

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a spirituality from the scientific view of the world.

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Abstract

Teilhard de Chardin besides his scientific work in geology and paleontology, especially related to the fossil origins of man in China, developed a philosophical and theological thought rethinking Christian faith taking into account the evolutionary view of the world provided by science. His thought sprung from a deep spirituality and mystic experience. His spirituality was founded on the role of Christ in an evolving universe, as the creator and the center of the evolving process. Here I present the main lines of his spirituality. The role of science as Teilhard is aware that science is the main force that drives today human progress. The relation between matter and spirit, the convergence of the cosmic evolving process to what he has called the Omega Point, that is identified with the Christ of Christian faith. According to Teilhard, we can neither think of the universe without its center in Christ nor of Christ without being the center of the universe. This leads to the concepts of Cosmic or Universal Christ and the process of cosmogenesis becoming a Christogenesis. Thus the world becomes transparent to the present of Christ in what he calls the “Divine Milieu” and the “Christique”.

Introduction

As a priest and Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's (1881-1955) greatest concern was first of all how to integrate Christian thought with the new evolutionary world view presented by modern science. We can already find this concern in his first writings and it will continue until the last pages written a few days before his death. His whole life rested on two columns his scientific work and his mystical experience. After joining the Jesuits he began his first scientific work in field geology, between 1905 and 1908, while he was a science teacher in the Jesuit school of Cairo. During the First World War he was called up to serve in the army as a stretcher-bearer, where he underwent the experience which he called afterwards a “baptism in reality”, his immersion in the great human confrontation. In 1919 after he finished his licentiate in science in Paris, he began his teaching of geology at the Institut Catholique that he had to abandon soon. In 1923 Teilhard made his first journey to China, where he worked on the geology of northern China and Mongolia. From this first journey his life will be tied to the work on geology and paleontology in China. From 1939 Teilhard began to be internationally known in scientific circles, made frequent journeys to France and United States and carried out field studies besides in China in Kashmir, Java, Burma and South Africa. His work becomes especially linked with the fossil origins of man. His scientific work was published in more than 200 articles. Beginning in 1916 he carried out also an intense work on religious and philosophical subjects linked with the evolutionary world view and the formulation of Christian faith. However, Teilhard kept apart his scientific work from his religious reflections. In his scientific articles there is no mention of the religious problems. He was, thus, a true scientist recognized for his work in geology and paleontology. However, for him scientific work also had an intrinsic religious value and constitutes in itself a type of worship. Thus he affirms that science and religion form like two faces of the same endeavor to know reality. Together with his scientific work Teilhard also carried out the development of an original philosophical and theological thought inspired by a true mystical experience. He expressed it in a large number of

essays and the two books, *The Human Phenomenon* and *The Divine Milieu*, that he was never allowed to published during his life.

The notes written out during his Spiritual Exercises (religious retreats made by Jesuits each year) allow us to find how his ideas formed also year after year the core of his meditation and prayer. In these notes we find that his vision of Christ and the world was not a theoretical system to present to others, but the motor and center of his whole spiritual life. Year after year his Spiritual Exercises are centered in the same ideas relating Christ and the world. The idea of Christ-Omega appears for the first time in his notes of 1922 and repeats in the following years. In 1940 appears the term “omegalize” to express the union of the universe with the “total Christ” and in the following year he presents the two perspectives that will summarize his activity: “universalize Christ” and “Christify the universe”. Thus Teilhard conceives his whole life as a fidelity to “Christ-Omega”. Finally, in 1950, near to his death he expresses that nothing should enter his life that it is not “Christifiable”, that is part of Christ. He shows also his concern for “ending well, that is, in a complete confession and faith to the Cosmos and the Christ-Omega. To end well, that is having had the time and occasion to formulate my essential message, the essence of my message”. In 1954 in the last day of his last Exercises he summarizes his vision with a single word: “Pan-Christism”, meaning all in Christ. In 1955 Teilhard died in New York in Easter day.

Main texts

We can follow the development of Teilhard’s spirituality through some of his key texts, from the earliest writings to the last one written a few months before his death. The fundamental lines are already present in his first writing *La vie cosmique*, but they will not be fully developed until his last and definitive ones.

La vie cosmique (1916)

Mon universe (1918)

La Messe sur le Monde (1923)

Le Milieu Divin (1927)

Comment je crois (1934)

Le Phénomène Humain (1947)

Le coeur de la matiere (1950)

Le Christique (1955)

These texts will help us to establish the general lines of Teilhard spirituality and to understand the role played by the scientific view of the world.

Son of the Earth and son of the Heaven

Teilhard repeats often in his writings that he feels himself being at the same time a “son of the Earth” (Teilhard writes Earth, World and Universe always with capital letters) and a “son of Heaven”. Thus he affirms: “I love passionately the World, but I

love God as expressed in Christ with the same passion”. Therefore the foundation of his spirituality lays on the synthesis of these two loves. These two poles of his love are always present in his life and he tries to synthesize them. He finds that this synthesis is realized in the Universal-Christ where the two are united. The two processes to carry out this synthesis are to *Christify the Universe* and to *universalize Christ*. First of all, the universe needs of Christ in order to achieve its perfection. Without Christ the universe will be without a head, it will lack its key element needed for the whole structure to be sustained and perfected. On the other hand, we cannot fully understand Christ unless considering him as the Alpha and Omega of the universe. Christ is both the creator (Alpha) and the final end and achievement (Omega) toward which the whole universe is attracted. The Incarnated Christ cannot be understood separated from the material universe in which he has been made present.

The role of science

Teilhard is aware of the role that science and technology have in the modern world, as the two main forces that drive today human progress. He does not speak much about technology, for he considers it included when he speaks of science, term he uses in a very general sense. In the modern world science, taken in this general sense, constitutes for him what he calls the “*Grande Affaire du Monde*”, a “human function as vital as nutrition and reproduction”. This must be understood in the context of his evolutionary conception of the world. Cosmic evolution, for Teilhard, extended by biological evolution on the earth continues today by human evolution. Thus at the human level, that is, in his terminology at the “Noosphere”, the conscious or thinking envelope of the earth, science occupies the tip of the evolutionary progress. From this point of view and taking into account that the whole evolution progresses toward a converging point he calls the Omega Point, identified by Teilhard with the Christ of Christian faith, he can affirm: “there is no other most powerful food for the religious life that the contact with well understood scientific truths”. With this, he means that science by itself is an important factor in religious life. Science shows the way of man’s search for truth that implicitly moves the world in the direction of its convergence in Christ.

In one step forward, Teilhard affirms: “Scientific research is a form of worship where the creative power of God is hidden and works around us”. This worshiping character of science springs from its consideration as the means by which we discover the nature of the universe and its dynamic evolution, whose final end and perfection is achieved by its union with the divine Omega Point, that is, with the cosmic Christ. Considering science as human work Teilhard sees it as the common endeavor of humanity which consciously or unconsciously leads it to its ultimate end. In this sense Teilhard can say that in science the only true “human-Christian mystique is developed that can achieve in the future a human unanimity”. Thus the common effort of science drives humanity towards its final unification through the process that Teilhard calls “socialization”. In conclusion, for him scientific work has in itself a religious value.

Key topics of his spirituality

In his essay *Comment je crois (1934)* Teilhard tries to formulate the main lines of his views. As a synthesis he writes in the front page the following lines:

Je crois que l’Univers est une Évolution

Je crois que l’Évolution va vers l’Esprit

Je crois que l'Esprit s'achève en du Personnel

Je crois que le Personnel suprême est le Christ-Universel

His whole thought is summarized in these four lines. He presents it as a “belief”, so he begins each line with: “I believe”. The first step is the evolutionary vision of the universe discovered by science, which extends from the initial big-bang to the intelligent life of man. Evolution continues today at the human level, that is, in the Noosphere. Evolution shows a direction that goes from simple to complex, but also from matter to spirit. The spirit achieves its perfection in the personal. The Omega Point toward which evolution finally proceeds must have a super-human personal nature. This supreme personal crowning of all evolution is the Universal Christ. Thus, the Universal Christ represents the ultimate achievement of the whole evolutionary cosmic process. His attracting power is acting on the cosmic evolution from the first to the last moment.

Matter and spirit

Science has shown that the universe evolves in the line of greater increment of complexity from the isolated elementary particles present after the big-bang to atoms and complex material compounds, to living beings and finally to man with consciousness. Consciousness belongs to the spiritual dimension in man. Teilhard rejects all dualism matter-spirit, as two independent substances, and presents a unifying concept of matter that includes the spiritual dimension. This spiritual dimension is related in the material dimension through its “complexity”. To a greater degree of complexity in matter corresponds a higher level in the spiritual dimension.

Materialism seeks to understand man only through his material dimension. It reduces man to a mere material object capable to be fully explained by its ultimate material elements. Teilhard follows the opposite way, recognizing the spiritual dimension in man he seeks to understand matter from this fact. Man is a self-conscious material being, therefore this quality of consciousness must be present in some way in all matter. This leads Teilhard to propose the idea that there is in matter besides its “exterior” aspect an “interior” one. The interior of matter is linked with its complexity. To a greater degree of complexity corresponds a greater degree of interiority. Interiority is in turn linked with consciousness and the spiritual dimension. Increasing complexity is, thus, identified with a greater spiritual dimension.

To this double aspects of matter (exterior and interior) corresponds two types of energy: “tangential” corresponding with physical energy, with which things interact with others at their same level and “radial” energy responsible of the convergence of evolution along the line of greater complexity and consciousness, that is, in the direction of the spirit. Radial energy can be also called “spiritual energy” and at human level is identified with “love” which unites elements keeping their identities. Thus the way of evolution is finally the way of love. These two types of energy are for Teilhard really the two components of a single fundamental energy that includes both. This energy drives the cosmic evolution from the isolated multiple to ever increasing complex unity, following the way from matter to spirit and from spirit through love to the Omega Point.

The Cosmic Christ

According to Teilhard evolution must converge to what he has called the Omega Point, which must be transcendent and personal and identifies with the God of religious faith.

The transcendent God has been formulated traditionally as the “God on Height”, but He must be considered also as the “God in advance”. He is not only the creator (Alpha) of the world, but also the center toward which the whole cosmic evolution tends (Omega).

Christian faith leads us to think that Christ by his incarnation and resurrection is precisely this Omega Point, cosmic center of creation. If the evolution of the universe is convergent and Christ occupies the function of Omega-Center, the evolutionary process of cosmogenesis can be considered as a “Christogenesis”. The whole evolution is, therefore, the process by which the “body” of the “Total-Christ” is built.

Therefore, according to Teilhard, we can neither think of the universe without its center in Christ nor of Christ without being the center of the universe. It is his cosmic attracting action that makes all things to converge toward himself, and thus consummates the evolutionary process of the universe.

The universal Christ

Teilhard uses also in this context the term “Universal-Christ”. He defines what he means by this in *Note sur le Christ universel* (1920) in the following form:

I understand by Universal-Christ, Christ as the organic center of the entire universe. Organic center, that is, the center from which all developments of the whole universe physically depend.. not only on the earth and humanity but in Sirius and Andromeda, ..This includes all realities on which we depend physically, not only the moral and religious efforts, but all growth of body and spirit. This Universal-Christ is what the Gospels present and specially St. Paul and St. John. This is the Christ from whom all great mystics have lived.

Divinization of activities

Teilhard based on his Christocentric vision of the Universe and of man formulates Christian ascetics in a new form as a process of divinization of activities and passivities. In this formulation he gets beyond the traditional scheme of good intentions, in which terrestrial works do not have value in themselves, but only as an occasion for a supernatural aim.

Teilhard insists that human activity or efforts must be considered as a participation in the achievement of the world in Christ. Therefore they have a value in themselves as the human part of the process of cosmic evolution that, as we have seen, has its final achievement in Christ. Then, nothing can be considered profane, since by the mystery of the Incarnation God has entered the evolutionary process of the universe and occupies its center that attract all to Himself. All human works are then part of the building of the body of the Universal Christ. This does not exclude the need also of fighting against all that hinder and obstruct our participation in this process. This justifies the need for an asceticism (*Le milieu Divin*, 1927, 31-65).

Divinization of passivities

Teilhard means by passivities of diminution everything that affects us in a negative way. They form the other half of human existence. They can be external or internal, as

they affect our body or our spirit. They may appear to be just negative, but actually they also form part of the process of evolution whose final aim is the formation of the body of Christ. What may look as something empty and scattered is in fact a mean for plenitude and unity. In life there is a time to grow and a time to decrease. Both cooperate as part of the general movement of human evolution in the building of the body of the Total-Christ. As there is a communion in action there is also one in diminution. In the latter instead of being we who act, God is acting on us. (*Le Milieu Divin*, 1927, 71-101)

The Divine Milieu. The Diaphanie of God

The *Divine Milieu* is the term Teilhard uses to express the presence of God in the universe. It represents a Center in which all the elements of the Universe unite and get in contact with each other.

In a world animated by the Incarnation, the *Divine Milieu* appears to us as a modification of the most profound essence of things. By it the world appears bathed by an internal light that intensifies its relief, structure and depths.

By the synthesis in Jesus through his Incarnation of all the elements of the world a *Diaphanie of God* is produced in the Universe. *Diaphanie of God* is another expression to indicate the transparency of the world of the presence of God. He expresses it saying that by the Incarnation the Divine Milieu reveals itself as a glow of the interior layers of being. Everything is penetrated by the presence of Christ. Thus, the presence of the Divine Milieu is present all around us and only it is needed to see it (*Domine, fac ut videam*, Lord may me see it).

Teilhard proceeds to say that the way inside the Divine Milieu is realized by purity, faith and fidelity. The objective is the communion in charity to form all in one only body. (*Le Milieu Divin*, 1927, 133-191)

The Mass on the World

We can find the Eucharistic formulation of Teilhard's spirituality in this prayer written in 1923. He sees the world as a total Host which is transformed into the body and blood of Christ in each Eucharistic celebration. From this point of view this prayer can be considered as a summary of his spirituality.

Offering: Receive, O Lord, this all-embracing host which your whole creation, moved by your magnetism, offers you at this dawn of a new day. This bread, our toil, is of itself, I know, but an immense fragmentation. This wine, our pain, is no more, I know, than a draught that dissolves.

Consecration: Fire has once more penetrated the Earth. The Universe an immense Host has been converted in Flesh. All Matter is now incarnated, oh my God, by your Incarnation.

Communion: I will extend my hands toward the burning bread that you present me. Lord Jesus, I accept to be possessed by you. How can I refuse this chalice, Lord, when through the bread you has given me the passion for uniting to you beyond life through death has enter in me.

Prayer: Lord, at last, through all the powers of the Earth, I recognize you as my sovereign and I hand myself over to you. Glorious Christ, diffused influence in the sinus

of Matter, glaring Center where all the fibers without number of the Multiple are united .. It is to You that my whole being calls with a desire as large as the Universe.

The Christique

The last essay written shortly before his death, *Le Christique* (1955), represents a last version of his vision about Christ and the world. It represents the synthesis between *cosmic convergence* and *Christic emergence*.

Science has discovered the process of cosmic evolution following the direction of complexity. At planetary dimensions on earth increasing complexity implies increasing conscience. Evolution must continue at human level and must be convergent. This implies the existence of the Ultra-human and the Omega Point as the end of all evolution. Christian faith discovers the insertion of Christ by his Incarnation in the process of evolution, which expands by his resurrection to integrate the whole humanity in one body, the Body of Christ. The universe and Christ complement each other in a *Christified Universe* and a *Universalized Christ*.

Thus the consummation of the Universe by Christ and of Christ by the Universe takes place. In this process a new evolutionary super-milieu appears, the *Divine Milieu*. The *Christique* is then the union and synthesis of the cosmic demands of an incarnated Word and the potentialities of a convergent Universe.

Teilhard mystic

In a few words Teilhard's spirituality it is not only the results of a theological reflection on the modern image given by science and the role of Christ, but mainly the fruit of a true mystic experience, in which the presence and action of Christ gives full meaning to the evolutionary universe. For him neither Christ can be conceived apart from the universe, nor the universe apart from Christ. Teilhard lived with passion this Christ's presence and action in the world, and he exerted himself to communicate it to others, in spite of all the obstacles and misunderstandings that he found. The Christcentric character of his spirituality is clearly expressed in the prayer at the end of his autobiographic essay *Le coeur de la matiere*, that ends in this way:

God, who, in order to present yourself to our worship as He who evolves and makes evolve, you are from now on the only one who can satisfy us - free at last all the clouds that still hide you – those of hostile prejudices and of false believes. Let emerge, by the Diaphanie and the Fire, your universal Presence. Oh Christ, always greater!

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