
EVOLUTION, EVIL AND COSMIC CHRIST

A DIALOGUE WITH

PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

Junghyung Kim*

Presbyterian University and Theological Seminary, 25-1 Gwanjang-ro 5-gi, Gwangjin-gu, Seoul, 04965, South Korea

(Received 26 April 2021, revised 11 June 2021)

Abstract

In this essay, I analyse and reconstruct Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's cosmic vision based upon his evolutionary worldview. This allows us to reveal his distinctive contributions to the contemporary Theology-Science dialogue. I highlight his creative synthesis of scientific and theological visions of the Universe, his dynamic metaphysics of cosmogenesis, his strong commitment to the Christological and eschatological orientations of the Christian faith, and his fresh reinterpretations of traditional doctrines. Despite these and other significant insights, Teilhard is often accused of the pantheistic, deterministic, and triumphalist tendencies underlying his thoughts. In the final analysis, I correct these and other misunderstandings of Teilhard's vision, and update his insights for today's Science-Theology dialogue.

Keywords: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, evolution, omega, cosmic, Christ

1. Introduction

Last century, with the scientific discovery that the natural world has its own history, modern sciences began to narrate a 'big history' that integrates histories of the Cosmos, Earth, life and humanity. In the first decades of the twentieth century Pierre Teilhard de Chardin grasped the theological significance of such an approach and integrated it into the Christian faith. For Teilhard, Evolution went beyond 'the origin of species' to include the genesis of the entire Universe. Teilhard was not an ontological materialist. However, instead, he pursued a harmony between scientific and theological visions of the Universe by making evolution the key to a dynamic metaphysics of union.

My analysis will show that Teilhard's theological worldview based upon his evolutionary vision of the Universe resulted in a completely different idea of Creation and redemption than the traditional one, and thereby brought about a revolutionary reversal in the Christological thinking.

*E-mail: junghyungkim@gmail.com

2. Analysis and reconstruction

Here, I will systematically reconstruct the overall structure of Teilhard's cosmic vision by focusing on the position of Christ within the grand narrative from the original creation *ex nihilo* to its consummation in the new creation. For efficiency's sake, I focus on, and carefully analyse, dozens of articles contained in his posthumous book, *Christianity and Evolution* [1]. Of his many theological works, this book contains twenty short articles primarily concerned with speculative theology [1, p. 7]. As I will show, it is remarkable that these writings, even though written over thirty years (1920-1953), show great coherence in their basic theological ideas.

2.1. *The Universe in evolution of convergence*

To reconstruct Teilhard's vision, the best starting point would be his distinctive concept of the Universe as an organic unity in the process of Evolution. For Teilhard, the Universe is "an organic whole, advancing towards an ever higher degree of freedom and personality" [1, p. 154]. "From the lowest and least stable nuclear elements up to the highest living beings", he says, "nothing in Nature can be an object of scientific thought except as a function of a vast and single combined process of corpusculization and complexification" [1, p. 238]. Here I note Teilhard's insistence upon the organic unity, as well as on the dynamic nature, of the cosmic history. In this vein Teilhard proposes to replace the Aristotelian metaphysics of 'being' by the evolutionary metaphysics of 'union' and, moreover, the static notion of 'cosmos' by the dynamic notion of 'cosmogenesis' [1, p. 178, 223-224].

Teilhard's idea of the organic unity of the evolving universe is closely related to his confidence in the direction of Evolution. According to him, the Universe is not in a state of purposeless fluctuation but moving towards a specific goal. In the evolving universe, Teilhard argues, "the fundamental property of the cosmic mass is to concentrate upon itself, within an ever-growing consciousness, as a result of attraction or synthesis" [1, p. 87]. Despite the law of entropy, he believes, there is only one real evolution - namely, the evolution of convergence. Teilhard finds it natural to posit the ultimate point of convergence that applies to the entire Universe. Given the structural necessity of evolution, Teilhard thus says, it is obligatory to assume the existence in the Universe of a centre of universal confluence [1, p. 87]. Teilhard calls it 'the Omega Point': "If scientific views on humanization are carried to their logical conclusion they assure the existence at the peak of anthropogenesis of an ultimate centre or focus of personality and consciousness, which is necessary in order to control and synthesize the genesis in history of spirit. Surely this 'Omega Point' (as I call it) is the ideal place from which to make the Christ we worship radiate." [1, p. 143] Note that Teilhard postulates the existence of the ultimate point of convergence primarily on the basis of the scientific accounts - that is, without any reference to

articles of religious faith; then, he employs it as the contact point between modern science and the Christian faith [1, p. 180].

2.2. Christogenesis as the goal of cosmogenesis

To our great interest, Teilhard brings the scientific vision of the evolving universe into a synthesis with the Christian faith. Thereby he creatively reformulates the traditional theological themes, including Creation, original sin, fall, the incarnation, redemption and eschatology [1, p. 175].

As early as 1920, Teilhard finds himself dissatisfied with the scholastic distinction between creation and providence. Employing the concept of ‘creative transformation’, he argues that there is always only one creative action: “Creation is not a periodic intrusion of the first cause: it is an act coextensive with the whole duration of the Universe. God has been creating ever since the beginning of time and, seen from within, His Creation (even His initial Creation?) takes the form of a transformation.” [1, p. 23] It is impressive that Teilhard makes secure the unity of God’s economic activities in the world by making creation the overarching category. Recently one can find similar approaches in many contemporary theologians, including Wolfhart Pannenberg and Ted Peters [2, 3].

While paying attention to the fact that every creature accompanies some fault as a risk and shadow, Teilhard further develops the idea of creative transformation. First, he notes the four major events in the traditional understanding of God’s history with the Creation - that is, Creation, fall, the incarnation and redemption. In contrast to the traditional ideas, he then argues that they take place neither successively nor sporadically in time. Instead, “all four of those events become coextensive with the duration and totality of the world; they are, in some way, aspects (distinct in reality but physically linked) of one and the same divine operation” [1, p. 53]. Of the four aspects, later he drops off fall. In my view, this correction is desirable because fall does not belong to divine action. Now creation, the incarnation and redemption are described as “the three aspects of one and the same fundamental process” [1, p. 182]. Note how emphatic Teilhard is on the unity of the whole process of God’s action in the world [1, p. 135, 198].

Then Teilhard describes the one and same cosmic process as “the mystery of the creative union of the world in God”, or simply as ‘pleromization’ and ‘Christogenesis’ [1, p. 182, 198, 155; 4]. According to him, “since all time and for ever but one single thing is being made in Creation: the body of Christ” [1, p. 74]. In other words, Christogenesis is “the soul of universal cosmogenesis” [1, p. 166]. It is in this vein that the above-mentioned Omega Point of Science is identified with the universal Christ of faith.

2.3. *The original sin universalized*

To defend this cosmic vision, Teilhard attempts to reformulate the traditional doctrine of original sin. According to him, it is “one of the chief obstacles that stand in the way of the intensive and extensive progress of Christian thought”, nullifying any attempt to introduce “a fully human and humanizing Christian [worldview]” [1, p. 188].

For Teilhard, the traditional doctrine of original sin refers to the belief “that evil (first moral, and then physical) entered the world as the result of a fault committed by [an] individual human being” [1, p. 37]. Teilhard has numerous reasons to reject this teaching. First, the idea of original sin is based upon such scientifically unacceptable ideas as strict monogenism and geocentrism [1, p. 36]. Second, long before the appearance of humanity death existed on Earth [1, p. 39]. Third, given polygenism and universal physical evil as established scientific facts, there is no acceptable place for the historical Adam and still less place for an earthly paradise in the historical picture [1, p. 46]. Fourth, in terms of the organic homogeneity of the physical universe and the universal dimensions of redemption, it no longer seems possible today to regard original sin as a mere link in the chain of historical facts [1, p. 149]. Finally, in an evolving universe evil is an inevitable concomitant of creation [1, p. 149, 134, 195].

Teilhard feels disillusioned by the literal-historical conception of original sin. Hence, he proposes to reinterpret the doctrine of original sin as a symbol of the universal evil. He says, original sin in its widest sense “is not a malady specific to the Earth, nor is it bound up with human generation. It simply symbolizes the inevitable chance of evil which accompanies the existence of all participated being.” [1, p. 40] For Teilhard, Adam does not refer to a historical person but is a name that “disguises a universal and unbreakable law of reversion or perversion - the price that has to be paid for progress” [1, p. 41]. In other others, “original sin expresses, translates, personifies, in an instantaneous and localized act, the perennial and universal law of imperfection which operates in [hu]mankind in virtue of its being in the process of becoming” [1, p. 51]. Or, original sin belongs to “a trans-historical order, affecting (like a colour or a dimension) the whole of our experiential vision of the world” or “a general condition of history” [1, p. 189]. In this regard, Teilhard appeals to the most recent conclusion in biblical exegesis that “what we should look for in the first chapters of Genesis is not ‘visual’ information about man’s history but teaching about his nature” [1, p. 191].

In short, Teilhard’s evolutionary vision of the dynamic universe is in striking contrast with the traditional vision of the static universe, which presupposes God’s absolute freedom and Creation’s absolute contingency. Along with a new interpretation of original sin, Teilhard believes, the former gives a more satisfactory answer to the theodicy question than the latter. For “physical suffering and moral transgressions are inevitably introduced into the world not because of some deficiency in the creative act but by the very

structure of participated being: in other words, they are introduced as the *statistically inevitable* by-product of the unification of the multiple. In consequence they contradict neither the power of God nor His goodness.” [1, p. 196]

2.4. *Redemption fulfilled in Evolution*

As I mentioned earlier, Teilhard does not hesitate to identify the universal Christ with the Omega Point, the ultimate centre of universal confluence: “Regarded materially in their nature as universal centres, the Omega Point of science and the revealed Christ coincide” [1, p. 143]. Given that the function of the Omega Point is to control and synthesize the genesis of spirit in history, this identification of the universal Christ with the Omega Point makes the universal Christ “the prime mover and controller, the ‘soul,’ of Evolution” [1, p. 180], namely, the driving force of the cosmic history. In the same vein, Teilhard says that Christ is the master of the world who “animates the whole range of things from top to bottom” [1, p. 89]. To be more precise, the causation is not only from above, but from ahead or from the future. In this context, he speaks of “an organic Prime-Mover God, *ab ante*” [1, p. 240]. This idea of the universal Christ as the Omega that consummates the whole cosmic process encourages him to adopt a likewise dynamic concept of the Logos. Briefly speaking, he redefines the concept of the Logos in terms of the evolution-driving principle of the moving universe, instead of in terms of the order-giving principle of the stable Greek cosmos [1, p. 180]. This is how Teilhard envisions the universal Christ in whom all things hold together.

This grand vision of the universal Christ who drives and consummates the cosmic history in evolution, however, seems to conflict with the traditional understanding of Christ who redeems the history [1, p. 143]. Due to this seeming conflict, in my view, Teilhard deals first with redemption and then with the incarnation as he reconstructs a Christology based upon the evolutionary worldview. His discussion of redemption begins with a critique of the traditional picture of the fall. He does not regard evil as the outcome of an initial transgression but as the inevitable by-product of the creative act. Consequently, his doctrine of redemption shifts the focus from the reparation to the completion of creation [1, p. 81].

This shift corresponds to his emphasis on the positive aspect of redemption, rather than its negative aspect. In Teilhard’s discussion of redemption, the theme of reparation ceases to play the central role in the saving works of the Word, even if it is retained. Rather, “*Primario*, to consummate creation in divine union; and, in order to do so, *secundario*, to annihilate the evil forces of retrogression and dispersion” [1, p. 146]. This is a significant correction of Anselm’s exclusive focus on the doctrine of redemption at the expense of the doctrine of creation. In Teilhard’s own words, “Christ the Redeemer [is] fulfilled ... in the dynamic plenitude of Christ the Evolver” [1, p. 147]. On the basis of this renewed understanding of the relation between

creation and redemption, Teilhard reinterprets the meaning of the cross as well. For Teilhard, the cross does not symbolize simply the expiation of an offence but primarily the ascent of Creation through creaturely efforts [1, p. 146]. The cross does not have merely a purifying effect but a driving brilliance for us [1, p. 217]. Here one can hardly fail to see Teilhard's emphasis lying more on the triumphant side, than the retrogressive side of the Universe, even in relation to the cross of Christ [1, p. 163].

Before I finish the analysis of Teilhard's Christology, brief attention needs to be paid to the significance of the historical Christ within the context of the cosmic history. In Teilhard's vision of the Universe, it does not seem difficult to accept the idea of the universal Christ who is identified with the Omega Point. However, the reason why the Universe needs the historical Christ at a particular moment in history requires some explanation. Teilhard is also aware of "a supposed lack of proportion between the universal Christ and the man Jesus" [1, p. 158]. To begin with, Teilhard indicates the historical fact that the idea of the universal Christ first appeared in the human Jesus [1, p. 159]. This fact, meanwhile, is insufficient to ensure the divinity of the historical Christ or his identification with the universal Christ. Teilhard's arguments then flow from above, not from below. He insists that the universal Christ had to enter the cosmic history in order to act effectively and to produce the final unification [1, p. 136]. In other words, he says, "it is from his concrete germ, the man of Nazareth, that Christ-Omega (both theoretically and historically) derives his whole consistence as a hard experiential fact" [1, p. 181]. This idea of the historical Christ seems to support his preference of the literal, physical interpretation of Christ's mystical body [1, p. 67]. On the other hand, Teilhard tries to find a way out of the so-called scandal of particularity by appealing to the point of the ultimate convergence of all the cosmic processes. He claims, "If we assume Christ to be established by his incarnation at this remarkable cosmic point of all convergence, he then immediately becomes co-extensive with the vastness of space [and time]" [1, p. 87].

2.5. Human destiny in the evolving universe

Now I turn to Teilhard's discussion of our human destiny in the cosmic process oriented to Christogenesis. According to Teilhard, the Universe has progressed through the stages of geo-genesis, bio-genesis, anthropo-genesis, and, finally, noo-genesis [5]. Even with the appearance of reflective human beings, however, the evolutionary process has not come to a halt. "On the contrary, as a result of convergence, it is making a fresh and more vigorous start in the direction of ever higher degrees of co-reflection, in the form of self-evolution." [1, p. 221] In other words, the final stage of Christogenesis is still ahead of us [5, p. 297].

With this big history in mind, Teilhard discusses the human vocation between the stages of noogenesis and Christogenesis - in particular, in terms of the human role in the evolutionary history of creation. "What is to be done",

Teilhard claims, “is to confront the future”, or “to drive [the evolution] further ahead” [1, p. 76]. We should reinforce the evolutionary process which is still ongoing [1, p. 92] and collaborate “in the further advances of hominization” [1, p. 224]. This is, in Teilhard’s view, to follow the way of the universal Christ who is driving the evolutionary process. In my judgement, Philip Hefner’s definition of humanity as “created co-creator” [6] may be regarded as a proper translation of Teilhard’s anthropological understanding.

Teilhard then redefines the traditional Christian virtues on the ground of the evolutionary view of the human phenomenon. Just like his renewed concept of the cross, his vision of the Christian life gives more emphasis on the positive, creative aspect than on the negative, passive one. As regards the Christian holiness, for example, he says, “now the emphasis is not primarily on mortification - but on the perfecting of man’s effort through mortification” [1, p. 168]. In the same vein, he defines the saint as the one “who seeks to make all his powers - gold, love, or freedom - transcend themselves and cooperates in the consummation of Christ, and who so realizes for us the ideal of the faithful servant of evolution” [1, p. 169]. In the final analysis, Teilhard finds a way to synthesize both love of Heaven and love of Earth, love of God and love of the world. Now we can “make our way to Heaven through Earth” [1, p. 93]. The true communion with God is only through the world. To put it otherwise, we should “love God in and through the genesis of the Universe and of mankind” [1, p. 184].

3. Discussion and conclusions

Thus far, I made a systematic presentation of Teilhard’s cosmic vision. As I mentioned in the introduction, Teilhard’s original contribution lies in his audacity to reconcile and even synthesize the scientific and theological visions of the Universe. He had successfully overcome both the dangers of scientific materialism and unscientific (or anti-scientific) fideism. In this sense, Teilhard may be regarded as the pioneer of the contemporary Science-Theology dialogue. However, Teilhard’s significance does not consist only in his approach alone, but also in his creative theological thinking. Some of his mind-opening insights are these: (1) the essentially dynamic and historical nature of the Universe as seen in his preference of the notion of cosmogenesis and the metaphysics of union; (2) the strongly eschatological orientation of his whole approach, including his belief in the all-embracing power of the Omega Point; (3) the inseparable unity of God’s economic works in the world, which are at the same time creative, incarnational and redemptive; and finally, (4) his rediscovery of the positive and creative aspect of the cross and redemption.

Despite all these contributions, however, I think Teilhard’s vision needs more clarifications and further developments at some other points. To be specific, I note that several thinkers have pointed out the pantheistic, deterministic, and triumphalist tendencies underlying his thoughts [7]. All these aspects are, in my judgement, closely interrelated.

To begin with, Teilhard's pantheistic inclination may be seen in his resistance to the ideas of God's absolute freedom and of Creation's absolute contingency [1, p. 225-226]. He puts an ontological restriction on God's power of Creation [1, p. 31]. In his early essays, Teilhard makes great efforts even to embrace a pantheistic vision [1, p. 202-203, 239]. However, his vision is in fact quite nuanced. He applies the principle of ontological necessity only to the way God creates the world, but not to its existence itself [1, p. 182]. This idea comes close to the contemporary discussion of Creation as God's kenosis [8]. Besides, his neglect of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* may be explained by his concentration on the field of our experience [1, p. 23]. Nevertheless, the suspicion that his view of God's relation to the Creation impinges upon God's sovereign freedom may still remain. In this regard, it may help safeguard divine freedom to emphasize the idea of God's free self-determination to create the world in a specific way - namely, through the evolutionary process.

Next, one may also note Teilhard's inclination to determinism. Teilhard's vision looks too optimistic to take seriously the ambiguous reality of the evolutionary process and the probability of our not reaching the supposed Omega Point due to, for example, the sudden extinction of our human race. One biologist notes, "Most profoundly, [evolutionary theodicy] entails not just the scale of suffering over evolutionary time nor the role of suffering in evolutionary process, but the intensification of suffering as an inescapable consequence of the evolutionary escalation of life" [9]. Martin Rees claims, "humanity is more at risk than at any earlier phase in its history" [10]. In this regard one may wonder whether in Teilhard's vision history is genuinely open and thus one can expect something new in the future. However, it is noteworthy that Teilhard puts great emphasis on human responsibility for the further evolution. This emphasis on human responsibility would not be possible without assuming the genuine openness of the future [1, p. 180]. Consequently, there is some tension in Teilhard's own ideas. Nonetheless, given the overall deterministic tendency in Teilhard's thought, it is important to adjust it by emphasizing that our future is open to both divine freedom and human freedom. In a sense, one may say, this is already anticipated by Teilhard's own idea of 'an organic Prime-Mover God, *ab ante*'. As Moltmann suggests by the advent concept of future [11], God is preparing for us something authentically new that we cannot expect out of the present situation. This explains why one should pray for the beginning of new creation by the grace of God, while making every effort to become a faithful servant of God's on-going creative work.

Finally, Teilhard's theology is often condemned as too triumphalist to see the horrendous evils in the world. This accusation is not directed at his rediscovery of the creative aspects of the cross, but at his underestimation of the reality of evil. It is to be noted that Teilhard made his own efforts to defend himself against this charge [5, p. 309]. However, it is doubtful whether he had successfully defended himself. Unlike his own confidence, Teilhard's argument that evil is a statistically inevitable by-product of creation does not seem to be a sufficient answer to the theodicy problem. This rational justification of evil

cannot be applied to such extreme evils as the Holocaust. In this light, one may say that Teilhard's ethical failure during the World War II [11, p. 295] was not an accidental mistake. His emphasis on the creative aspect of the cross implies that the cross is necessary for furthering the evolutionary process. Throughout history, however, we have witnessed a great number of innocent victims that seem to have nothing to do with the progress of history. In this regard, Rene Girard's thesis may be insightful that the cross of Jesus discredits mythical scapegoating as the outcome of collective self-deception [12]. Hence, apart from the indelible significance of Teilhard's restoration of positive and creative aspects of the cross, it is also important to note that there are evils that have nothing to do with the creative process of the world. In this vein, one may supplement Teilhard's vision by paying more serious attention to the negative aspect of redemption, or "the redemptive side of creation's completion" [11, p. 296].

Acknowledgement

This article is based upon my earlier writing, published as part of my Korean book, *The Doctrine of Creation* (Seoul: Holy Wave Plus, 2019). I inform that the publisher has agreed to publish it in *EJST*. While translating it into English, I revised the original manuscript at several points. Special thanks are given to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments which I incorporated into the final draft.

References

- [1] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, Harcourt, New York, 1974.
- [2] W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1991.
- [3] T. Peters, *Anticipating Omega*, Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2006.
- [4] I. Delio, *Open Theology*, 4 (2018) 158-169.
- [5] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, 181.
- [6] P. Hefner, *The Human Factor*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1933, 100.
- [7] T. Peters and M. Hewlett, *Evolution from Creation to the New Creation*, Abingdon, 2003, Nashville, 119, 129, 157.
- [8] J. Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2001.
- [9] J.P. Schloss, *From Evolution to Eschatology*, in *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments*, M. Welker, T. Peters & J. Russell (eds.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, 78-79.
- [10] M. Rees, *Our Final Hour*, Basic Books, New York, 2003, 188.
- [11] J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, 317-321.
- [12] R. Girard, *Violence, Scapegoating and the Cross*, in *The Evolution of Evil*, G.P. Bennett, M.J. Hewlett & R.J. Russell (eds.), Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2008, 334-348.