PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

PALEONTOLOGIST, MYSTIC & JESUIT PRIEST

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela
As a paleontologist and a Catholic priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin created a unique vision bringing together science and religion.
Youth, vocation, and early thoughts on evolution

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (pronounced tay-YAR-de-shar-DAN) was born in the countryside of France. Teilhard was the fourth of 11 children.

Teilhard’s father was an amateur naturalist who collected rocks, insects, fossils, and plants. His deeply religious mother, the great-grandniece of the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire, instilled in her son a devotion to Jesus. The family lived in the countryside among volcanic mountains and forested hills. Teilhard grew to embrace both of his parents’ greatest interests: love of the Earth and love of the Christian God.

Shortly before he turned 11, Teilhard went to a Jesuit college to study philosophy and mathematics. Teilhard completed his studies in England in 1905 and was sent to teach chemistry and physics in Cairo. There he was enthralled by Egypt’s natural beauty and collected fossils at every opportunity.

In 1908, Teilhard returned to England to study theology. There, in Henri Bergson’s book Creative Evolution (published 1907), he encountered the idea that evolution is driven, not by natural selection, as Darwin believed, but by a vital force. Like nearly all modern scientists, Teilhard disagreed with Bergson’s main idea. But Bergson inspired him to form his own view that the cosmos itself is evolving.

At 30, Teilhard became a Catholic priest. The next year he was sent to study at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. There, he became interested in human paleontology, the study of prehistoric man.

During the time of the world wars

Before Teilhard could finish his studies, however, World War I intervened. In December 1914, he became a stretcher-bearer at the front. He witnessed firsthand the terrible violence of trench warfare. He would enter “no-man’s land” to recover the dead and injured in some of the main battles of the war. Teilhard was awarded several medals for bravery. This experience led him to envision a larger meaning of life, with humanity evolving toward something bigger and more spiritual. In his 1918 essay “The Great Monad,” he wrote:

The Whole of History teaches us this lesson, that after every revolution and after every war Mankind has always emerged a little more self-cohesive, a little more unified, because the links that hold its organism together are more firmly locked together and hope of a common emancipation has become strengthened....It will not be long before the human mass closes in upon itself and groups all its members in a definitively realized unity. Respect for one and the same law, one and the same orientation, one and the same spirit, are tending to overlay the permanent diversity of individuals and nations. Wait but a little longer, and we shall form but one solid block. The cement is already setting.

(The Heart of Matter, pp. 184 — 85)
During the war Teilhard wrote 18 essays. In them he formulated his ideas about the relationship between a Christian God and the natural world. In the ‘Cosmic Life,’ he wrote: “There is a communion with God and a communion with the Earth and a communion with God through the Earth. In this first basic vision we begin to see how the kingdom of God and cosmic love can be reconciled: the bosom of Mother Earth is, in some way, the bosom of God.” He concluded: “To live the cosmic life is to live with the dominating consciousness that each one of us is an atom of the mystical and cosmic body of Christ.”

Teilhard took his final vows as a priest in 1918. He lectured in paleontology and geology at the Catholic Institute of Paris and studied at the University of Paris (Sorbonne). In 1923, he went to China with another priest to study stones and fossils in western Mongolia.

Two years later, Teilhard returned to Paris and resumed teaching at the Catholic Institute, where he was scolded for trying to create friendly relations between science and religion. Teilhard, for example, tried to make the latest discoveries about human origins fit with the Bible’s doctrine of original sin. After revoking his license to teach, the Jesuit Curia sent him back to China for research, in effect protecting him from possible harsher measures by Church leaders in Rome.

Teilhard spent most of the next 20 years in China. In early 1929, he joined the National Geological Survey of China and took part in the excavations, in December 1929, that uncovered a Homo erectus skull, known as Peking Man. As the stratigrapher (a geologist who studies layers of the rock record), Teilhard played a major role in dating the discovery.

While in China, Teilhard wrote what would become his best-known work, The Phenomenon of Man. However, his superiors refused to permit its publication. He returned to Paris but was not allowed to teach. He connected with the Wenner-Gren Foundation in New York City and in 1951 moved there to work as a researcher.

**Teilhard’s view of an evolving Universe**

Teilhard was both a scientist and a mystic. His views on religion were blended with a visionary fire. In Teilhard’s view, the unfolding, evolving Universe is both a physical and a spiritual event. The Universe begins with matter, some of which develops into a new level (life), which develops into human consciousness. From there it becomes concentrated until it reaches what he called the “Omega Point.” God is implicit from the beginning, but the Universe is gradually making divinity explicit.

Teilhard invented words to express his ideas, including noosphere (from the Greek word noos, for mind), which he used in a 1925 essay called “Hominization” — another word he invented to refer to human reflection intelligence. The noosphere is a “thinking” sphere circling the Earth above the biosphere. It’s made of human reflection, conscious souls, and love.

Teilhard explained that the Universe has a direction of increasing complexity and consciousness. He named the goal toward which the Universe is headed the “Omega Point, a Universe that has become God.” The Omega Point exerts its force on everything; Teilhard describes it thus:

> Because it contains and engenders consciousness, space-time is necessarily of a convergent nature. Accordingly its enormous layers, followed in the right direction, must somewhere ahead become involuted to a point we might call Omega, which fuses and consumes them integrally in itself. (The Phenomenon of Man, p. 259)
Final years and posthumous works

Teilhard lived his final years in New York City. He died in 1955.

Teilhard was prolific: he wrote 11 volumes of scientific work, three books, and 200-plus essays. Many of his scientific papers were published during his lifetime, but the Church would not allow his religious or philosophical essays to be published until after his death. The Phenomenon of Man came out in 1955. It became an international best seller. In late 1957, the Holy Office withdrew Teilhard’s books from seminary libraries. In 1962, the Vatican claimed that Teilhard’s books contained “serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine,” without indicating what the errors were.

Now that reprimand is largely forgotten. The Second Vatican Council (1962 — 68) wanted, like Teilhard, to define the relationship of Christ to the Universe. Pope Benedict XVI praised Teilhard’s “great vision” in July 2009. Teilhard’s ideas have inspired many Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

American writer Flannery O’Connor was one of Teilhard’s admirers. She took the title of her last collection of short stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge(1965), from Teilhard’s essay “Omega Point,” in which he wrote:

Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.

But Teilhard’s ideas continued to offend some theologians and some scientists as well. Scientists in general do not believe in evolution toward a goal or purpose. Biologist Peter Medawar objected to Teilhard’s attributing consciousness to matter.

Teilhard and the information age

More recently, Teilhard’s ideas have attracted people in the technology world. To some, the Internet seems to have fulfilled his prophecy of a noosphere. As Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg wrote in Wired magazine in 1995:

Teilhard imagined a stage of evolution characterized by a complex membrane of information enveloping the globe and fueled by human consciousness. It sounds a little off-the-wall, until you think about the Net, that vast electronic web encircling the Earth, running point to point through a nervelike constellation of wires. We live in an intertwined world of telephone lines, wireless satellite-based transmissions, and dedicated computer circuits that allow us to travel electronically from Des Moines to Delhi in the blink of an eye. Teilhard saw the Net coming more than half a century before it arrived.

A movement known as transhumanism wants to apply technology to overcome human limitations. Followers believe that computers and humans may combine to form a “super brain,” or that computers may eventually exceed human brain capacity. Some transhumanists refer to that future time as the “Singularity.” In his 2008 article “Teilhard de Chardin and Transhumanism,” Eric Steinhart wrote that:

Teilhard de Chardin was among the first to give serious consideration to the future of human evolution....[He] is almost certainly the first to describe the acceleration of technological progress to a singularity in which human intelligence will become super intelligence.

Teilhard challenged theologians to view their ideas in the perspective of evolution. He asked scientists to examine the ethical and spiritual meanings of their knowledge. He fully accepted evolution. He saw it as part of a spiritual evolution toward the goal of ultra-humans and complete divinity. This idea still means something to some people. It offers a way to place scientific fact within an larger spiritual view of the cosmos, though most scientists today reject the notion that the Universe is moving toward some clear goal.
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