various fields who will unite their efforts in the pursuit of a new synthesis of reality. It is not to be limited to scholars, however, believing that thinkers in all human endeavors (business world, etc.) must contribute. The Institute had a series of lectures in 1963 and another in 1964 and set up a five-day conference last summer that followed a five-week workshop. An executive committee exists for the Institute with at least one staff person and funds are recruited.

Chicago Theological Seminary devoted its complete December issue of *The Register* to Teilhard. Study groups exist in ministerial circles as well as among Protestant laymen. Teilhard, all by himself, is a phenomenon. Of course, it isn't everyone who in the great silence of Asian nature will conduct a Mass in which he offers Mongolia to God!

I. SUMMARY

I should like briefly to summarize his position. This summary is from *The Phenomenon of Man*.²

The plurality of the universe is immense. It possesses a basic unity of order and structure. Energy is the

¹ Pierre Teilhard deChardin, *Letters From A Traveller*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1962.

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² Pierre Teilhard deChardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1959.

basic power source finding its way by evolution. Existence has a Without and Within. The energy that connects these two faces is divided into tangential and radial. All elements are present from the beginning. The system is monistic. Evolution is described as turning in upon itself. Life began in the biosphere. The cell emerged. Life proceeded by the evolutionary process. Thought or consciousness emerged in the noosphere. Consciousness is defined as every type of psychicism. The cell became a person. Consciousness began to reflect upon itself. Consciousness can be traced through to the point where groups are the basic form of existence. Our modern age is greatly upset. We are at an organic crisis in evolution. Eschatology begins to be obvious. There will be no future unless man associates. We are reaching the critical point... Omega. Omega has autonomy, actuality, irreversibility and finally, transcendence. All consciousness gathers to or becomes Omega. At the death of the planet, Omega will survive. Omega Point is Christ that has been luring the evolutionary process along.

1. Teilhard maintains that he is primarily a scientist, specifically a paleontologist and wants to present a scientific interpretation of reality. He asks to be judged as a scientist. He coins many words that sound scientific.

2. Teilhard ends with a Christology, maintaining it has been scientifically discovered. Fr. Huybens said in 1963:

Teilhard wanted to show first of all how Christianity gives the answer to the problems of the relation between God and the universe. This answer consists, in Teilhard's opinion, in a truly understood Christology, the doctrine about Christ, who appears to be, after careful analysis, the attracting and propulsive center Omega.³

II. PROBLEMS

1. Psychology. Teilhard used the term psychology seldom. When he uses it he portrays an inadequate understanding. This is obvious when he de-

fines unconsciousness as a sort of ontological inferiority or evil. He does this in *The Phenomenon of Man*. Although his formal use of psychology is lacking, the revealing of his own psychological problems are not. If Teilhard continues to be popular undoubtedly some competent psychologist will explain his motivations. But the average reader can sense some of motivations from reading *The Letters*.

It is known that his first and greatest love was science. This is borne out in *The Letters*. He also loved the church. The solution to the conflict between these two exacting disciplines in his life must have affected his philosophical and scientific conclusion. It is becoming increasingly clear that a real understanding of the thinking of the great minds requires insight into their emotional problems. Teilhard accepted the Church's sending and keeping him in exile. Yet the truth that he felt he understood burned for expression. His writings were the result. But what did he do with his hostility? Teilhard had the opportunity to come home several times but did not do so. He delayed returning seven months after the end of World War I. His family relationship was less than could be expected. He did not return at the death of his parents. Teilhard does not openly reveal hostility to Church or family although he does reveal frustration. I have wondered if his offering Christ as the Omega Point is an expiation of hidden hostility against the Church for denying his expression and reward as a scientist-theologian. Teilhard **does** claim to be a loyal son of the Church yet he does continue in work and writing conclusions contrary to the Church. Outwardly he passively accepted the punishment of the Church. It is a strange situation.

2. Science. The major weakness of Teilhard's thought (I think this comes from the psychological problems that I assume to exist) is his lengthy claim to be a scientist and then capping the ef-

³ Fr. Maurits Huybens, *Lecture Notes*, (Fifth Lecture at the Teilhard Fall Lectures,

fort with an all-embracing Christology. He actually becomes a mystic and dreams of a future in grandiose expressions. It is amazing that a disciplined mind would read much of his writing and continue to accept his claim to being a scientist. Medawar, of University College, London, wrote the following about **The Phenomenon of Man**: "non-sense, tricked out by a variety of tedious metaphysical conceits... errors of fact and judgement..."⁴ Medawar is overly emphatic in his criticisms of Teilhard, but nevertheless the end result of Teilhard's work is that his Christology prostitutes his science so that science is no longer a tool of research but a handmaiden of church orthodoxy. He states several times that he is "orthodox" and his conclusions demonstrate it. Even using evolutionary concepts the conclusion that Christ is the final explanation and consummation of the universe is quite "orthodox." C. F. vonWeizsacker, in describing the illusionary nihilist, says:

unable to bear the despair of honesty . . . he seizes on the first value that comes along, and tells himself that he has found meaning and salvation. This is the nihilism of the flight from truth. It does not know that it destroys its values precisely by making on them demands they cannot meet.⁵

It is to be assumed that the Roman Catholic Church will lift its ban on his writings and the reading of them. In the Fordham Library, Teilhard's works are in the section locked from the general public, along with *Lolita*, while on the same campus the Philosophy Department is avidly promoting him and selling his books at a lively pace.

III. CONTRIBUTIONS

Teilhard may be criticized for his placing science under religious ortho-

doxy and his followers may be assumed to be naive, yet Teilhard has made two significant contributions. 1. The first was pointed up by Dr. John Walsh, a historian from Pace College, who spoke at Fordham University at one of the lecture series in 1964. Dr. Pace considers himself sympathetic to Teilhard and certainly the Institute considers him so. In his prepared lecture Dr. Pace affirmed that Teilhard was a great scientist but although he did not solve the problems, he compels us to think about them. In answer to questions Dr. Pace said, "To history, Teilhard stands for what has been going on. He is not unique, but significant and emphatic." Dr. Pace further said, "I recognize the discontinuity of the philosophy and theology of Teilhard with his science." While these quotes may seem to support earlier criticism of Teilhard, they also lead to the recognition of Teilhard's making emphatic a crucial need. Significant work must be done in the relating of the evolutionary theories, which serve as a basis for much of modern scientific disciplines, with the theology of Christianity. It is sad that the excellent work of vonWeizsacker at Chicago (i.e. **The History of Nature**), the philosophical work of Whitehead, and the theological system of D. D. Williams in this field are not more widely known. Our own men at Iliff have not had their work appreciated adequately. It is ironic that a paleontologist, who subordinated his science to religious orthodoxy and proclaimed a bizarre evolutionary Christology should now dominate so much of the thinking in this area. If Teilhard can be the springboard to a more widely accepted, respectable exploration of evolution and Christian theology, we should be grateful.

2. On a quite positive note, it is to be hoped that Teilhard survives as a mystic. His book, **The Divine Milieu**,⁶ is a jewel. It is a valuable item for a devotional library and could possibly become a classic in that field. Whether Teilhard had ambitions in this field is

⁴ Peter B. Medawar, *Mind*, Volume LXX, No. 277, January, 1961, pp. 99-106.

⁵ C. F. vonWeizsacker, *The History of Nature*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1949, p. 130.

not as certain as in the scientific and theological field but it is here that he will survive, if he dies. His writings have often been described as poetical. This is true. He does not write as a scientist; he does not write as a theolo-

gian; he does write as a poet. The **Divine Milieu** is an exquisite work of art.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In addition to the works mentioned in the article, Teilhard's book, *Hymn to the Universe*, is scheduled for publication this spring by Harper and Row.

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