

Toward the World Soul an Introduction to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's life

1881: May 1st, birth of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

1899: March 20th, enters the Jesuit order at Aix-en-Provence as a novice

1901: takes first vows at Laval

1905-1908: Egypt, philosophy teacher, several excavations

1908-1911: Hastings, England, ordained priest

1912-1914: studied science in Paris, specialized in paleontology and geology

1914-1918: World War I, stretcher bearer

1919-1922: Paris, License, Doctorate, Professor at the Catholic Institute

1923.-1946: long trips to China, Central Asia, India, and Java as geologist;

1929: working in China when Sinanthropus man was discovered

1947: myocardial infarction

1947: September, refused permission by Rome to publish philosophic works

1951-1954: trips to South Africa, America, Europe

1954-1955: final stay in New York

1955; April 10th, Easter Sunday, dies.

Introduction to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

His life was one constant search, one continuous expansion. It was a life of excitement expressed in his writings, in his giving to others. Although not permitted to publish his findings he remained undaunted, for he believed in his work. A work for God and man, a work permeated with tremendous hope for man

and the future. Inspiration, courage and stamina led him to a new threshold: a window into an untouched universe, a frontier which man can finally begin to explore.

Father Teilhard witnessed World War I as a stretcher bearer, and at one point it was suggested that he be chaplain, to which he replied that he wished to remain in the ranks where he was of more use to the men. This attitude characterizes his entire life. There are countless stories of his continual spirit of generosity, his sense of service. These traits were such an integral part of him as to be quite unconscious. And through this personality is demonstrated an acute awareness of man, a profound insight into the world.

... And if I am destined not to return from these heights (Verdun, 1916) I would like my body to remain there, molded into the clay of the fortifications, like a living cement thrown by God into the stone-work of the New City.

The world was at a point where it was ready to receive a "creative transformation." There is a sense of destiny, a sense that the struggle to emerge is a positive one; it is a step onward in the general formula of providence. The concept of a "New City" reflects Teilhard's consideration of motion as constantly going forward.

This necessary direction is reiterated in writings pertaining to World War II. He states that the world has never "had a greater need for a new faith or been more released from old forms to receive it... Christianity must show itself, with all its resources, for renewal, now or never.... "Because this war as war was so total, the need for humanity to survive was paramount.

The root of the evil is not in the apparent conflicts but very far away from them, it seems, in the inner fact that men have despaired of God's personality.

Man has removed himself very far from a view of God, and from the vision of his creative responsibilities. Man has to re-establish himself, as well as realize that history and the world, provides an "unlimited horizon." Otherwise, it would be in "the inadmissible situation of having to wither away every time the consciousness born in it reached the age of reason." Once again there is a sense of movement, that it continues forward, and indeed that it must do so.

Although there is only one direction -- forward -- this does not imply that the past is to be discarded. Teilhard's one scientific preoccupation was his desire to uncover man's origins "to find via the past the guiding thread of our action." As a geologist and paleontologist he set about to read the story of early man as found in rocks, fossils, and the matter of the earth. If "the world, taken as a whole, is something infallible (first stage) and if, moreover, it moves toward spirit (second stage); then it must be capable of providing us with what is essentially necessary to the continuation of such a movement." The better man can understand how he has evolved, then the better equipped he is to advance.

Blessed be you, universal matter, immeasurable time, boundless ether, triple abyss of stars and atoms and generations: you who by overflowing and dissolving our narrow standard of measurement reveal to us the dimensions of God.

But it is important to remember that "matter" is only a beginning, for everything moves toward "spirit." "By spirit I mean 'spirit of synthesis and sublimation.'" Teilhard's entire life was the "passion for growth." This growth is a continual refining process into greater and greater consciousness. The end result of this purification is the emergence of a transformed being using his full creative powers. Parallel with the growth to consciousness is the increased awareness of unity.

... Instead of looking at the cosmos in the aspect presented by its external, material sphere, turn back to the point at which all the radii meet. These too, brought back to unity-the Whole exists....

What was at first a vague intuition of universal unity has become a rational and well-defined awareness of a presence. I know now that I belong to the world and that I shall return to it, not simply in the ashes of my body, but in all the developed powers of my mind and heart. *I can love the world.*

The last statement is an extraordinary belief in the world and in man's ability. Teilhard constantly felt the interplay of matter and spirit. One could not be without the other: "... spirit which is born within, and as function of matter," and both were part of striving toward the Absolute.

Christianity serves as a framework for achieving such a goal, but it has to be an expanded and revitalized structure. Christianity, more precisely, Roman Catholicism,

... disappointed me by its narrow representations of the world, and its failure to understand the part played by matter... develops without any reference to cosmic evolution. Christianity gives the impression of not believing in human progress. It has never developed the *sense of the earth.*

Christianity had to acknowledge this cosmic evolution if it was ever to advance. It had to realize "the world as a coordinated system of activity which is gradually rising up towards freedom and consciousness...irreversible and convergent." A "universal Christ" can be introduced only if Christianity can extend itself to new dimensions of the world. "The universal Christ is a synthesis of Christ and the universe." It is not merely a Christ as mediator, but a Christ "total... only at the term of a universal evolution"; that is at a point where man acknowledges the purpose of this pursuit of evolving into the universe.

In the great river of mankind the three currents (Eastern, human[ist pantheism], Christian) are coming to run together... A general convergence of religions upon a universal Christ who fundamentally satisfies them all... [this is the] only possible conversion of the world, and the only form in which a religion of the future can be conceived.

Teilhard refuses the idea that many consider religion merely being a stage in man's infancy. "The more man becomes man, the more will it be necessary for him to be able to, and to know how to worship." This can happen when people give themselves "... to the religion which activates them most as human beings," the religion which allows them to develop both vertically and horizontally: essentially, the religion of the universe.

Although Teilhard was fortunate in being able to fulfill two vocations during one life span, it is not to assume that there was no struggle. In an essay entitled "The Priest" he demonstrates that the continual push to "promote, in however small a degree, the awakening of spirit in the world, is to offer to the incarnate Word an increase of reality... you have a universal function to fulfill: the offering of God to the entire world." And this push must also involve the internal development, so that...

over and over he must transcend himself, tear himself away from himself, each reality attained and left behind gives us access to the discovery and pursuit of an ideal of higher spiritual content.... If man is to come up to his full measure, he must become conscious of his infinite capacity for carrying himself still further.

Throughout his work Teilhard sought this ideal. In his endless journeys throughout the world he probed, seeking clues to the secrets of ancient man. "To be more is in the first place to know more," he believed. And what better way to learn more from what man has already done; to take this knowledge and apply it further; to find a way for man to draw closer to the universal. And so he prayed:

Since once again... in the steppes of Asia -- I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar, I will raise myself beyond these symbols, to the pure majesty of the real itself. I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labors and sufferings of the world.

Accompanying his exalted moments were also anxious periods, when "on certain days the world seems a terrifying thing: huge, blind and brutal. It buffets us about, drags us along and kills us with complete indifference." Because of this, the need to struggle and to win implies that there is no such thing as "peace conceived as a repose. Peace is not the opposite of war. It is war carried above and beyond itself in the conquest of the trans-human."

Teilhard acknowledged the Pascalian infinity/nothingness, time/space, but he was not dwarfed by it. As a historian of the earth he set about the gigantic task of finding the Whole. Through recorded history, be it fossil or rock, he wanted to show how earth (matter) is a beginning. All that has transpired through the ages has a purpose, and a structure which is discernible. The world is expanding; it is still being created and continues to evolve. Within this framework spirit exists, and as one becomes attuned to the world one begins to grow into the awareness of spirit: convergence and unity-the Whole.

Teilhard's belief in the world was great, but possibly his faith in man's ability to actualize was even greater. "...The expectation of heaven cannot remain alive unless it is incarnate. What body shall we give ours today? That of a huge and totally human hope. "Teilhard was ever ready to bring that hope to life, to "get to work-quickly, right now" on the basis of a simple formula that "all we have to do is to let the very heart of the earth... beat within us."