

The Problem with Teilhard

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THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL for Culture has voted to request that the *monitum* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1962 against the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin be lifted on the grounds that, though “some of his writings might be open to constructive criticism, his prophetic vision has been and is inspiring theologians and scientists.” Whether there are scientists who, qua scientists rather than amateur philosophers, are inspired by Teilhard may be doubted. That there are still theologians of a certain sort who are thus inspired may not be. Which is why the *monitum* must remain in place. For it is not his association with frauds like the Piltdown man that matters, but his assault on basic Catholic orthodoxy in cosmology, Christology, and ecclesiology. A reminder of this seems timely. Hence I offer here an abridged version of what may be found in full elsewhere.¹

Let us begin with what attracted (and still attracts) people to Teilhard, in whom the conflicting hopes and fears of the twentieth century met and found expression. Positively, he wanted to reconcile, to unite in a grand synthesis, “faith in God and faith in the World,” or “the cult of progress and passion for the glory of God.” Negatively,

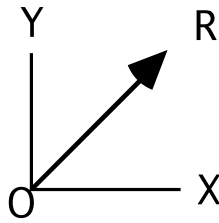
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he wanted to combat with resolute determination an *angst* he thought rooted in the trauma of the Copernican revolution. He recognized man's loss of bearings in the vastness of the universe and his sense of futility in a world subject to the law of entropy. He knew the "malady of space-time" that manifests itself as a "fundamental anguish of being," a "sickness of the dead end," a feeling of confinement: "As the years go by, Lord, I come to see more and more clearly, in myself and in those around me, that the great secret preoccupation of modern man is much less to battle for possession of the world than to find a means of escaping from it. The anguish of feeling that one is not merely spatially but ontologically imprisoned in the cosmic bubble; the anxious search for an issue to, or more exactly a focal point for, the evolutionary process; these are the price we must pay for the growth of planetary consciousness; these are the dimly-recognized burdens which weigh down the souls of christian and gentile alike in the world of today."²

Teilhard made it his aim to address this anxiety, to restore confidence in progress, and so to make the Christian faith relevant once again. To that end, he undertook what he called a "re-cosmologization of our religion," commandeering evolution as the vehicle not only of creation but also of redemption. Evolution, if we ourselves took charge of it, would lead us to what he called Omega, that final issue our hearts desire, a point of complete cosmic convergence that quells all fear of perpetual, meaningless becoming. With this combination of evolutionism and eschatology, he hoped to cure the spiritual crisis of the modern world. Humanity needed a common center, a new hope, a uniting faith and vision.

That is just what he hoped to achieve by breaking down the disastrous barrier dividing devotion to God above from commitment to worldly progress here below. These "rival mysticisms" must not be allowed to divide mankind any longer. Advance toward God must be linked with social progress for the benefit of both. In an article entitled "The Heart of the Problem," he offered the following diagram, in which O^Y represents, he says, Christian faith aspiring upward, while O^X represents humanistic faith driving forward, and O^R is a "rectified" Christian faith capable of reconciling the two:

² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., *Hymn of the Universe*, trans. Gerald Vann (London: Collins, 1965), 138–39.



Through this rectified and rectifying faith, mankind would “achieve a breakthrough straight ahead by forcing its way over the threshold of some higher level of consciousness.” All who, in their own fashion, shared this conviction would advance in step together, be they Christian or otherwise.

I call this “diagonalism.” Teilhard called it “noogenesis.” By that, he meant the “ascent of the Universe towards consciousness,” the “drift of matter towards spirit,” a gradual liberation of consciousness from the primitive, material layers of the world—the triumph of the interior over the exterior, of mind over matter. Time itself is “the rise of the Universe into high latitudes where complexity, concentration, and consciousness grow and increase, simultaneously and correlatively.” As diversification gives way to unification, creation’s spatio-temporal dimensions will be reduced to a vanishing point. The newly emergent consciousness, satiated on “the whole divinisable substance of matter,” will break away “to join up with the supreme and universal focus Omega”—that is, with its divine Origin and Destiny. Is it not conceivable, he asks, “that Mankind, at the end of its totalization, its folding-in upon itself, may reach a critical level of maturity where, leaving Earth and stars to lapse slowly back into the dwindling mass of primordial energy, it will detach itself from this planet and join the one true, irreversible essence of things, the Omega Point?” That may be “a phenomenon perhaps outwardly akin to death: but in reality a simple metamorphosis and arrival at the supreme synthesis.” It will be “an escape from the planet, not in space or outwardly, but spiritually and inwardly, such as the hyper-concentration of matter upon itself allows.”³

Did I say attractive? It should not be necessary to point out that that all of this is far closer to the gnostic cosmology and eschatology than to the Judeo-Christian. Teilhard’s vision of salvation is undeniably escapist. His hope is not, as some pretend, in the renewal of

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, trans. Norman Denny (London: Collins, 1964), 122–23.

all things, but in the forsaking of all things. It is not hope in the restoration of a proper relationship between God and the world and between the soul and the body, but in the eventual repudiation of the body and of the world, of all that is material, through union with God. That is his idea of rectification, indeed of deification, and it is—not to put too fine a point on it—a decidedly heretical idea.

It goes without saying that this heretical cosmology requires an heretical Christology to support it, and that Christology is found in Teilhard's exposition of the "Cosmic Christ." The expanding cosmos seemed to have rendered our planet and our race, and hence also Jesus of Nazareth, virtually irrelevant, leaving individualistic materialism as the only option. One recalls here, more recently, Paul Feyerabend's challenge to Cardinal Ratzinger that the Church ought to have foreseen this problem long ago. Père Teilhard was certainly aware of it, and his answer was to shift the emphasis to something or someone more grand than a mere man. Jesus, he suggested, was only one expression among many of the Cosmic Christ, a local expression appropriate to the needs of our particular planet and race.

Already in 1916, the young Jesuit wrote in his journal of "surrender to the Cosmic Christ" as the option that would secure what is best *both* in classical spirituality *and* in a more world-affirming posture. Beyond the traditional two natures of Christ, he claimed, we must reckon today with his *third* nature: with his relation to the Universe, rather than to the Father and the Spirit. This he posited as our most pressing theological problem. We must get to grips not with "the Man-Jesus and the Word-God," but with "a third face of the theandric complex," with "the mysterious super-human person everywhere underlying the most fundamental institutions and the most solemn dogmatic affirmations of the Church." We must get to grips with "the consummating and cosmic Christ of St. Paul," who alone could hold everything together.⁴

But Teilhard's Cosmic Christ, who underwrites noogenesis, has in fact nothing to do with the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ to whom Paul bears witness. He is not Lord at all, really, but rather the product of the cosmic process. There is a sense in which he does not yet even fully exist. If evolution is noogenesis, noogenesis is *Christogenesis*. "Christ is the end-point of the evolution, even the natural evolution, of all beings; and therefore evolution is holy." "Quite

⁴ See J. A. Lyons, *The Cosmic Christ in Origen and Teilhard de Chardin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 189–90.

specifically,” says Teilhard, “it is *Christ whom we make or whom we undergo in all things.*”

So who was Jesus? In him, this future Cosmic Christ appeared proactively, or perhaps we should say retroactively, as a particular man. He did so in order to infuse into human nature a grace essential to evolution’s “hominization” phase. By his sacrifice on the Cross, Jesus provided the impetus to self-transcendence, without which unification—incorporation into one infinite Person—is ultimately impossible. In his resurrection, he anticipated our liberation from “the temporal zones of our visible world” into the oneness of the *Pleroma*. Having thus demonstrated a law common to all life, he began to draw the whole world after him as the enormous body of his ascension. The Cross now represents “the deepest aspirations of our age,” and “towards the peaks, shrouded in mists from our human eyes, whither the Cross beckons us, we rise by a path which is the way of universal progress.”

For Teilhard, the incarnation was a decisive but temporary affair, then. The Christ “appeared for a moment in our midst” that we might see and touch him “before vanishing once again, more luminous and ineffable than ever, into the depths of the future.” His withdrawal—both a going up and a going ahead, an ascension and an advance—means a going beyond the humanity he once shared with us. He has become “an immense and living force” to be encountered already, and worshipped, in all creatures. His presence is “silently accruing in things” until, in the Parousia, as if at a kind of flashpoint, it will suddenly break forth in all its splendor. For, as the twin vectors of our rectified faith “veer and draw together” they point us to the consummated Christ, the divine soul of a divinized creation.

To meld two opposing worldviews requires a powerful bond. Since Jesus of Nazareth could not supply that bond, Teilhard turned to the Cosmic Christ. But is that Christ something more substantial than a diagram, an invented metaphysic, an empty guarantee that forward is upward? And if so, can we follow Teilhard in addressing him as “Jesus”? For this much is clear: the first task of the Cosmic Christ is to dispose of the scandal of particularity with which Christianity has hitherto been burdened. Jesus of Nazareth is retained only as a reference point on our evolutionary chart, stretched out on the cross that is constructed for him by the intersection of Teilhard’s twin axes or aspirations. To expect belief in him today, as a living man, as “this same Jesus,” would not unite, but divide. The resurrected Christ,

whose strength bends these axes until they touch again at Omega point, is someone quite different. He is no longer the incarnate one, with his own human and bodily specificity, but the immanent one. "Why should we go searching the Judaea of two thousand years ago?" asks Teilhard. "You do truly appear to me as that vast and vital force which I sought everywhere that I might adore it."

On the basis of his Christology alone, it is impossible to speak, with the Pontifical Council, merely of reservations or room for constructive criticism. We are talking about heresy, full stop. Were the *monitum* to be lifted, what Pius XII called a "cesspool of errors" would slop out all the more readily into the Church. But we must add something now about Teilhard's view of the Church.

The Church is that "portion of the world which has reflexively become Christ" already. Little by little, it is harvesting "the world's expectancy and ferment," gathering together mankind's spiritual energies "in their most sublime form" so as to focus them on the Omega point. The Church is the primal fall, the evil that is inevitable in creation, reversing itself.

Let me explain. Teilhard's evolutionism, as already intimated, consists of a twofold process of descent into multiplicity (divergent evolution, subject to entropy) and ascent into unity (convergent evolution). There is first a spreading out of material entities and then a regathering through the perfection of inwardness. The spreading out can rightly be regarded as a fall, the regathering as redemption. "The multitude of beings is a terrible affliction," he avowed. Or in the equally plain words of his journal: "There is only one Evil = disunity." In human society, the Church serves to overcome disunity, or ought to. All that is required is a "simple readjustment" to orthodox beliefs, a turn from "the man who lived two thousand years ago" to the ubiquitous Christ who "shines forth from within all the forces of the earth." That will enable the Catholic faith to be retooled as one "containing and embracing all others," a strong and attractive faith that must eventually "possess the Earth." (Yes, this sounds rather like Schleiermacher in his Fifth Speech.)

The Church he describes as a phylum, a kind of genetic pattern that has emerged to govern the future unfolding of evolution. It fosters convergence. It strives towards a planetary synaxis. It demolishes all barriers to social unification—religious barriers in particular. It builds up Christ. When, in *Le Divin Milieu*, Teilhard speaks of "the onrush of the cult of the Holy Eucharist," this is what he has in view. This is

Christogenesis, the Church generating Christ. Has it not been busy from the start transforming creation, little by little, into an extension of the body of Christ through its daily Masses? Not in some crass physical sense, of course, but by the steady assimilation of humanity into the one communion of him who underlies everything. "As our humanity assimilates the material world, and the Host assimilates our humanity, the eucharistic transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. Step by step it irresistibly invades the universe." For, in a secondary but true sense, "the sacramental Species are formed by the totality of the world, and the duration of the creation is the time needed for its consecration."

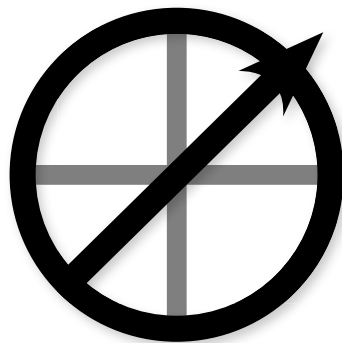
The Church, then, is engaged in effecting the consecration of everything. It is knitting together for Jesus, out of the stuff of creation, an immense body "worthy of resurrection." It is fulfilling its Marian task of bringing forth Christ. Through its cooperation with the world, the one who has hidden himself in the womb of the world will reappear. The Church is in labor, and the product of that labor will be the pure spiritual Unity it adores. In Teilhard's notorious "The Mass on the World," his offering of strange fire in the Ordos desert, he completes his act of Christogenetic idolatry: "'Lord.' Yes, at last, through the twofold mystery of this universal consecration and communion I have found one to whom I can whole-heartedly give this name. . . . Glorious Lord Jesus Christ: the divine influence secretly diffused and active in the depths of matter, and the dazzling centre where all the innumerable fibres of the manifold meet, . . . it is you to whom my being cried out with a desire as vast as the universe, 'In truth you are my Lord and my God.'"⁵

On the altar of Unity, the Church itself is to be a victim. According to Teilhard, it has become "the principal axis of evolution," the hub of "a perennial act of communion and sublimation" by which the Cosmic Christ "aggregates to himself the total psychism of the earth." But it cannot remain this if it is not prepared to grow and change with the world, to embrace the world in its own advancing humanity, to be fulfilled by the world. Its faith and praxis must be rectified by the pull of society at large. If it will not thus transcend itself, if it will not happily embrace the compromises of diagonalism, it can hardly hope to lead others in the quest for Omega. To assimilate the world, in other words, the Church must also be assimilated

⁵ Teilhard, *Hymn of the Universe*, 33–34; see also 19ff. and 94–95.

by the world. (And yes, when we recall Teilhard's statist inclinations, this does now sound very much like Hegel.) Who then is consecrating whom? Which is really the critical phylum? Does it even matter, or is that a distinction without a difference? If Christ and cosmos can be run together, and Christ and Church, what can separate Church and world? The whole is greater than the parts, and Christ is that whole. "Always from the very first it was the world, greater than all the elements which make up the world, that I was in love with; and never before was there anyone before whom I could in honesty bow down."

Teilhard's monistic drive explains the fact that he could describe not only Roman Catholicism, but also fascism and communism as being, "in line with the essential trend of cosmic movement."⁶ It is true that, after the Second World War, he could be found criticizing faceless and dehumanizing collectives. However, his Cosmic Christ—neither fully human nor fully divine, but itself a faceless *tertium quid*—pulled him steadily toward the reefs of the impersonal. "Even as late as 1946," notes John Passmore, Teilhard "was still prepared to write that it was too early 'to judge recent totalitarian experiments fairly,' to make up our minds whether 'all things considered, they have produced a greater enslavement or a higher level of spiritual energy.'"⁷ Teilhard was not blind to the fact that the unification of human society seemed to be producing not harmony, but turmoil and suffering—what Irenaeus called "minglings without cohesion"—but he had a kind of chaos theory by which to account for this: "Incoherence is the prelude to unification." Meanwhile, we must "look for our essential satisfaction in the thought that by our struggles we are serving, and leading to salvation, a personal Universe."



L'En Haut et l'En Avant
Upwards and onwards,
onwards and upwards!

⁶ Teilhard, *The Future of Man*, 46.

⁷ John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 246.

One can of course quibble about the details in interpreting Teilhard, and one can always find an intriguing remark or felicitous phrase, a quotable paragraph or page, that seems quite susceptible of an orthodox reading. But the Cross-cancelling outline is plain enough.⁸ Pius XII was not exaggerating. The Holy Office was not being overly scrupulous when, under John XXIII, it issued its warning. Karl Barth, for that matter, did not go too far when he described the thought of Teilhard de Chardin as a giant gnostic snake. With all due respect to the Pontifical Council for Culture, it is high time the Church's heel struck that snake a sharp blow on its head. The *monitum*, if it is to be lifted, should be lifted only for that purpose—to replace it with a condemnation of the material heresy with which Teilhard's work is replete.⁹ NEV

⁸ I have tried to represent that in the above diagram, which adds to Teilhard's own diagram the three missing quadrants.

⁹ Here, in sum, is a short list of his errors, each of which implies several others:

1. Creation, as the gnostics taught, entails a fall.
2. Diversity means disunity, and disunity is the only evil.
3. The redemption of creation involves overcoming matter with spirit and escaping, rather than renewing, the material world.
4. The risen Christ is not the man Jesus, but a spiritualizing force immanent in all creation.
5. Christ has three natures, not two: divine, human, and (synthesizing those two) universal.
6. The Church is building Christ by bringing his ubiquity to ritual expression.
7. Transubstantiation means the spiritualizing of matter.
8. The Church or city of God is one axis of Humanity as it fulfills its task of spiritualizing the world; the other is the city of man, with which the Church must fully (not partly or provisionally) identify and cooperate in a common enterprise.
9. The Cross represents the deepest aspirations of our age.
10. God is not, from and to all eternity, the Holy Trinity in transcendent splendor, who creates freely and grants being and goodness to all things that he makes, but rather, as Hegel taught, the Spirit-generating Process of diversification and unification.