

## Teilhard de Chardin - 50 Years Later

Jamaica Plain, May 29, 2005, Rev. Terry Burke

This winter at the church retreat I saw Father James Skahen, a Jesuit and geologist that I met many years ago. As we were finishing our conversation, he enthusiastically said, "Remember that this year is the 50th anniversary of Teilhard de Chardin's death!" Dr. Frank Holmes, who was our minister emeritus when I first came to Jamaica Plain and the epitome of a learned minister, was also a fan of Teilhard's work. I also remember how in the 1980's my Unitarian Universalist colleague in Cambridge, Ed Lane, would quote from memory a passage from Teilhard to the effect, 'It is Sunday, and as a priest I must say mass, but here in the desert there is no bread or wine. So I will celebrate my mass on the altar of the world.'

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a great scientist, mystic, and religious thinker. However, if you remember only one thing about Teilhard, remember that he LOVED evolution. This is in stark contrast to many conservative Christians in our country today. I heard of a recent interview that National Public Radio's Terry Gross conducted with a conservative thinker, who blamed all of America's problems on the theory of evolution. Teilhard, on the other hand, wrote "Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow."

Teilhard was born in southern France in 1881; his father was an amateur scientist and his mother something of a mystic. Among his "most valuable possessions" were characteristic pebbles that he carried with him from the area of his birth. He LIKED ROCKS. For a time he taught at a Jesuit school in Cairo, where his interests in geology and paleontology blossomed. He also read French philosopher Henri Bergson's work *Creative Evolution*. The idea of evolution fired his imagination, though, unlike Bergson, he felt that evolution must have a purpose and a goal. A few years later the Vatican shifted to ultra conservative positions, condemning liberal "modernism" and the theory of

evolution. Teilhard saw this increasing conservatism as a challenge to his presenting faith in a "more real and universal way."

Teilhard's younger brother was killed at the beginning of World War One, and his priest brother served as a front line stretcher-bearer for the four years of the war. He carried the wounded and dying at such battles as Verdun and Chateau Thierry, where millions of men were killed and maimed. Teilhard was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor for his heroism. The horrors of the war intensified his mystical belief in evolution.

Following the war, Teilhard completed a doctorate in geology at the Sorbonne in Paris. He started teaching at Catholic institutions, but ran afoul of the authorities because of his non-traditional ideas on original sin and his support for the theory of evolution. He went to China, where his sister had been a nun working with the poor, to teach and do research. He was to spend most of the next 20 years in that country. Soon he was also forbidden to teach in China, though he was allowed to do research in geology and paleontology. In July of 1925, Catholic authorities forced Teilhard to sign a document repudiating his theories on evolution and original sin; it was the same week as the guilty verdict in the Scopes "Monkey Trial."

Teilhard was a brilliant scientist. In 1929 he was involved in the discovery and analysis of "Peking man" (some think that Teilhard may have staged the famous hoax of "Piltdown man"). He created the first geological survey of China. While doing scientific work on far-flung expeditions in the years 1932-36, his father, mother, younger brother and sister all died while he was away from France. In 1937, he traveled to the United States to receive an honorary degree from a Catholic university. A New York Times article described him as "Priest thinks humans descended from apes," and his honorary degree was rescinded. In 1937 he was also instructed to only publish works on purely scientific subjects.

Teilhard had been working on a book about evolution, correctly translated *The Human Phenomenon*, usually in English called *The Phenomenon of Man*. Teilhard is sometimes

criticized for not learning about Confucian ideas while in China, which would have enriched his theories, and for regarding the earth-centered religions of some of the indigenous peoples he encountered as only evolutionary predecessors of Christianity. His writing is often dense and obscure, perhaps deliberately so to confuse his censors. Then again, mystical writings are often obscure.

In his book, Teilhard describes four stages of evolution - galactic evolution, the evolution of earth, the evolution of life on earth, and the evolution of consciousness. Evolution is the mystical purpose, the "Ariadne's Thread" that leads us past the labyrinthine dead ends as the world grows into a "single thinking envelope" of consciousness. Teilhard wrote that just as there is a "biosphere" or layer of living things on the earth, so there is a "noosphere" (based on the Greek word noos or "mind") which is the layer of consciousness.

For Teilhard, humans were not the purpose of evolution, but "an arrow" pointing to the final unification of consciousness into a collective mind, that "single thinking envelope." He saw the hundreds of thousands of scientists working world wide doing research as a "vast organic system" that was an evolutionary step toward greater complexity and connection of mind. One commentator described the goal of this increasing consciousness as "a globe surrounded by a brain." Teilhard also believed that space/time was cone shaped, and that increasing evolutionary complexity yields unity at what he called the "Omega Point." At the mystical "Omega Point," everything will be part of a unified consciousness. Some have questioned the depersonalization that such an "Omega Point" suggests. The "Omega Point" is also reminiscent of the Biblical line that "all will be all in all."

For Teilhard, Christ is "realized in evolution." Along with the traditional two natures of Christ, human and divine, he argues that Christ has a third "cosmic nature." Teilhard's beloved rocks also had "pre-life" as part of his vision of what he called "Christian pantheism." His ideas brought Teilhard into increasing conflict with Catholic authorities.

Following the revolutionary upheavals in China, he was invited to lecture at Columbia University; American Catholic officials would not grant him permission to do so. Teilhard was then invited to fill the vacant chair in pre-historic studies at the Sorbonne. Summoned to Rome to discuss the academic offer and to defend his theories, Teilhard said that he would "stroke the tiger's whiskers." Vatican officials made clear that Teilhard would not be allowed to teach at the Sorbonne, and that his religious writings would never be published in his lifetime.

Teilhard had said that the "spirit" of what he was doing was more important than his ideas. He continued to work quietly in New York City. At the end of his life he requested permission to live again in his native France. The French religious authorities responded with a polite but firm "non." His letters to family and friends show no bitterness, and he died on Easter Sunday, April 10th, 1955.

Following the reforms of Vatican II, Teilhard's works were finally published, and he had about five minutes of fame. His works are still on the list of "monitored" writings of the Vatican. The good-natured scholar and mystic is the subject of websites like "Teilhard de Chardin is in Hell."

The priest in the film *The Exorcist* is supposed to be based on Teilhard de Chardin; there is not much room for personal evil in his progressive theories of evolution. Judging by websites, Jungians are fond of Teilhard. Some Internet visionaries see the 'Net as providing an evolutionary step toward the greater connection and consciousness of the noosphere. Proponents of the Gaia Hypothesis see Teilhard as a precursor of their idea of the earth as a "colossal living biological super system" with humans as the consciousness. Some Artificial Intelligence researchers feel they are following Teilhard's ideas of evolution by giving consciousness to material forms. Teilhard's concept of the "cosmic Christ" was further developed by theologian Matthew Fox's "creation-centered" spirituality. I introduced Fox at a Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship lecture at the UU General Assembly in 1989. Like Teilhard, Fox also had trouble with Vatican authorities; finally he left the Catholic Church

Fifty years after his death, what is the meaning of Teilhard's legacy? He felt that the church had to be in relationship with the modern world, and showed a mystical way that the Catholic Church has chosen to ignore. He loved science and evolution, seeing God at work in both. Amidst the horrors and wars of the twentieth century, Teilhard was able to maintain an ultimate spiritual hope in the future.

Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "The day will come when, after harnessing space, the winds, the tides, gravitation, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, we will have discovered fire. "

We give thanks for those, like Teilhard de Chardin, who try to harness the energies of science and love.