

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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LE PHÉNOMÈNE HUMAIN has been a best-seller in France since its posthumous publication in 1955. The initial impact of the recent translation, published as *The Phenomenon of Man*,¹ has been considerable. Never before, one imagines, in English publishing history, has a book by a Roman Catholic priest received such remarkable tributes in all types of journals and newspapers. 'Book of the year' for a number of well-known critics, 'possibly the book of the century' for one *Sunday Times* contributor.

During the period when Teilhard's works were available only in French, one had heard doubt expressed as to whether he would ever appeal to more than a few in this country. After the events of recent months there is now every indication that the teilhardian movement will become as international in character as was Teilhard himself. It looks as if the influence of this remarkable man will come to be felt more and more in many different branches of human endeavour during the next few decades. For myself, I would go so far as to say that Teilhard's vision—he writes like a visionary but a visionary whose feet are always planted very firmly on or in terra firma—marks the most significant achievement in synthetic thinking since that of Aquinas. We cannot afford to neglect him, because, quite simply, he seems in so many matters, and those the most important, to be so essentially right. His genius has sown many seeds which, in so far as they fall on receptive and fertile ground, would seem destined to grow and flower according to the pattern of those same laws of development which lie at the heart of his system of thought.

A very full account of Teilhard's personal history, including many extracts from his letters and published works, and containing an excellent though provisional list of his writings, is to be found in the *Life*² by Claude Cuénot. A translation of this book is being prepared for publication in America. There have been other books about his thought published in France, and his *Collected Works* are still appearing, the fifth volume being the most recent. Many articles about him have appeared in French periodicals. Reference

¹ *The Phenomenon of Man*. By Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Translated by Bernard Wall. (Collins, 25s.)

² *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*. By C. Cuénot. (Librairie Plon 1958.)

is made to him in a book on Evolution translated from the French and recently published in the Faith and Fact series.³ The first of the *Cahiers* published by L'Association des Amis de Pierre Teilhard de Chardin⁴ contains extracts from his works published in five languages including English.

The title of this last-mentioned publication is, in its English form, 'Building the Earth'. The articles all look to the future, being devoted to the subject which came to occupy Teilhard more and more in his later years. Much of his life was spent in the study of the far-distant past. But he became increasingly conscious that the patterns displayed throughout the course of evolutionary history are of the greatest significance if we are to appreciate what paths might be open to mankind in the future. The future of man is a popular subject these days for speculative biologists. For some it represents a nice academic exercise. For Teilhard it was more than this. It is not a question for him just of working out correlations and probabilities on the basis of observations sufficient in number to ensure statistical accuracy. For Teilhard science, whether it be of the past or the present or, by extrapolation, of the future, is by no means the sort of donnish cross-word puzzle that some of our contemporaries delight in. For the positivist and the relativist this is what, inevitably, science becomes. Clues are followed up and fruitful answers found, that is answers which will allow for or suggest the solution to other clues. But to ask, 'Is this answer true?', 'What does this solution mean?', let alone, 'What does it all mean?', is, for many exponents of current scientific orthodoxy, to talk in a way which is neither meaningful nor useful. Does one ask what is the 'inner meaning' of a cross-word puzzle? It is enough that it provides an intellectual pastime that is stimulating in the challenge and satisfying in the performance.

It is perhaps significant that of the distinguished Reith lecturers of recent years the two biologists might with justice be counted amongst the ablest exponents of this type of scientific, aseptic positivism. 'Aseptic', as many would see it, in the sense of being untainted with metaphysical questions about truth or value in any significant sense. This is a kind of speculation which, in the orthodox view, is to be ruled out as against the laws of the game, as being scientifically unverifiable in principle. 'Aseptic', as others would see it, in the sense of being at bottom sterile, destined finally to perish of inanition; a system which contains within itself the seeds of its

³ *Evolution. Hypotheses and Problems.* By Rémy Collin. Faith and Fact Books: 30. (Burns and Oates, 7s. 6d.)

⁴ 12 Rue de l'Abbé Grégoire, Paris VI.

own destruction, namely the inherent contradiction of the meaninglessness of meaning.

In this country and in America exponents of scientific positivism wield immense influence in the field of the biological sciences. Attempts to put other points of view are highly suspect in some professional circles. Now Teilhard speaks the language both of science and of theology. We know that some theologians are suspicious of him. What of scientists? In my opinion, if Teilhard's views are to be censured, the attack is more likely to come from some of the more orthodox members of the scientific hierarchy than from their counterparts in theology. Indeed, if Teilhard is right in his understanding of the process of evolution, then the writing is on the wall for scientific positivism. That system will not prevail if human evolution continues. No system will, of course, if the whole process is destined, by man's own folly, to be brought to an end. Such a cataclysm could only result from the exercise of that very freedom to produce it which man has acquired as the goal and purpose of the evolutionary process itself. But assuming survival of our present civilization I think it unlikely that science will be able to progress if its only source of inspiration is positivism. Something of this sort was well expressed in a recent essay by R. A. Crowson the taxonomist in one of the Darwin celebration volumes.⁵ The essay is entitled 'Darwin and Classification', and it concludes as follows:

Unfortunately the advanced societies of today recognize only two motives for human endeavour—economic gain and pleasure; and if the pursuit of a natural classification is not to be justified in terms of economic gain, then modern men will insist that it must come under the category of pleasure. A hundred years ago a third type of motive was socially recognized—the pursuit of virtue and piety; and in the pre-Darwin and pre-Huxley age the justification of natural history was seen in these terms. The dedicated naturalist had something of the aura of a priest or monk, as the revealer of the divine mysteries of creation, and it would have seemed irreverent to suggest that anything that was worth God's while to create was not worth man's while to study. Whether systematic natural history can continue to flourish when its practitioners are looked on merely as a rather odd variety of pleasure-seekers remains to be seen.

It is more exciting to some people, of course, to engage in, say, experimental embryology than in taxonomy. But whatever may be the intrinsic interest of the particular field of study, if the scientist's motivation is restricted to economic gain and pleasure, his science

⁵ *A Century of Darwin*. Ed. S. A. Barnett. (Heinemann, 1958.)

is likely to become either corrupt or effete, finally to die from a shortage of practitioners of the proper quality. There will always be a few people, and those amongst the most gifted intellectually, who will be happy to spend their lives doing cross-word puzzles, especially if there are worth-while prizes offered for correct solutions. But most people like to regard their work in terms more significant than this.

It is precisely to the real significance of modern scientific knowledge that Teilhard first and foremost brings the attention of his readers; the ability of man to understand, and not merely to know. Understanding implies the ability to distinguish between what is true and what is false, and the distinction is an unqualified one, even though the particular truth or falsity can be understood only in relation to others. Here Teilhard rejects entirely—though he does so always with abundant charity—the position of the positivist-evolutionist who would regard man's intellectual activities as no more than yet another evolutionary gimmick, a type of specialization which has had great survival value for us up to now, but a specialization which might well result, as is known to have happened with many examples of extreme specialization during the course of evolution, in final extinction of the species. Teilhard would reply that the position of *Homo sapiens* is in altogether different case from that of specialized groups in former epochs as, for instance, in the age of ruling reptiles before the mammals entered into their inheritance. Man is unique precisely by virtue of his capacity for understanding. He not only knows, but knows that he knows. In man we see the evolutionary process achieving its final significance. It does so by a process of turning in on itself, becoming conscious of itself. Man's knowledge is not limited to that derived from personal experience of the here and now, as is that of other living beings. His powers of understanding appear to know no bounds. He has unlimited capacity for acquiring and transmitting information and, more significantly, for assessing the quality of the information he receives, for accepting what is true and rejecting what is false. Teilhard insists on the reasonableness of the world. The world, of which we form a part, can be known and understood. Man can arrive at truths about it, if only by degrees and primarily by the use of the scientific method. Teilhard, as befits a great scientist, is a great champion of science and the scientific method, related as it always is to phenomena. Modern science is for him one of the most significant achievements of man, an activity amongst the noblest available to us. The dust out of which we are truly fashioned is now observing, studying, and to some extent understanding itself. Living dust that can reflect upon itself and its history. The greatest single

discovery of modern science is the fact of evolution, that process which stretches out through thousands of million years in the past, is always somewhere in action, and of which the end in time can in no way be foreseen. But what that end will be is, in Teilhard's view, now discernible. It will be when 'God shall be all in all' (I Cor. 15, 28).

Teilhard understood St Paul's 'all' quite literally. His life was devoted, one might say, to the study of the implications of this text above all. He referred to it specifically in the last entry he made in his Diary on April 7th, 1955, recently published as the last page of *L'Avenir de L'Homme* (volume 5 of his collected works). In a sense this entry constitutes a summary of his faith and his life's work. Three days later, on Easter Sunday, he was quite suddenly, and in some ways most fittingly, taken from this world. He had once said that of all the days in the year he would best like to die on Easter Day. This hitherto obscure passage from St Paul acquired real meaning for Teilhard through his appreciation of the nature of the evolutionary process. This always seeks and always finally achieves increase in 'complexification' and hence increase in freedom. 'All' then includes the whole history of cosmogenesis up to the present and beyond, through inorganic barysphere and hydrosphere to biosphere and noosphere, those successive layers of the world each of which represents a great increase in complexification. And now, since Christ, we know where lies the future of the noosphere, the future of man and of all the rest as represented in him: in Christ. Superimposed, then, on what Teilhard called the noosphere, there is the beginning of the Christosphere. 'Christogenesis' is the process through which all men will come to share in, to form part of the Mystical Body of Christ. And men will bring with them all the rest of that world of nature in which our human nature is inextricably bound up. Christogenesis constitutes the last stage of the evolutionary process. Christ is the term of the natural evolution of all created being. Such a conclusion could only be accepted by one who already had Christian faith. But Teilhard's genius will bring many non-believers to the portals of the door of faith.

Teilhard offers a solution, satisfying both to mind and heart (in those rare moments when one really sees) to the perennial Christian conflict between the things of this world and those of the next, the conflict between matter and spirit. As Aquinas did for the world of natural learning of Aristotle, so does Teilhard for the modern world of natural science. He grasped the significance of scientific knowledge and steeped himself in it, while at the same time he lived a life of the deepest spirituality, faithful throughout to the spirit and rule

of his Order, the Society of Jesus. Faithful too to himself, superbly confident of the essential rightness of his vision. An account was recently given⁶ of an experience he had at the age of six, which illustrates the clarity with which from the start he saw the unity and goodness of the world of experience. This was the simultaneous appreciation of the significance, the reality, of a piece of iron—a ploughshare—which he was holding, and of the Sacred Heart of Jesus which his mother was telling him about. The iron was so real, so full of being, so essentially good. So too was the Sacred Heart, fashioned like the ploughshare out of matter. Never in his life, it seems, was he subsequently troubled by or suspicious about matter after the way of Pascal and of the majority of spiritual writers in recent centuries. Cartesian dualism, after the decline of the authentic teachings of St Thomas, bit deeply into Christian thinking. Flight from the reality that is the world of nature in search of the things solely of the spirit is surely at the root of the modern predicament. Teilhard shows the falsity of this supposed antithesis precisely by showing how interdependent, inextricably commingled are these two aspects, these two faces, of the created universe. The 'without' and the 'within' are for him two aspects, equally real, of everything that is. It is, I think, matter and form again in modern dress, but with this difference, that everything is seen in terms of duration and hence of evolutionary change.

The sphere of operation of the Divine Spirit is not restricted to man and the angels. The whole world is involved. As another Jesuit has told us, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God'. To each of us, thinking in terms of our natural units of measurement, the human frame and the life-span of man, the world is immensely large and has a history, as has been discovered in very recent decades, which is immensely long. Throughout these aeons, in Teilhard's teaching as in traditional Jewish and Christian teaching, the Holy Spirit has been brooding over the land and over the waters. In this respect the roundness of the world is an essential feature of Teilhard's thought. Being spherical it is essentially a unit, one which progressively turns in on itself and finally discovers the Holy Spirit at the heart of things, Alpha and Omega. This is the source of that inner dynamism which has led through evolution to the development of all the separate 'things' we see around us, to the increasing complexification of the relatively homogeneous stuff of primaevial matter. The manifold and the one. Teilhard was equally conscious of the reality of both.

⁶ In 'Le Phénomène Teilhard' by Jean Guitton, *Informations Catholiques Internationales*, 111, 28-29, January 1, 1960.

Attempts to achieve the reconciliation of opposites are everywhere encountered in *The Phenomenon of Man*, and it is astonishing how often the proposed solution rings true even when its formulation is, as perhaps it is bound to be, somewhat obscure and inexact. Take for instance the central problem of randomness versus purposiveness in evolution. The subject really requires a paper to itself. But briefly, evolutionary-theorists can be divided into two groups, of which the first, and much the largest at the present time, stress above all the undoubted randomness of those genetic mutations and recombinations which form the raw material of evolution. The environment too, which acts as the sieve of natural selection, is subject to changes which again appear to be due basically to chance. Complex but meaningless fabrication. Against this sort of approach some point with justice to the many examples in biological evolution of straight-line development of a species or a group, what is known as orthogenesis. It is then sometimes assumed that this constitutes the basis evolutionary pattern, the guiding force being a kind of 'entelechy', somehow known to the species and inevitably followed as towards a goal consciously perceived. Teilhard, however, speaks of 'groping' as the essential picture of the evolutionary process. The word itself is a stroke of genius. Groping movements are bound to appear to be random, may indeed be so when taken in isolation and without regard to the eventual outcome. Perhaps one might gain some appreciation of his concept by thinking in terms of a highly complex maze, made up of a series of interconnecting mazes each highly complex in itself and offering to the groping contestants unlimited opportunities for becoming sidetracked into blind alleys. Correct solution of one maze allows the group to proceed to the next. But mere survival at the next stage may require that earlier mazes be reasonably well explored and occupied. Thus the unity of the system as a whole is preserved. With the advent of man the final maze was entered, and the story of man during the last few hundred thousand years is the story of his wanderings and searchings—often seemingly blind—to find the way out. The path was finally lighted for him as recently as two thousand years ago. Teilhard saw this final goal as point Omega. He saw all mankind converging towards it, and together with man all the rest of creation out of which he has sprung, on which he is entirely dependent for his existence, and for which now he assumes responsibility. Full of understanding of himself and of nature, full of acceptance of all that is, full of love of God and of his creatures.

Is this mere wishful thinking? Is Teilhard so optimistic, so naive, that he can theorize as though no such thing as evil existed? Many,

including the present writer, have been misled by his appendix on this subject, where he says 'Nowhere, if I am not mistaken, have pain or wrong been spoken of'. And yet, on pages 288-290 of *The Phenomenon of Man* he gives a perceptive account of the possibility, always open to man, of refusal of Omega rather than acceptance. Teilhard is no sentimentalist. There is in him nothing of the 'all things bright and beautiful' approach. Struggle and suffering, pain and limitation, are, for him, simply inherent in the fact of existence, inherent in the traditional sense of *privatio boni*. With the advent of the noosphere many such deprivations can be overcome, much suffering relieved. But the greater the freedom, the greater the possibilities for both good and evil. It may be extreme, the final anguish of the choice for or against Omega, for or against the evolutionary process itself. A final struggle, between two opposing and irreconcilable groups of men, is clearly recognized by Teilhard as a distinct possibility, though one to be prevented by every means in our power. But whatever crisis may develop, he is surely right to rest in the Christian hope and expectation that finally all shall be well. Incarnation, redemption, resurrection, they cannot have been in vain.

Man has been given—has acquired—tremendous responsibilities as a corollary of the increasing freedom resulting from complexification. Complexification represents increase in the inner-directed 'radial' energy of matter at the expense of the more primitive and outwardly-directed 'tangential' energy such as we see so vividly in the destructive forces locked up in the atom. In the matter of responsibility Teilhard has taken a common picture of the nature of evolution and stood it on its head. We can no longer think of ourselves, as did some of Huxley's audiences in the nineteenth century, as no more than advanced apes with no more responsibility than befits an ape. That is evolutionary regress, not progress. Teilhard, however, is absolutely consistent in his interpretation of the nature of evolution. Further progress can only be through the personal sanctification of the species, personal because, as always, the evolutionary process must work through individual members of the species. The conclusion is posited quite soberly by Teilhard, after careful investigation of the facts, of the phenomena. It is expressed in terms of modern science as well as of traditional theology. With Teilhard Christian humanism has taken a great step forward.