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Teilhard de Chardin's View of the New Man

H. GÜNTHER*

1. The History of our Planet

For Pierre Teilhard de Chardin it is no question whether evolution has taken place,¹ but only *how* it has done so. In his important book *Le Phénomène Humain* he develops the theory of an integral evolution, according to which life emerges from dead matter, and man from animal. The whole cosmos including man is understood as a continuous process of evolution, in which each phase has its distinctive period. There have been three very different and clearly distinguishable stages:

- (a) Geosphere—the earth's crust solidifies after a process of cooling down; no trace of life; exclusive presence of inorganic matter.
- (b) Biosphere—life emerges, unfolded gradually in various forms.
- (c) Noosphere—man enters upon the terrestrial scene.

The hypothesis that a transition took place from inorganic matter to organic matter and life cannot as yet be completely proved, but is accepted by almost all scientific investigators. When life had gradually developed and had reached a high degree of complexity an utterly new phenomenon was manifested in the womb of life: the entry of man.

After Galileo Galilei and Charles Darwin it seemed that man had lost not only his central place in the universe, but also his independent status in relation to his natural environment. Man was only an accidental 'off-shoot' of the animal kingdom. For Teilhard the difference between man and the primates is no longer only a matter of degree. Teilhard envisages in the entry of man the dawn of a new phase of the world's history: in man alone the world becomes conscious of itself. Man is the spearhead of evolution. Over many millions of years nature has been at work shaping man. He obviously is the end of a long course, but this course is not at an end. Evolution moves on into the future. Why should the laws that have governed the past lose their force all of a sudden? It is Teilhard's conviction that these laws have their validity also for the times to come.

2. The Law of Increasing Complexity and Increasing Consciousness

How can these laws be described? Teilhard claims that the course of the whole world has all the time been moving in the direction of

* Dr Günther teaches systematic theology at Serampore College.

¹ Since Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), evolution has claimed the unremitting attention of biologists, anthropologists, and theologians, but is still rejected even today: cf. H. Enoch, *Evolution or Creation*, Madras 1966.

what is more complex: from elementary particles to atom, from atom to molecule, from molecule to cell, from the cell to pluricellular creatures and to more and more complex organisms, ending up with man, the most complex entity we have on the earth.

Running parallel to this *increasing complexification* there is another feature of evolution: the course of this world is orientated toward an ever *increasing* degree of *consciousness*. Throughout the evolutionary process there can be discerned a gradual growth of psychic manifestation marked by a gradual refining and extension of the nervous system. Even for the future Teilhard expects so much of a positive eugenic that he believes a superior race of men to be in prospect. Now, we may consider that view to be merely a kind of materialism. But for Teilhard 'matter' is never understood in a materialistic sense; matter has both an exterior physicochemical aspect and an interior vital, conscious aspect. The greater the complexity of matter, the more its consciousness grows.

3. God and the Universe

No doubt, Teilhard was in the first instance a geologist and palaeontologist and not a philosopher or theologian. Nevertheless, he always was as preoccupied with the religious issues as he was with the purely scientific ones. For many people the world of science and the world of faith constitute totally different territories. Not so for Teilhard. For him God and the universe form the twin poles of his whole thinking. Natural sciences and Christian faith need each other. He tries to discover the connection between them. From the very start of his scientific career onwards he was convinced that 'a reconciliation must be possible between cosmic love of the world and heavenly love of God...between the cult of progress and the passion for the glory of God.'²

It is not wrong to say that for the Jesuit Teilhard the key to evolution was the presence and action of God in the world and more particularly the presence and action of Christ. It might be worth mentioning in this connection how important the Eucharist is for Teilhard, not only as the centre of his own spiritual life, but also as the focus of that unity between God and the material world which points to an ultimate transformation of matter.

4. The Past points to the Future

If we want to understand the world in its totality it is not enough to discover the principles of the past evolutionary process, but we have to take a look also at the future. Reading Teilhard's letters one can continually come across his feeling, 'that historical and geographical research is, in itself, empty and deceptive, the true science being that of the future as gradually disclosed by life itself.'³ The past has revealed

² *La Vie Cosmique*, 1916, in *Écrits du Temps de la Guerre*, Paris, Grasset, 1965, p. 46. (English translation: *Writings in Time of War*, Collins, London, 1968).

³ *Letters from a Traveller*, Collins, London, 1962, p. 50.

to us how the future is built, i.e., in which direction this process of evolution is going to move.

Up to now evolution has been accomplished 'passively', so to speak; but with the entry of man a fundamental change has entered the situation. The human activity of mind and intellect seems to be a turning point in the structure of life. 'During the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, the main effort was concentrated on illuminating mankind's *past*—and the outcome of these investigations was in effect to demonstrate evidentially that the appearance on earth of thought went hand in hand, biologically speaking, with a humanization of life. And now the moment has dawned when the light of scientific research, *its beam turned in a forward direction*, begins to disclose to us an even more astonishing perspective in the extended line of the "phenomenon of man": namely, a rapidly advancing "humanization" of mankind.⁴ The noosphere presents itself to us a *noogenesis*, i.e., as a growth-process of mind. Man himself is still in evolution and has to do his part toward a completion of that process. This is not a deterministic view of history. The future will rather be the outcome of an interplay between the laws of nature and human freedom. But what about God?! Is there any place left for God? For Teilhard more than ever before: the world is engaged in discovering God.

5. Planetization

According to the fundamental law of increasing complexity and consciousness deduced from the study of the past Teilhard projects this law into the future. He not only expects an increase of complexity and consciousness for man's future but discovers evidences for his hypothesis already among today's mankind: increasing *socialization* and growing out of multiplicity into *unity*. (Living in India one may rather have the feeling that we are on the way to a disastrous 'massification'!) Teilhard however perceives numerous symptoms pointing to a worldwide sense of solidarity and organized unification. Mankind is becoming one and plainly bent on creating some organizational pattern on a planetary scale. We may resist this tendency for a time, but along with the influence of science, technology and the economic order this unavoidable interpenetration of cultures, the 'planetization' of man, has already begun.

6. Omega

Teilhard seems to be quite certain that this planetization of mankind will continue to advance in the direction of a growing unification. He cannot but see the world as a world with a convergent structure. The question arises: to what final point will this evolutive process eventually lead? It is the point where the law of universal love will

⁴ *Le Christ Evoluteur*, p. 2, (Cahiers Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, No. 5), cit. in N. M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Fontana, London, 1968, p. 88.

have reached its climax, a point which Teilhard refers to as the point 'Omega'.

If we really have understood that there is no longer any gap between the evolutive process and God's activity, and that this unity between God and the material world is even pointing to an ultimate transformation of matter,⁵ we shall hardly be surprised that this Omega point is to be ascribed to Christ. 'Christ occupies for us, hic et nunc, so far as his position and function are concerned, the place of the point Omega.'⁶ St Paul's letter to the Colossians⁷ may be understood anew in the light of that dynamic world picture: all things have been created by Christ; and they are created for him, they tend toward him, in order through him to realize their end, which is to make God manifest.

7. The New Man

If Christ is the One in whom all things cohere, and on whom they depend, what does it mean for our place and task here and now? From what has been said so far, it is only natural to consider all activity on man's part which in some measure contributes to mankind's ascent toward this final end of history as furthering the coming of God's kingdom. That intrinsic orientation toward point Omega may become the great source of inspiration for our attitude and work in this temporary plane. Faith in Christ as the ultimate goal of the world's history is the greatest incentive to work confidently for building the future.

The New Man needed is the Christian⁸ in whom coincides both love for the task on this earth in an evolving world and love for Christ as the goal of the world's history. Karl Marx is wrong in accusing religion of alienating man from himself and from his task in this world. On the contrary, Teilhard considers Christian faith to be the incentive for man's creative activity through which he might raise himself to an even higher degree of perfection.

We may designate Teilhard's conception as a kind of humanism (and Teilhard himself accepted that term), but we must distinguish between the outmoded humanism of Plato and the Renaissance and what took shape in Teilhard's work: 'An evolutive neo-humanism, supported by the conviction of the existence of an Ultra-Human.'⁹ The old Greeks dreamed of a 'harmoniously developed man'¹⁰ in an aesthetic context. Teilhard's dream is directed to the fully evolved man rising beyond himself in order to reach his true goal in the 'sur-homme' (superhuman): 'The humanism of the cosmos is outmoded and out-

⁵ Cf. what we have said above in section 3: 'God and the Universe.'

⁶ *Super-Humanité, Super-Christ, Super-Charité*, 1943, p. 9, (cit. in N. M. Wildiers, *op. cit.*, p. 135).

⁷ Col. 1:15-20.

⁸ Teilhard usually avoids speaking in individual terms. So we should rather speak of a 'New Mankind' and the 'Church' (i.e., the Roman Catholic Church), which is the 'springboard' from which to plunge into every part of the world of matter and so 'Christify the earth' (V. Sproston, *op. cit.*, p. 87).

⁹ Cited by C. Cuenot, *op. cit.*, p. 457 (English translation, *op. cit.*, p. 377).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

distanced and is making way for a humanism of cosmogenesis.¹¹ This is perhaps the point which is most striking in an environment for a:1 by the Hindu tradition: that man has to take the historical situation in which he is involved very seriously, for it is up to him whether the process of evolution will reach its final goal.

Questions and Difficulties

1. I remember a Catholic critique on Teilhard stating that evolutive causality destroys man's freedom. I think it is not evolutive causality which hinders man's freedom (I consider man's freedom dependent on causality), but teleology which being a human phenomenon is transferred and applied to the cosmos. How can one relate teleology and eschatology to each other? Are they really identical?

2. If the future is really the outcome of both the laws of nature and human freedom, then the result seems to be totally uncertain and a reliable picture of the future cannot be formed. Teilhard can only envisage a future extended along the line constituted by the past, as a further and higher implementation of the law governing the cosmic process (of the past). But this is only the context of man's freedom. What about the freedom itself?

3. The problem of evil seems to be underestimated in Teilhard's positive prophecy. I am afraid evil is not really understood as sin in the biblical sense (*hamartia*—gap between God and Man). Teilhard was honest enough to admit: 'On this question, in all loyalty, I do not feel I am in a position to take a stand.' That is why he left that issue 'to theology, so that it may add precision and depth.'¹²

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *The Phenomenon of Man*, Collins, London, 1959, p. 313.

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- (c) *The Teilhard Review* is published twice yearly by the Teilhard Centre for the Future of Man, whose headquarters are at 3, Cromwell Place, London SW7.