

## Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born on May 1, 1888 to Emmanuel and Berthe-Adele Teilhard de Chardin. His birthplace in Auvergne in southern France had a lasting effect on his experiences of love for the natural world. In 1899 he entered the Jesuit order where he launched into his life long effort to unify science and religion through the study of evolution and the role of the human as part of evolutionary processes. Three years later the novitiate was moved to the island of Jersey in England due to anti-clericalism in France. It was also at this time that his eldest brother died, his younger sister became seriously ill and two years later another sister passed away. These experiences had a profound effect on Teilhard who considered engaging only in theological studies and turning away from science.

Instead he was sent to teach at the Jesuit College in Cairo from 1905-1908. It was here that he developed his naturalist's inclinations by studying Egypt's flora and fauna as well as the fossil record. Teilhard spent from 1908-1912 in Hastings, England where he continued his theological studies but also pursued his interest in evolution. He encountered Henri Bergson's newly published *Creative Evolution*. This had a profound effect on his ideas regarding the spirit and direction of the evolving universe. It was also during this period that the attack on modernism and evolution arose under the papacy of Pius X. From 1912-1915 Teilhard studied geology and paleontology in Paris eventually earning his doctorate in 1922 from the Sorbonne.

The war years interrupted his studies as Europe was plunged into bloody trench warfare. Teilhard served as a stretcher bearer and was awarded the Legion of Honor for his heroic service. The experience of war had a profound effect on him as he wrote of his growing sense that even in the midst of such turmoil there emerges a feeling for a purpose and direction to life more hidden and mysterious than history generally reveals. It was shortly after the war when he was recuperating in Jersey that he wrote his essay on "The Spiritual Power of Matter." In 1923, at the invitation of the Jesuit Emile Licent, Teilhard sailed for China to undertake paleontological research. Together they traveled numerous times to the Ordos desert on the border with Inner Mongolia to study Paleolithic remains as well as the natural terrain. Teilhard returned to France a year later to resume teaching at the Institute Catholique but the conservative climate perpetuated by the Vatican created a difficult atmosphere for him to develop his ideas on evolution. Teilhard returned to China and settled in Beijing where he continued his scientific studies, interacted with a broad circle of intellectuals, and wrote *The Divine Milieu*. This work eventually caused his Jesuit Superior General to insist that Teilhard confine himself to his scientific work and not publish any of his theological writings. Teilhard was also encouraged to stay in China where he remained until after the second World War except for brief visits to France.

Teilhard engaged in several key research projects including the discovery of Peking Man in 1929-1930, the Mongolian Expedition sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, the Yellow Expedition sponsored by Citroen, as well as expeditions to India, Burma, and Java. In 1931 he traveled across the United States that inspired him to write *The Spirit of the Earth*. It was in 1940 that he completed his most

important work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. After the war when he was able to return to France his Jesuit superior would still not allow this work to be published. He spent the last years of his life in New York City with a research position at the Wenner-Gren Foundation. *The Phenomenon of Man* was not published until after his death in 1955. It was first translated into English in 1960 and a new more accurate translation by Sarah Weber was published in 2000.

It is in *The Phenomenon of Man* that Teilhard outlines the fourfold sequence of the evolution of galaxies, Earth, life, and consciousness. Teilhard presents his vision of the emergence of the human as the unifying dimension of the evolutionary process. For Teilhard the awakening to the idea of evolution since Darwin is unique in history and he likens this to the moment when a child becomes aware of perspective. To realize that humans are part of cosmogenesis, namely part of developmental time, brings a massive change to all of our knowledge and beliefs.

Teilhard's sees consciousness as intrinsic to the process of evolution not as an extrinsic addition to matter. For him all reality consists of simultaneously a within and a without. Matter and spirit are thus joined in this vast evolutionary unfolding toward a final Omega Point. The universe in this context is a divine milieu, a center that has the possibilities of uniting and drawing all things to itself. For Teilhard the evolutionary process is characterized by increasing complexity and consciousness and the divine is seen as part of the process not simply transcendent to it.

Humans are the self-conscious mode of the universe in whom complexity and consciousness has come to its fullest expression. One of Teilhard's greatest hopes was that this large perspective of a purposeful universe would help to inspire human action for

the flourishing of the Earth community. In contrast to a resigned or fatalistic perspective he spoke of the need to reignite in the human community a joy for action and a zest for life. Human suffering he saw not as due to original sin but as a form of potential energy which if transformed could change the face of the Earth in positive ways.

Teilhard's optimistic perspective has led to critiques from theologians who grapple with the problem of evil. It also has resulted in criticisms from deep ecologists who view him as highly anthropocentric and envisioning "building the Earth" without an awareness of the need for environmental restraints. Nonetheless, with these critiques in mind Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme have drawn on Teilhard's evolutionary perspective in developing their idea of *The Universe Story* as a comprehensive context for an expanded ecological sensibility. Like Teilhard they see cosmogenesis as critical to understanding the role of humans as intrinsic to evolution and as responsible for its continuity. Teilhard's ideas continue to inspire appreciation and critique in the search for sustaining human-Earth relations.

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