

Strobel.: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary theology

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PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S EVOLUTIONARY THEOLOGY AND ITS RECEPTION IN THEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC LITERATURE

[PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN EVOLÚCIÓS TEOLÓGIÁJA ÉS ANNAK FOGADTATÁSA A TEOLÓGIAI ÉS TUDOMÁNYOS SZAKIRODALOMBAN]

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Abstract. In his unique position at the intersection of science and spirituality, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is a Jesuit priest, paleontologist, and philosopher. As Teilhard de Chardin attempted to reconcile the seemingly absurd realms of faith and science, this article examines his life and views. In Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy, the "Omega Point" represents the highest point of complexity and consciousness in the universe. The framework is discussed in the context of his views on cosmic evolution, human consciousness, and the intricate interconnection between all life forms. The article attempts to provide an overview of the reception of Teilhard de Chardin's ideas within both religious and secular communities.

Keywords: Omega Point, Noosphere, Cosmogogenesis, Christogenesis, Darwinian evolution theory

Introduction

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), was a French Jesuit monk, scientist, paleontologist and theologian. His life and work had a significant impact on the fields of science, philosophy and religion.

Teilhard de Chardin combined the Darwinian theory of evolution with the ideas of Christian faith and theology. He believed that evolution plays a role not only in the biological world, but also in the development of consciousness and society. As a result, he created the concept of the "Noosphere", which represents the collective sphere of thoughts and human consciousness. (King, 2018)

Among his important works is "The Phenomenon of Man", in which he presents the process of evolution and the possibilities for the development of human consciousness. He believed that humanity would become more and more interconnected as it progressed through the evolutionary process, reaching a point he called the "Omega Point". This would be the step where consciousness unites and reaches a new level in which humanity lives and cooperates in unity.

Teilhard de Chardin was known for his multidimensional personality as a scientist, theologian, and mystic. He possessed a deep sense of wonder and curiosity about the

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natural world and the mysteries of existence. His ideas were profoundly influenced by his dual background in science and spirituality, leading him to bridge the gap between evolutionary science and religious thought. (Deane-Dummond, 2008)

As a Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin was deeply devoted to his religious faith. His spiritual inclination and commitment to the Christian tradition shaped the lens through which he viewed the universe and its purpose. He was also known for his open-mindedness and willingness to explore new ideas. Teilhard was not afraid to challenge conventional beliefs and sought to reconcile scientific discoveries with religious doctrine. One of Teilhard de Chardin's central ideas was the concept of "Omega Point." He proposed that evolution has a purposeful direction, leading towards a final convergence or point of unity, which he called the Omega Point. Humanity's consciousness will eventually become the thinking layer of the earth, which Teilhard calls the noosphere. (Fuchs-Kittowski, 1996)

Cosmic evolution will not stop with the noosphere. Teilhard does not see the human race as the embodiment of the universe; rather, it says that Nature provides us with another evolutionary opening, a supersoul above our souls.

Teilhard de Chardin outlines evolution as a process that leads to more complex organisms, and thus to higher self-awareness. According to his theory, self-consciousness was already present at the time of the creation of the world,

In one of his major works, *The Human Phenomenon*, he divides the history of evolution into four parts, which are also the four levels of evolution:

- Pre-life¹: The period between the origin of the universe and the appearance of life
- The appearance of life²: the appearance of the first living creatures
- The emergence of self-consciousness³: the emergence of man
- The future⁴: the future of humanity

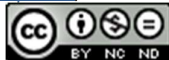
By the future he meant more than the construction of the physical world; he envisioned an irreversible ascent, through the collective forces of man, material and spiritual, to reach what he called the Omega Point. For Teilhard, the Omega Point is the cosmic summit, Christ, who is the soul of the Earth. As a naturalist, Teilhard began to see the cosmos as an ongoing holistic entity. The scientific basis of his ideas rests on the principles of geological and biological evolution. As a theologian, he combined these evolutionary cosmic concepts with Christian confessional theology.

¹ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1968): *THE HUMAN PHENOMENON* p. 12.

² Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1968): *THE HUMAN PHENOMENON* p. 32.

³ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1968): *THE HUMAN PHENOMENON* p. 81.

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1968): *THE HUMAN PHENOMENON* p. 123.



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Teilhard calls the superhuman the Omega Point. This is the pinnacle of cosmic evolution. Scientifically, Teilhard can only imagine what Omega's reality might be like, a pure conscious energy.

Through his comprehensive view of the universe, Teilhard found Christ in the entire cosmos, from the smallest particle of matter to the human community. The cosmos is a kind of creation. Christ is the means, the center, the end of the entire living and material creation, through him everything is created, sanctified and brought to life. Christ took human form and gave the world its final form. God could not create without being incarnate, and to be incarnate is to share in his suffering and evil on Earth. (Cowell, 2004)

The greater unity he observed in nature, from atoms to cells to plants, animals, and humans, led him to posit a central figure as the basis of unity, both immanent and transcendent to material reality. The expressed love of the Father is concentrated in the Word; so when God turns to the world, Christ becomes the center of creation. The doctrine of creative union complemented the Franciscan idea that Christ is first in God's intention of love; all of creation is modelled after Christ. For Teilhard, evolution was divine from the beginning and always aimed at the baptized universe.

In his book *Christianity and Evolution*, Teilhard puts it this way: "Cosmogogenesis transforms into Christogenesis, this [...] belongs to the now personalized world. Someone, and no longer something, is evolving in the universe". In some providential way the God above, the Alpha, unites and imbues Christ within and forward, with the Omega. And as Georgetown University theologian John Haught describes. (Holmes, 2005)

Teilhard's synthesis of evolution and spirituality led him to propose the idea of the "Noosphere", which denotes the sphere of human thought and collective consciousness. He believed that as human intelligence and interconnectedness increased, the Noosphere would evolve, ultimately contributing to the realization of the Omega Point

He emphasized the interconnectedness of all living beings and their place within the cosmic evolutionary process. Teilhard saw humanity as an integral part of the Earth's evolution, with a responsibility to actively participate in its continued development.

According to Teilhard, evolution has two parts: the biological and cosmological processes of creation - cosmogenesis - and the evolution of faith is Christogenesis. With genesis, he indicated that evolution involves controlled change, a patterned process. Teilhard recognized that the whole evolutionary process has a unifying effect, a centralizing factor that continues to hold the whole process together and move it forward towards greater complexity and unity, hence evolution has a direction. The ultimate mover of the whole cosmogenesis, he indicated, is what is at once in the series of living beings as tendency, desire, and purpose, and before the advancing wave of development. Evolutionary pressure drives this development at every stage. Unconvinced by *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard's theological critics accuse him of promoting a modern-day form of Gnosticism that denies the historical Jesus. It does not separate theology and science and replaces salvation

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with evolution. According to Etienne Gilson, one of his most famous critics, Teilhard's apparent efforts to synthesize salvation and evolution only do violence to the traditional Christian understanding and should be rejected as theologically incoherent and spiritually dangerous. (Curran, 2019)

In addition, paleontology suggests that the process of evolution is a series of slow development (gradualism) and leaps that produced new species within a very short period of time. Granted, this need not contradict neo-Darwinism, since geologically short periods (e.g. 50,000 years) can produce many successive generations within which biological mutations may have occurred. Especially in the situation where we find small, isolated populations, a rapid transformation of species has taken place (drift). However, even strict neo-Darwinists recognize that a distinction must be made between microbiological explanatory models at the genetic level and macroevolutionary explanations (Gregersen, 1994).

Reputation in the religious community

The papacy and the Roman Catholic Church viewed his work and views harshly, as they were in some respects contrary to official Catholic teaching. Therefore, he spent most of his life teetering on the border between science and theology.

However, Teilhard de Chardin's work later had a significant impact and inspired many theologians, philosophers and thinkers. His ideas about evolution, human consciousness and collective development are still relevant today and play a role in thinking about the future of humanity.

Teilhard de Chardin's ideas often challenged traditional religious views, particularly regarding original sin and the nature of divine creation. His work faced criticism from some within the Catholic Church, leading to certain restrictions on his writings during his lifetime.

Teilhard de Chardin's ideas often challenged traditional theological interpretations, particularly within the Catholic Church. His focus on evolution and the interconnectedness of all life could be seen as a departure from certain dogmas. Some critics might argue that his cosmological perspective deviated from established religious doctrines. Some interpretations of Teilhard de Chardin's work suggest an anthropocentric view, where human consciousness and evolution are seen as the culmination of the universe's purpose. This could potentially lead to an inflated sense of human importance and disregard for the intrinsic value of other life forms and the environment. (Galleni and Scalfari, 2017)

The reception of Teilhard de Chardin's work and ideas in the Church and other religious communities was diverse and changed over time.

During his lifetime the Catholic Church strictly monitored the work and views of Teilhard de Chardin. Many of his writings were banned and many writing grants were

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cancelled. His work "The Phenomenon of Man", for example, was not published until the late 1950s and early 1960s, after his death.

It has been observed that the attitude of the Church toward science and theology has become more open in the 1960s, especially during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The document with the beginning "Gaudium et spes" adopted at that time allowed to a certain extent on the subject of evolution, which gave Teilhard de Chardin a small opportunity to rediscover his ideas.

However, the Church has never made an official statement about Teilhard de Chardin's work and teachings. (Tennert-Hellwig, 1995) Some theologians and bishops remained cautious about his work and warned people against possible transgressions.

However, Teilhard de Chardin's popularity increased at the end of the 20th century. Many Christian communities, theologians, and philosophers accept his work, especially ecumenical trends and circles interested in connecting evolution with Christianity.

Teilhard de Chardin's reception

A first step towards a theological reflection on evolution from a Catholic perspective was made by the French theologian and anthropologist Teilhard de Chardin. After being banned for decades, his work did not begin to influence German Catholic theology until the 1960s, when a new spirit of reform was introduced with the Second Vatican Council. In the council's pastoral constitution *The Church in the Modern World*, Teilhardian ideas have been incorporated. A German philosopher, theologian, and translator of Teilhard de Chardin's works into German, Karl Schmitz-Moormann (1928-1996) also attempted a critical edition of Teilhard de Chardin's works which was never completed (Schmitz-Moormann, 1992). The ideas of Teilhard have largely been ignored by Protestant theology. An exception was the dissertation of Sigurd Martin Daecke *Teilhard de Chardin and Protestant Theologie* (Daecke, 1967). In this book Daecke announced a more comprehensive work on Teilhard's theology which he never completed. The most important Catholic German theologian in this respect was Karl Rahner (1904-1984). He referred to Teilhard de Chardin only occasionally, but his theology can be regarded as influenced by him. Rahner started by working on the question of hominization, the theory of the evolutionary origin of humanity. He sees creation as an ongoing process leading toward an ever greater richness of life, in which something new indeed emerges.

In other religious communities

In the Jewish and Islamic communities, as well as in other religious traditions, the influence of Teilhard de Chardin was not as pronounced as in the Catholic Church. His work is less known and less influential in these religious communities.

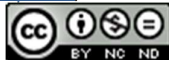
However, there were religious leaders and theologians within ecumenical movements who appreciated his work and found that it could be part of a dialogue between evolution

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and religion that attempted to reconcile the relationship between modern science and religious faith. (Lane, 1996)

In the early 20th century, when Teilhard de Chardin began to publish his ideas, some in the scientific community dismissed his work as speculative and not properly scientific. He received criticism regarding the directionality of evolution, as it contradicted the dominant Darwinian theory of evolution.

In the 1960s, especially after the Second Vatican Council, in which evolution and science-religion dialogue were discussed, Teilhard de Chardin's ideas received increased attention from the secular scientific community. (Ovedio et al., 2015)

Teilhard de Chardin's work and ideas began to have a growing influence in interdisciplinary research and scientific fields such as evolutionary biology, cognitive science, philosophy, ecology, and consciousness research.

A first step towards a theological reflection on evolution from a Catholic perspective was made by Teilhard de Chardin. After being banned for decades, his work did not begin to influence German Catholic theology until the 1960s, when a new spirit of reform was introduced with the Second Vatican Council. In the council's pastoral constitution *The Church in the Modern World*, Teilhardian ideas have been incorporated. A German philosopher, theologian, and translator of Teilhard de Chardin's works into German, Karl Schmitz-Moormann (1928–1996) also attempted a critical edition of Teilhard de Chardin's works which was never completed. (Schmitz-Moormann, 1992) The ideas of Teilhard have largely been ignored by Protestant theology. An exception was the dissertation of Sigurd Martin Daecke *Teilhard de Chardin and Protestant Theologie*. (Daecke, 1967) In this book Daecke announced a more comprehensive work on Teilhard's theology which he never completed. The most important Catholic German theologian in this respect was Karl Rahner (1904–1984). He referred to Teilhard de Chardin only occasionally, but his theology can be regarded as influenced by him. Rahner started by working on the question of hominization, the theory of the evolutionary origin of humanity. He sees creation as an ongoing process leading toward an ever greater richness of life, in which something new indeed emerges.

Teilhard saw the development of human consciousness as an important part of evolution. As people evolved, they acquired higher and higher levels of self-identity and cognition. This consciousness enables humans to think, communicate, and create in ways that distinguish them from other living beings.

As humans evolved, they created increasingly complex social structures and communities. With the emergence of human language, culture and common belief systems, they began to cooperate and exchange information on an increasingly large scale. These interactions offer opportunities for the accumulation and intergenerational transmission of knowledge.

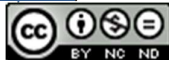
Teilhard recognized the importance of technology in human evolution. Technology was seen as an extension of human capabilities, enabling individuals and societies to overcome

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physical limitations and create increasingly sophisticated tools and machines. According to Teilhard, technological developments played an important role in expanding human communication and cooperation. (Delio, 2012)

Teilhard proposed that as human societies and technologies advance, consciousness will merge. This unification continues with the exchange of ideas, the spread of knowledge, and the development of ever-increasing connections between people and cultures. Teilhard believed that this increasing connectivity would lead to the formation of the "noosphere". The noosphere, according to Teilhard, is the domain of human thought and collective consciousness. It is a higher level terrestrial organization, comparable to the geosphere and biosphere, but based on human cognition and interconnectedness. Teilhard saw the noosphere as the next stage of human evolution, where humanity would rise to a new level of global interconnectedness and collective consciousness.

Teilhard de Chardin's reception in the scientific community

Kurzweil, in his book *The „Singularity is Near“* sees parallels between Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point and his own concept of the „technological singularity“. Both ideas envision a transformative future where humanity experiences a profound shift in consciousness and existence. While Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point is rooted in a more spiritual and metaphysical context, Kurzweil's technological singularity is based on the exponential growth of technology and artificial intelligence.

By referencing Teilhard de Chardin's work, Kurzweil highlights the long-standing human desire for transcendence and a vision of the future where humanity evolves into a higher form of being. The connection between these ideas serves to provide historical context and philosophical grounding for Kurzweil's own predictions about the future of technology and human evolution. (Kurzweil, 2005)

Teilhard must have been influenced by this trend while seeking to extend it throughout the planet, as the organic metaphor and organicist language were fundamental for the birth of sociology as a discipline. (Barberis, 2003)

Emergent properties and complexity

In the 21st century, more and more researchers have adopted the views of Teilhard de Chardin due to the interest in emergence and complexity. His thoughts on the new properties appearing in evolution and the development of collective consciousness inspired researchers of complex systems and self-organizing structures.

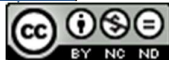
In *The Phenomenon of Man* (book 2, chapter 3, section 3), he briefly discusses his thoughts on insects. He explains that insects have an extremely specialized nervous system, the nerve ganglions concentrate, become localized, and grow forward into their heads. This is called cephalization. A differentiation of nerve tissue is responsible for this specialization. This indicates an important feature in evolution, namely, that the latter is characterized by

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a direction. In fact, Teilhard affirms quite telegraphically that „at the same time instincts become more complex; and simultaneously the extraordinary phenomena of socialization appear.” This general direction, which Teilhard calls complexification, can be seen in the movement “from subatomic units to atoms, from atoms to inorganic and later to organic molecules,” ending up - after a long sequence - with higher forms of life, higher animals and man. (Scerri, 2014)

According to Teilhard, what actually takes place within the framework of the noosphere is the superorganization of matter itself, and this is realized through human collectivization and collective cooperation. Only through collectivization (collective cooperation) can humanity achieve this complete development of the noosphere. It cannot be built by people who think only of themselves; yet every person on earth participates (in himself) in the universal heightening of consciousness.

And finally, using anthropomorphic terms, Teilhard believes that the noosphere belongs not only to the Universe, not only to humans, but to the Humans who will be born in the future. (Stevens-Arroyo, 2011) And through the efforts of humanity building the noosphere, it finds the soul of the earth.

A very similar theory is the Gaia theory, which describes the world as a self-regulating system. The modern version of the theory was created by James Lovelock (1919-2022) in the 1970s. It has been called the "Gaia hypothesis", claiming that the biosphere is "an active adaptive control system capable of maintaining the Earth in homeostasis". Sometimes they took this line of thinking quite far: Lovelock even ventured that algal mats evolved to regulate global temperatures, while Australia's Great Barrier Reef is a "partial project for an evaporation lagoon" to regulate ocean salinity volt. (Lovelock, 1974)

Criticisms and controversies

While Teilhard de Chardin's ideas have garnered both praise and criticism, it's important to note that perspectives on his work can vary widely, his work still chooses divisive views even in the secular scientific community. Some scientists continue to criticize the directionality and speculative nature of evolution, arguing that it does not stand up to the criteria of scientific rigor.

Teilhard de Chardin's ideas might be criticized for blurring the lines between science and spirituality to an extent that could dilute the distinctiveness of both fields. Some may argue that a complete fusion of these domains could undermine the rigor and integrity of each discipline.

The Omega Point could raise concerns about determinism and predestination. If the universe is evolving toward a predetermined endpoint, this might raise questions about free will and the role of individual choices in shaping our spiritual paths.

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Some critics might argue that his ideas do not adequately address the urgent ecological concerns facing the planet. A focus on a future cosmic unity might be seen as neglecting the immediate need for responsible stewardship of the Earth.

Chardin's cosmic theology could potentially downplay the uniqueness of various religious traditions by suggesting a universal convergence of spiritual paths. Critics might argue that this could undermine the rich diversity and distinct teachings of different faiths.

Despite facing opposition, Teilhard's ideas have continued to influence both scientific and philosophical discourses. His profound exploration of the relationship between science, spirituality, and the destiny of humanity continues to inspire thinkers and scholars across various disciplines.

Results

Overall, Teilhard de Chardin's ideas and work are still controversial in the scientific community, but they are increasingly appreciated in an interdisciplinary context and serve as a source of inspiration for research fields that study complexity, evolution, and consciousness. His views continue to generate lively dialogue on philosophical questions about the relationship between science and religion and human development.

Conclusion

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin reveals himself as an extraordinary thinker who crossed science and spirituality at the crossroads in his life, views, and reception. His route from the laboratories of paleontology to the contemplative spaces of theology led to the formulation of a cosmic theology that sought to harmonize the complexities of the universe with the depths of human consciousness.

Teilhard de Chardin's profound insights into the evolutionary process and the concept of the Omega Point challenged conventional boundaries, inviting us to ponder the interconnectedness that underlies all existence. His vision of a universe continually evolving toward greater complexity and consciousness is a testament to his capacity to synthesize diverse strands of thought into a coherent narrative.

Nonetheless, his legacy carries its share of critiques. The shadows of anthropocentrism, determinism, and the potential dilution of spiritual uniqueness loom over his cosmological vision. The challenge of integrating his ideas with the urgent ecological concerns of the present day remains a pressing issue that requires continued exploration.

Teilhard de Chardin's cosmic theology challenges us to keep seeking, questioning, and reflecting as we navigate the intricate tapestry of existence, ever eager to uncover the hidden threads that connect us all.

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Absztrakt. A cikk a Teilhard de Chardin elképzeléseinek fogadtatására fókuszál mind a vallási, mind a tudományos közösségekben. A vallási területen nézetei élénk vitákat váltottak ki, egyesek elfogadták a modern tudomány és teológia összekapcsolásának kísérletét, azonban mások aggodalmakat vetettek fel a nézeteinek és a megszokott vallási doktrínák között fennálló lehetséges konfliktusokkal kapcsolatban. A szekuláris közösségben Teilhard de Chardin munkája innovatív megközelítése miatt kapott figyelmet, amely a tudomány és a spiritualitás közötti szakadék áthidalására törekedett. Az összekapcsolódás hangsúlyozása néhány tudósnak és filozófusnak is tetszett, akik a fejlődés és tudatosság mélyebb következményeit kutatták. Mindazonáltal munkáját nem kerülték el a kritikák. A személyközpontúság, a determinizmus és a spirituális egység potenciális veszélyei/következményei árnyékolják be kozmikus vízióját. Ezenkívül az ökológiai következmények és a filozófiájának a környezeti aggodalmakkal való összeférhetősége továbbra is vitás kérdések. Végül Teilhard de Chardin öröksége olyan összetett párbeszédet hozott létre, amely meghaladja a hagyományos területek határait, és új megértési utakat tár fel.