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# Phenomenon of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The;Note

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## THE PHENOMENON OF PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Ever since the midtwenties the name of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., has been known to paleontologists and anthropologists. Those who were members of that scientific brotherhood read his reports and studies, of which there were many. Teilhard's complete espousal of the notion of evolution drew the attention of his brother Jesuits. Yet he was not well known to the world at large until after World War II. His lectures in France during that era distinguished him as a man of profound vision. Books and articles appeared to explain the man and his thought. He went into comparative silence after he left France in 1951 to live in New York, where he died suddenly in 1955. After his death his works on themes of interest beyond the limits of formal paleontology saw print, first in France and finally throughout the world. The English edition of *The Phenomenon of Man*<sup>1</sup> has produced real commotion in the English-speaking world of ideas.

Catholics have shown a timorous fascination for Teilhard. He was one of them, frankly and authentically so. Yet his ideas and language are so different from those in common Catholic currency that many wondered whether he was true to the faith once delivered to the saints. Those who knew the man personally gave eloquent testimony to the Jesuit's deep piety and religious conviction. If indeed it were true that his ideas could not be reconciled with the orthodox doctrine of Christianity, at least they were not inspired by disloyalty or treacherous intent. That much was certain beyond any doubt.

This primary datum did not solve the problem whether this good Catholic's conception of the world and man was in harmony with the authentic expression of Catholic faith. Teilhard was certainly no fool — all the world agrees on this. Likewise, he wanted above all to be a Catholic. How then could his ideas arouse suspicion in some Catholic circles? It is to this question that the present study addresses itself.

For Teilhard de Chardin *The Phenomenon of Man* was the principal essay in communicating his own understanding of human reality. He had written it as early as 1940 but retouched it in the years which followed. By 1948 he was anxious to publish it. His superiors did not feel that this was prudent and they refused him permission to have it printed. He gave his manuscript along with the manuscripts of other books to some friends, who published the works after his death. One can consider *The Phenomenon of Man* Teilhard's *summa*, his *Meisterwerk*.

The reading of the book is an exhilarating experience, for it is a deep and inspiring book. It is not only logically structured but also rich in isolated golden phrases which excite the spirit, shooting lightning flashes on whole areas of human concern. The essay has its difficulties because it combines different modes of expression. Teilhard is primarily a scientist but not exclusively so. He is also a poet, a prophet, a veiled philosopher, and even a mystic.

1. London: Collins Sons Co.; New York: Harper & Bros. (1959).

But above all we must remember his basic stance. He is examining reality inasmuch as it is related to man. He is discussing the *phenomenon* of man, and the title of the work was chosen with care so as to make it clear what was under discussion. The work is an essay in phenomenology. Man as he *appears* according to rigorous scientific examination is the theme, and no other. No ontology is presented, nor is there any theological consideration of the subject. Yet theological and metaphysical relevances do become manifest, but the methods of these two disciplines are not employed. A scientist who is doing a scientific work of synthesis cannot but betray his own concerns beyond his chosen field, but he is not willing to allow these concerns to meddle with his proper method of approach to the problem. Hence it would be most unfair to consider any statement of Teilhard as either philosophical or theological, even though strictly phenomenal stands are taken under the pressures of anxieties which are indeed theological or philosophical.

Teilhard invents many new words. He feels that he must do so, because he has found no other words in the current vocabularies which can express what he has in mind. He finds it convenient to speak in images, just as the poet and the mystic do. He believes that this is the safest way for him to communicate his message accurately. Like a true scientist, he believes that the work of synthesis goes beyond the mere description of data. He states quite explicitly that synthesis rests on an intuition freely accepted as the guiding light for the ultimate intelligence of the phenomenon. He believes that the intuition actually shows up the wealth of phenomena as a unity, but he knows that it itself cannot be deduced with mathematical rigor from the data.

The central position of the author is that the world is man — man in different stages of becoming, and this becoming has by no means ended. Evolution for De Chardin is synonymous with cosmic reality. He presents no cosmology, but in terms of understanding describes the cosmogenesis (a Teilhard neologism often used). The evolution of the cosmos is for him as clear as the world itself. He describes evolution; he does not prove it, because it is as evident to him as the existence of the cosmos we see. He merely thinks that the scientists have not investigated evolution sufficiently. And he believes that evolution can explain much more than the mere origin of a present species.

De Chardin gives his account of the meaning of evolution by tracing quickly the outline of the history of the universe. He rightly insists that history is a necessary dimension of scientific investigation. To understand an object, its genesis must be understood, even though indirect evidences are all we can rely on.

Many thousands of million years ago clouds of cosmic dust moved in masses in what we call the heavens. (Scientific analysis cannot discuss the first cause, which is beyond the phenomena.) This dust was made up of protons, electrons, neutrons, and photons. In their whirlings they combined to produce simple atoms. This was not merely a matter of chance, though chance had a part in the operation. Any cosmic entity has an outside action which can be seen from without. But it also has an inside action which can be seen only from within. This inside action is centered about an *élan*, a phenomenal impulse pushing the thing to consciousness. It is phenomenal, but analogous to the form which

philosophers call a soul. To avoid ambiguity, Teilhard calls this principle in the nonliving, a pre-soul. This impulse is toward consciousness; and under its thrust, simple elements formed molecules. Enormous clusters of such molecules became suns, and from the suns molecular masses were torn off to become independent planets. One such planet was our earth.

Since in every element there was the impulse to consciousness and unity, all the elements moved to ever more complicated forms of union, ever nearer to consciousness, though in the beginnings infinitely far from the consciousness which was ultimately to arrive. In every element and molecule there was a double action: one expending *tangential* energy, moving outwards with impact and influence on other elements and molecules; and the other with *radial* energy building up within the agent, producing ever closer approximations to the state of consciousness. Consciousness does not stumble on matter; matter is by inner compulsion groping for it.

In this way the earth historically built itself up in layers or spheres. First there was the barysphere, where simple atoms pushed forward to produce complicated molecules, which in turn formed a stable lithosphere capable of holding water, thus creating a hydrosphere. The condition for life was now produced, and the molecular beings could move on to preliving unions like the viruses. When these came into existence, the protozoa in the form of single living cells were brought forth with the power of reproduction of their kind. Cells clustered and combined so that organisms came forth from the seas. Millions of years ago such simple organisms combined, by reason of inner radial energy, with others in the ceaseless groping for forms which nervous tissue could coordinate. Ganglions grew to become a system of brain and nerves. At this point consciousness was achieved, but it was still an imperfect thing because it was incapable of self-reflection. Brain space had yet to grow larger, and in doing so, hominization (a Teilhard word!) was in its embryonic stage. There finally came a form with the brain power large enough to permit matter to support the activity of thought. Life gave the earth a biosphere, and reflective consciousness in the hominized combinations produced the noosphere, that layer of our earth which spreads thinking around the world.

This upward *nisus* was not in a straight line. It was the formation of a spiral around a cone. From this vine-like spiral buds shot off at many points. From these buds new forms in fan form were essayed but not all led upwards. When they did not move toward consciousness, they withered away or remained static to show the paleontologist a fruitless chance taken by evolution. Yet one of the buds on the vine would be in the way up in the spiral course of matter seeking spirit. The relics of some are found, but hardly all. We have no direct evidence for the complete movement of species to species up to the appearance of *homo sapiens*.

Teilhard supposes on grounds of observation that each new sphere was a once-and-for-all event. Once matter had achieved a higher stage of complication it did not bother to continue the process on the lower levels. Only at one period did the large molecules form. Once and only once did life take over on the earth. Once and only once did reflective consciousness form its own sphere. This does not mean that only a single new form was produced siring

all of its kind, but it does mean that it occurred only at one period of geological time to be continued by survival rather than through the continuing evolution of lower forms. Evolution today does not produce new men from a prehuman level nor does life proceed through the evolution of inorganic agents.

The question of entropy commanded Teilhard's attention. He thought that it applied only to the tangential energy of earth beings. This energy becomes less and less as time goes on, and this fact spells the inevitable death of the material globe. However, De Chardin found that as the tangential energy is reduced, the radial, spiritual energy is increased. Thought and its action supplement and even supplant the external action of the material agent.

So far Teilhard is creative only in details. His great contribution lies in the insistence that evolution is still going on in man. Isolated men give way to man in association, where the power of thought is increased by the accumulation of thinkers in collaboration. The earth is being changed not merely by unconscious gropings but through the planned orientations of the thought of communal thinking, preserved in cultures and tradition.

His greatest contribution is the discovery of an Omega Point in the phenomenon of human evolution. This is the apex of the cone of evolution. This point meets a superior plane which limits the cone and which is always there, attracting the very bottom of the cone through radial energy to climb up to the Omega Point. Of course, Omega itself is what Christians call God, and the doctrine of the Omega Point opens up the possibility of a new theodicy based on the scientific study of phenomena. Teilhard does not limit the order of phenomena to the external material object. He thinks that he has observed the inner nisus of radial action in phenomena through scientific, i.e., phenomenal, observation. Concerning Omega itself, which is no phenomenon, he can say nothing as a scientist. But the Omega Point where matter meets God and toward which all earthly reality tends is observable because of its attractive influence on evolution upwards. Teilhard is anxious to keep all metaphysical and theological reasoning outside of his own approach to the phenomenon of man. Concerning the Omega doctrine, Julian Huxley, who is so lavishly eulogistic of Teilhard's work, is far from being convinced. He thinks that it is a valiant effort of Teilhard to be at once an orthodox Christian and a sincere scientist. But he feels the attempt has failed.

The foregoing sketchy summary shows us the thought outline of Teilhard's message. Little details come into the book which show us his breadth of mind. Long before Sputnik went into space, Teilhard saw the high probability of man's early voyage into space. He makes room in his collectivization of the last stage of man's evolution for other groups of human beings in other sidereal bodies and sees the possibility of fullest development of man as a single flower formed by petals gathered from all the worlds of space. He wrote a distinct chapter on the phenomenological meaning of Christ and the Church, pointing out the heights to which Christianity has brought the human race. There is something winsomely mystical in the way this man describes the action of God as a call of love and the response of creation as love's response.

Many a Catholic theologian has studied this vision communicated by De Chardin. Some became angry at once and judged the whole idea to be a be-

trayal of the doctrine of the Church of which Teilhard was a priest. Others were not so much angry as worried and puzzled. They could not judge the man on the level of scientific competence because they were not at home in that field, nor could they even validly raise the question because the luminaries of biological science have given fulsome praise to the merits of the French paleontologist. But some felt sincerely that too many basic dogmas of the faith were unreconcilable with Teilhard's phenomenal scheme.

Can any positive judgment be made on the meaning of Teilhard's work? Certainly no definitive verdict can be made at this moment. Too much must yet be considered in three fields: science, philosophy, and theology. Yet certain recognitions of merit can be made in our time.

First of all we see that a wholly committed Catholic has here accepted science for its own sake with loving honesty and integrity. Teilhard has proved that there need be no schizophrenia in the Catholic who is enamored of scientific contemplation. Without inner conflict he can love both his faith and scientific truth. If Toynbee could write a work on the religion of a historian, Teilhard could equally well write about the religion of a biologist. De Chardin found his scientific and religious commitments mutually corroborative and he realized in himself his own prophecy that religion and science will in the future collaborate wholeheartedly instead of fighting each other to no avail. It is an inspiring thing to see in Teilhard the complete absence of nervousness when he speaks of man and his meaning in terms of scientific method. In this enterprise he suspects no possibility of conflict with his tranquil acceptance of faith.

Secondly, philosophers and theologians are hard put to dispute with the man. He has made it explicitly clear that he is not essaying philosophy or theology. His affirmations are not to be fitted into a theological or philosophical framework of discourse. There they may have no sense because those disciplines and methods are orientated differently with different starting points and different modes of procedure. Of course philosophers and theologians who have not yet discovered that disciplines are different — with the consequence that a proposition in one field cannot be extrapolated into another without losing its meaning — such thinkers will find all kinds of inadequacies in De Chardin's work. But the current progress in the disciplines makes such men fewer as the days go by. To a theologian the Eucharist is truly the Body and Blood of Christ; to a chemist it is homogeneous in phenomenal structure with bread and wine; to a philosopher it opens the doors of speculation on the possibilities of accidents without substance, reality with alien appearance, direct divine action in a natural milieu. We do not expect the three disciplines to make the same affirmations, and the disparity of their statements invalidates none of them.

Since Teilhard essays no theology or philosophy he cannot be criticized for his philosophy or theology. Yet it remains true that the theologian and the philosopher will be stimulated by the nontheological and nonphilosophical statements of the French scientist.

Teilhard makes it quite clear that he finds present theology oblivious of an important phase of human existence. The cosmos in which man is rooted has not only immensity as its setting in space but also duration in the thousands

of millions of years of its history. Yet theology concerns itself at most with some four thousand of these many years restricted to our little earth. The kinship of man with all the past and with the present realities of an expanding universe are not considered by theologians, and yet these factors are of human concern because they influence us through the past and in the widespread present. Time and space need theological study to make theology adequately relevant to modern man.

One lacuna in De Chardin's reflections is of special theological concern. This has already been felt, and he himself foresaw it. He was exuberantly optimistic about the present and future of the human species. Humanity came from humble beginnings but it has been a glory for the universe and it is still on its way upwards. Teilhard had to write a chapter on the evil in the world. He merely defended himself for not giving the matter much discussion on the grounds that he is tracing the positive benefits of evolution and therefore he had no need to consider all the suffering and immorality involved in the history of the world. This defense can certainly be accepted; but evil is as much present in evolution as glory, and it needs explanation. Perhaps paleontology and anthropology cannot explain it, but theology must make the attempt. The basic solution of the theological tradition is the doctrine of Original Sin, which entails the notion of a *devolution* of man, rather than his *evolution*. It seems to assume that in the beginning man was perfect and culpably fell into abiding imperfection. The basis of man's first perfection is described in dogma as an extraordinary direct and free action of God from without history and evolution. Man's imperfection needed the graciously given divine Incarnation in order to be overcome. The Christian hope is that in spite of the present decadence of man, he can in faith look forward to a future happy state for a remnant of mankind bestowed not by the innate power of natural evolution but through a catastrophic action of God. No matter how Original Sin is explained by the various schools of theology, the outline here given is accepted by all.

Can such a theological position be reconciled with the phenomenal vision of Teilhard? If one is to be candid, it must be admitted that at first sight the two schemes *seem* in contradiction. However, history has shown us that answers flowing from first sight are not to be trusted. First of all, Teilhard's scheme is not a theology. His discussion is outside of the theological circle. Hence it is on analysis true that the French Jesuit contradicted no theological doctrine, for the simple reason that he did not speak theologically at all. What is more, he sincerely and without reserve accepted the totality of the Church's dogma. This is a *primat*ial fact.

What is under question is not the formal validity of Teilhard's vision. By the rules he chose — the rules of phenomenal observation of empirical science — it is valid enough. The question that remains is whether the vision is compatible with Teilhard's first commitment, his Catholic faith.

It is well to remember that faith must not be identified with theology. The direct object of faith, the dogmas of the teaching Church, must not be identified with theology. Theology is the human science which explores dogma and faith. Dogmas are not made by theology; theology only examines them rationally and then in an explanatory synthesis proposes them to the believer

in search of understanding. Theology as a living tradition undergoes great changes in its long life. The temporary use of some philosophic insight rather than another gives theology new vitality and a "new look."

This is quite evident in our time. The majority of theologians at the beginning of our century, following the thought of their predecessors in the nineteenth century, rejected the possibility of using the then new theory of the origin of the human species through biological evolution. Many a theologian was hotly insistent on this rejection. Since 1950 this stand is no longer possible. The encyclical *Humani generis* of Pius XII explicitly declared that such a theory could be legitimately used by Catholic theologians. Since Teilhard began his own work long before 1950, his own employment of an evolutionary theory exposed him to the attacks of not a few theologians. Today this is no longer possible. Teilhard cannot now be censured because he holds a theory of evolution.

But there still remains a problem. Granted that *Humani generis* makes it licit to employ some kind of evolutionary hypothesis even for the theologian and Scripture scholar, is Teilhard's conception of evolution one of the acceptable forms?

The encyclical under consideration did not permit the use of an evolutionary theory which supposes polygenism, i.e., the actuation of evolution to produce more than one central source of the human race. Teilhard expressly declares for monogenism rather than for polygenism. But he understands monogenism to permit the production of either a single pair of true humans or of different individuals in different places in one and only one defined geological period. Teilhard holds for monogenism in the sense of monophylysm. Whatever may be objected to this conception, it must be yet admitted that the true unity and unicity of the human race are being affirmed. Whether or not Teilhard's conception meets all the requirements of theological monogenism can be debated, but we must not begin with the supposition that he stands for polygenism, when as a matter of explicit fact he expressly declares for monogenism.

Even though Teilhard is unimpeachable in his use of an evolutionary theory for the explanation of the origin of man, and even though a case can probably be made for his understanding of monogenism, the problem of Original Sin, the role of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in the development of mankind, the distinction of natural and supernatural, are all theological preoccupations which find little solace in De Chardin's phenomenology.

This is, it seems, a fact. But this does not mean that the theologian must immediately condemn Teilhard's image of the world. The history of theology ruefully shows that such a short shrift for a scientific creation can produce embarrassment for later theologians, and even for the whole Church itself. We want no more Galileo cases. One was too much, even though the real benefit it did to the Church was to make her cautious in her pronouncements concerning the reconcilability of scientific observation with theological stances.

The true task of the theologians in the presence of De Chardin's ideas is to examine diligently their own positions with the greatest care in order to find out the precise content of their formulas. In the past this type of investi-



gation has proved very fruitful. Today with the serious work being done in Scripture and the Fathers such work should be congenial. Above all, theologians must not consider Teilhard an adversary but only a stimulus to renewed study of the matter of their own field. The French Jesuit does not even pretend to be a theologian, but he himself has expressed the hope that the theologians would fill the many lacunae of his own thought.

If the theologians are called on to go more deeply into their own sources, the scientists have a similar invitation. Teilhard's great desire was the collaboration of the two disciplines — not their opposition. Scientists are called on to deal with the phenomenological work of the French scholar, to prune, to criticize, and to expand what he has done. No one expects of them theological contributions, but they are competent to tell us to what degree they themselves can subscribe to the scheme of Teilhard. It is not to the point for them to discuss De Chardin's religious preoccupations in his work. He obviously had them. But he wanted to do a job according to the scientific method and he presented his ideas as true to the observations of science. His work can be evaluated by scientists on the level on which Teilhard himself placed it.

The Jesuit thinker made an implicit suggestion at one point which could help both disciplines. Recognizing that his own view of natural history seemed to incline to an ever better situation for the human race with a kind of utopian finale, he proposed the idea that this final upward thrust in the end of time could be contingent on the acceptance of an invitation from Omega. Such an invitation would not coerce all the members of the species. Some would decide to accept it and others would decide against it. Those who accepted would rise to the highest expression of humanity, and those who rejected it would wither away as so many species and subspecies have done before them. This kind of thinking was obviously provoked by the Christian conception of an ultimate judgment and of a previous divine call to faith. In this form the hypothesis is certainly not scientific, because it cannot be derived from the observation of phenomena. For the theologian, however, it shows how the notion of an ever-ascending evolution of man can be harmonized beautifully with the notions of faith. It indicates a conceptual possibility, even if it does not present us with a fact.

Along such lines the theologian can do much to bring theology and science into an effective union. It is certainly true that theology by the very antiquity of its discipline must make heroic efforts to transpose its categories of the past into categories relevant to the present. We hear much criticism of the introduction of non-Hebraic modes of thought by the Greek theologians of the first five centuries. But this criticism is often wall-eyed. The Greek theologians were not creating revelation, nor even re-creating it. They were presenting the doctrine originally expressed in Hebraic literary forms, in styles and modes proper to the Greek way of life and thought.

What the Greek theologians did must be done in every new cultural situation. If Thomas Aquinas could use the Aristotelian framework for the expression of the Gospel, later theologians can use other hypotheses and postulates. St. Thomas did not make a natural science for his time. He supposed one, and created his theology to harmonize with what he found at hand. Today

when we go to Aquinas, we are not concerned with his scientific world image, because we know that he used the one suggested by the Aristotelian sages of his own day. That image has lost its appeal for us because we do not find it sufficiently reflective of the world we know. We go to St. Thomas to find his atemporal theological or metaphysical statements. We have to demythologize St. Thomas, in the good sense of that word. In this process St. Thomas is more useful than ever. But it is not a talmudic study of Thomism which helps us; instead we must engage in a construction of the medieval doctor's ideas to produce a viable structure for our day. It is hardly a serious investigation to find out what St. Thomas had to say about Freudian psychoanalysis. Patently he had nothing to say about a theory he knew nothing about. But Aquinas did have metaphysical principles and theological stands which can be supremely useful in our own current discussion and elaboration of the Freudian theses. We want to understand St. Thomas as he historically existed in order to understand better the moment in which we live, nor do we identify the two historical moments. We do, however, believe that the two moments can illuminate each other. According to the evolutionary idea of Teilhard, in *homo sapiens* tradition and culture supplement human instincts. What was good is not lost but moves into a fuller synthesis with the goods discerned in the lengthening of time.

Whatever is defective in Teilhard must not overshadow the high good of his work. He wished to excite theologians to recognize the basic outline of the scientific image of our time. His presentation of an evolutionary scheme was not an apologetic re-creation of it so that it could come forth theologically acceptable after a kind of plastic surgery. He wanted to be faithful and loyal to it for its own sake. There was no treachery in his use of it. With brilliance and imagination he presented it as he found it. This is what the scientists recognize when they praise the Jesuit thinker.

Teilhard wanted the theologians and philosophers of our day to take evolution seriously so that they could express their own findings in a way relevant to an age which spontaneously has accepted the evolutionary image of the cosmos. He himself made a portrait to that image from a perspective readily achievable by theologians and philosophers. He was not an apologete. Rather he was the voice of one anxiously urging the theologians and philosophers to tasks which are truly theirs and which they have, by and large, refused to undertake.

Teilhard is no enemy of theology. He is its true friend, even though outside of its preserve. He is shouting to the theologians to enlarge the borders of their highly significant discipline.

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