
TEILHARD 2005: RETROSPECTS AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

In this 50th anniversary year of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's passing, we first review his life and then his unique synthesis of Christian doctrine with an evolutionary cosmos. In so doing, a 20th scientific materialism which leads to a pointless universe and evolution is contrasted with new understandings of a cosmic genesis that innately grows in animate complexity, consciousness and spirit, as Teilhard foresaw. Teilhard 2005 conferences at the United Nations are next noted, along with a history of the American Teilhard Association. We conclude with some thoughts on science and religion, and a glimpse of a 21st century Teilhardian vision.

Keywords: Teilhard, cosmic genesis, evolution, natural theology

1. Introduction

The year 2005 is most distinguished as the 100th anniversary of the publication of Albert Einstein's three papers that revolutionized physics. It is also the 50th anniversary of the passing of the French Jesuit and scientist, priest and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which is also commemorated by conferences and events. Teilhard (1881-1955) and Einstein (1879-1955) were close contemporaries not only in their years but also in their sense of a comprehensible, deeply spiritual universe. A little known fact is that they died within about a week of each other, Pierre on April 10 (Easter Sunday) and Albert on April 18. Accordingly, in this article we will survey Teilhard's life and vision, noting an affinity with Einstein's, consider the past half century of the acceptance of his thought, and include some words on the American Teilhard Association. Along the way, we will contrast an older 20th century expiring universe with a 21st century glimpse of a numinous cosmic creation that Teilhard foresaw. A website reference source for this paper will be cited in turn.

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2. Teilhard de Chardin's life and synthesis of Christian doctrine

Born in the mountainous Auvergne region of southern France, Teilhard spent his early years amongst its rocks, flora and fauna from which he gained an insight into their immanent vitality. Trained both in theology and the natural sciences, he played a leading role in the discovery of the Peking Man in the Gobi desert in the 1930's. His many literate writings generally took two paths – more scientific works such as *The Phenomenon of Man* [1] and *Man's Place in Nature* [2], and such classics of modern mysticism as *The Divine Milieu* [3] and *Hymn of the Universe* [4].

Since his evolutionary Christianity was far ahead of the times, Teilhard was not permitted by Rome to publish in his lifetime, except for technical papers and some philosophical essays. His order stationed him in China for many years and he only returned to Paris after the war. A steady flow of manuscripts and articles continued even in his last years in New York City. After his death these luminous writings, unlike anything seen before, began to appear in print first in French and then in English. A profusion of volumes were published into the 1970's with collections such as *Activation of Energy* [5], *The Future of Man* [6], and *Science and Christ* [7].

For what Teilhard sought was nothing less than a reconceived Christian corpus in the light of a temporally developing, organic universe, a true genesis. In so doing, as an editorial in the Jesuit journal *America* (March 28, 2005) [8] for his anniversary notes, he made possible a passage from the Tridentine weight of a flawed, guilt-ridden world to witness its immanent risen divinity. This is possible because the locus and vector of history has shifted from a terminal passing away to life's regnant emergence still in process, still unfinished, of which the reflective human phenomenon is an intended participant.

Surely a turn of events and perspective not considerate before the 20th century, much in discussion, as it speaks of an unexpected reprieve of this earthly sojourn. Teilhard writes in *Christianity and Evolution*: "With cosmogenesis being transformed, as we said, into Christogenesis, it is...the very being of the world which is now personalized. Someone, and no longer something, is in gestation in the universe" [9]. In some providential way, God above, Alpha, is joined and infused with Christ within and ahead, Omega. And as Georgetown University theologian John Haught observes [10], for example, this does not set aside or usurp God's creative activity, rather it is quite to be accomplished through human endeavor.

But an unresolved quandary remains with regard to the prevalent scientific concept of the universe. We seem today in the midst of a cosmic Copernican Revolution between two opposite models or paradigms, which are often conflated. Both Albert Einstein and Pierre Teilhard believed in an ordained, knowable realm that God does not play dice with. Physicist Einstein discerned its relativity and quantum dimensions, while geologist and biologist Teilhard articulated an animate cosmos whose life evolves and emerges by a tandem

sequence of complexity and consciousness. This directed orthogenesis develops much like an organism because it is similarly guided by an innate, creative force, a 'within of things'.

But in the past decades, a materialism has gained sway to the extent as galaxies fly apart at an accelerating rate, the mechanical universe is said to be pointless, indifferent to life and people. The lead article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Physics Today* (January) for the 2005 World Year of Physics states that human beings have no role to play in such a hostile universe [11]. A similar pessimism holds in consequent evolutionary theory as its modern synthesis based on random mutation and selection alone also concludes that people are of no certain account. As a result, an acrimonious debate between this contingent neoDarwinism and the Intelligent Design agenda, goes nowhere. A new reading of an innately purposeful cosmos and evolution is imperative, for which Teilhard blazed a path.

Around 1975 the surge of interest in Teilhard began to wane, the books finally stopped coming. His oriented, teleological evolution was denigrated by the vested mainstream such as the late Stephen Jay Gould. His legacy has been to represent a holistic hope and optimism, as he writes in *Man's Place in Nature*: "I shall try to show how it is possible, if we look at things from a sufficiently elevated position, to see the confusions of detail in which we think we are lost, merge into one vast organic, guided operation, in which each one of us finds a place..." [2, p. 15]. But this is of no avail in an insensate, indifferent universe, devoid of Divinity before, during and toward whom. His vision has had notable supporters such as president John F. Kennedy and governor Mario Cuomo. And the philosopher president of Senegal from 1960 to 1980, Leopold Senghor, has made a most remarkable comment: Teilhard was the only European thinker of the 20th century with an African mind, that is one who appreciates nature's fertile, mythic spontaneity and formative energy [12].

Now this scene setting is important because a transition seems underway to a worldwide scientific collaboration that promises to verify Einstein's conviction and Teilhard's quickening gestation. Instead of an arbitrarily branching bush, if a newly understood hierarchical evolution proceeds as a symbiotic, modular nest from microbes to cells, organisms and onto societies, then its next stage can be predicted. By the compression of a spherical earth, humankind will merge into a 'super-organic', planetary person. As an immediate caveat, this does not mean a homogeneous collectivity but due to a recurrence of the principle of 'creative union' says Teilhard, increased community will actually enhance individual welfare and freedom. Often coining new words, some helpful, others less so, this phase is seen as the 'noosphere', the ascent of a global brain and mind.

It is this forecast for which Teilhard is best known, often as the father of the Internet whose beneficial communications and information are accessible to everyone. As the scientific project which began in the Renaissance just reaches international culmination, a radical new source of learning and knowledge may accrue, due to humankind altogether.

To sight future prospects, as the prior necessary reduction of nature is put back together, as mechanical becomes biological, its integral survey portends to affirm a genesis creation. As one contribution in such regard, a sourcebook website, has been posted to provide documentation with over 1,700 annotated references [13]. The site also contains a presentation I made in October at Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic, entitled 'Cosmic Genesis in the 21st Century', which compares the waxing and waning, no and yes, worldviews.

By its inclusive scope, a profusion of new findings can be integrated from non-equilibrium thermodynamics to biased, proactive genomes, dynamic ecosystems, fractal cities and a self-regulating biosphere. More than another scenario, this cosmic conception shifts from signifying nothing to an auspicious something. What is significant, missing from a sterile naturalism that as it looks back in time and down into matter loses life along the way, is to find a universal generative agency via complex, adaptive, self-organizing systems that stratify and grow smarter. The modern synthesis, which joined Darwin and Mendel, based mainly on fossil bones and genetic molecules, is of course correct. But it is said to be 'incomplete', for much more is going on, as Teilhard tried to convey. Rather than a 'tree' or 'coral' of life's bodily complexity, the textbook standard, a main trunk or axis appears if the accompanying rise in cerebral anatomy and intelligence is factored in. These qualities foster an advance in self-awareness that converges upon and culminates in human sentience and personhood. Circa 2005, a revolution seems in the air about what kind of conducive universe waits to be read and discovered, of course familiar to Einstein and Teilhard.

3. American Teilhard Association

An earth-wide solidarity of person, culture and planet was indeed evident at the Teilhard 2005 convocations at the United Nations in New York City in April. Held in a main assembly room, welcoming messages were sent by Kofi Annan, Jacques Chirac, Koichiro Matsuura, Director of UNESCO, and Klaus Topfer of the UN Environmental Programme. Michel Camdessus, former head of the International Monetary Fund, for example, told how he was inspired by Teilhard from his student days in the 1960's to work for this personalization, fraternity and even divinization of a worthwhile world. What was impressive is that the UN, with its many well-intentioned projects and its problems, felt that an encompassing spirituality would be necessary to truly heal, inspire and unite some 200 disparate nations. Another indication was the appearance of Jeffery Sachs, director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University and tireless anti-poverty advocate, who took time from his intense schedule to speak for almost an hour. In so many words, Africa must not be forgotten, written off, for a unified bioplanet cannot flourish unless everyone is in good health, just as a person cannot live with serious illness.

The session closed with a strong endorsement by the Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Unable to attend, in her video presentation from an African landscape she spoke of how the survival of Earth and of all her peoples was in the balance. By peace, democracy and respectful care we may yet achieve a sustainable, humane abode.

These meetings were organized by the American Teilhard Association, especially by John Grim, president, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme, vice presidents, and Franklin Vilas. For almost 40 years this organization has looked after Teilhard's thought, especially with regard to environmental concerns. Thomas Berry and Ewert Cousins, Fordham University theologians, have served as president, along with in the early 1970's the renowned geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky who felt that evolution's course could just as easily be read in a Teilhardian way. For some 15 years, a home was provided by Thomas Berry at his Riverdale Center for Religious Research on the Hudson River. What is unusual for such groups is that the same members have stayed on for the duration, given indispensable guidance by Fr. Berry. A *Teilhard Studies* [14] pamphlet and *Teilhard Perspective* newsletter [15] are published twice a year, and an Annual Meeting held each spring in New York City with noted speakers such as anthropologist Margaret Mead and systems biologist Harold Morowitz. Some 14 select *Studies* were collected in the 2003 book *Teilhard in the 21st Century*, co-edited by Donald St. John, Moravian College theologian, and myself, published by Orbis Books [16]. To our surprise, it was chosen by the Catholic Press Association as the paperback spirituality book of the year, a large category, which could be a sign nowadays of a church in search of new pathways.

My recent visit to the eastern Czech Republic, under the auspices of the Center for Dialogue between Science & Religion of the Cyril-Methodius Theological Faculty at Palacky University, where I was billeted at a Dominican monastery, uniquely brought together past and future. A metaphor that seems to help people accommodate a 3rd millennium Christianity of an on-going evolutionary genesis, a huge revision, is that of parent and child. This resolve is drawn from a paper by George Coyne, SJ, Director of the Vatican Observatory, in *Science and Theology: Ruminations on the Cosmos* [17]. By such an image, both God as parental Creator and human beings as daughters and sons, can be loved and honored. One can both be actively engaged in the good works of a sacred earth community while attentive to its Divine source, presence and destination.

As a comment, the present synthesis and reunion of religion and science, a confluence of the testaments of given scripture and found nature, seems to concentrate more on numerical proofs of God than an identity and purpose for this created earth, whose innate development becomes conscious in the phenomenal human. A devout Jesuit his entire life, imbued by spirit, it is yet this latter realm that Teilhard's natural exegesis sought to evoke and divinize.

A good indication of a Teilhardian revival, just in time, could be seen from the 2003 book *Lonely Planets* by the astroscientist David Grinspoon [18]. It contains one of the best vistas of a new kind of universe on the other side of our Copernican Revolution, which can return earth and human to creative centrality: “*The universe is progressing in a direction toward greater intelligence, conscious awareness, & self-understanding. The dark universe becomes gradually more lit up with consciousness*”. [18, p. 402] Grinspoon goes on to offer an insightful appreciation of Teilhard’s mission: “*Teilhard de Chardin believed in love as a cosmic principle. I find his writings meaningful, intelligent, and inspiring. I believe the phenomenon of humanity on Earth is a local example of a trend toward higher consciousness and spiritual enlightenment that transpires all over this universe.*” [18, p. 412]

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