

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

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THE works of Teilhard de Chardin, now being published posthumously, appear to be having a considerable impact on certain sections of the Catholic community on the Continent. The time is hardly ripe yet for the publication of a full critical appraisal of his writings, and the author of this book¹ would not pretend that it is more than an introduction to Teilhard himself, with an exposition of certain features of his writings which appear particularly to call for critical comment. More important at this stage than commentaries, is that the works themselves should be read and talked about. Slowly, then, by constant usage, we shall extract more and more meaning out of those brilliant new words and phrases that Teilhard has introduced into the study of the history of the world: words such as *enroulement*, to describe the essential feature of the evolutionary process (compare the traditional *déroulement*); and *hominisation*, to indicate the unquestioned tendency in evolution, especially in the Vertebrates, for increasing elaboration of the central nervous system without which, so far as we can see, those characteristics which we recognize as essentially human would not be possible. *Hominisation* becomes, then, the end of the evolutionary process, for it is admitted by not a few biologists today that, of all the species now extant, it is *Homo sapiens* alone which is capable of making any further *major* evolutionary advance. This is attributed by Teilhard precisely to Man's spiritual capacities by virtue of which, in continuation of the process of *enroulement*, he is offered the possibility (one species representing all the rest) of discovering at the heart of all creation the Omega, present there from the beginning as the Alpha. In this way we can look to the fulfilment in Teilhard's view, of St Paul's hope that 'Nature in its turn will be set free from the tyranny of corruption, to share in the glorious freedom of God's sons'.

Visions such as these, word-pictures painted on a time-scale canvas of thousands of millions of years, with the speed and the tensions mounting continually to new heights of awareness and self-awareness and the liberation thus achieved, are exciting

1 *Dialogue avec Teilhard de Chardin*. By Olivier A. Rabut, O.P. (Editions du Cerf; n.p.)

indeed. What a book is waiting, one hopes, some day to be produced, which will compare Teilhard's concept of *enroulement* in phylogenetic development, with Jung's *individuation* as the proper end of ontogeny! We may have to wait a long time for such a book in this country, for Teilhard is virtually unknown here. Not one of his works has appeared thus far in English translation, and since Teilhard was as much a poet and mystic as he was a man of science, it requires a great delicacy of feeling for the French language to follow all the subtleties of his thought in the original.

Perhaps some publisher could be persuaded to make a start for English readers with a translation of Père Rabut's book. British scientists, steeped in the empirical tradition, might find a certain lack of appeal in the more lyrical passages of Teilhard's own writings—though it is to be noted that the scientific committee which is partly responsible for these posthumous publications includes a number of the most distinguished British and American biologists. But the most empirical of scientists would find an ally in Père Rabut. In the first section of his book he makes the grievous charge of a lack of objectivity in Teilhard's scientific assessment of the evolutionary process, and contrasts the certain inevitability which he invokes with the accounts of evolutionary theorists like G. G. Simpson, who stress rather the fundamental randomness of the factors involved in evolutionary advance. Teilhard does indeed sometimes appear to hold views which would be unacceptable to thorough-going neo-Darwinians of today. It is refreshing to see his views challenged from this point of view in a book which carries the triple *nihil obstat*, *imprimi potest*, and *imprimatur*.

But Teilhard would not, one imagines, be daunted by the charge. He tends in fact not to discuss the mechanisms involved in the origin of species, nor the laws which govern those mechanisms. A palaeontologist of world-wide reputation, his standpoint is that of the historian, not that of the experimentalist. The history of evolution, presented by Teilhard with the strict objectivity that his scientific training demanded, leads most compellingly to his conclusion that, whatever may have been the precise factors operating at each stage of the process, the net result has been the increasing elaboration of complex organization (the very reverse of the law of increasing entropy), a process which has

led in turn from what he calls the Geosphere, through the Biosphere, finally to the Noosphere as realized in Man. It should perhaps be stated unequivocally that for Teilhard the advent of the Noosphere is a transformation so revolutionary that he is prepared to allow for it (e.g., in the footnote to p. 186, *Le Phénomène Humain*) whatever 'creative act' or 'special intervention' anyone might wish to postulate. He himself would probably prefer to see this as yet another, special, manifestation of that Divine Power which he sees displayed everywhere throughout the created universe. His is the view, in essence mystical, that was described by the late Dr Sherwood Taylor in *The Four-fold Vision* as 'essentially religious, though not essentially Christian . . . the vision of the whole universe, down to the moss and the stone, as the consequence of God's will and as actively fulfilling his purpose'. This vision which, as Père Rabut points out, probably came to Teilhard not as the result of his scientific work (as sometimes he seems to imply) but intuitively when he was a boy, does become for him essentially Christian in the light of the modern development, in even fuller measure, of the doctrine of the Incarnation. For Teilhard, the evolutionary process will achieve its final term only when the *Christus Rex* is acknowledged by the whole human race. Acknowledged not separately by individuals seeking private salvation, but acknowledged in unison by the whole species, members one of another, praising God in that full freedom which is theirs uniquely, and doing so on behalf of the whole Biosphere and Geosphere through which Man has come to be.

The *Dialogue* under review is well-named. Though the author is critical of many aspects of Teilhard's writings, yet he quotes freely from them, often in order to show how brilliantly on occasion there is expressed a theological truth of the utmost significance. A reading of this book gives one a fair insight into Teilhard's thoughts and methods. It is a valuable introduction, and has the advantage of providing at the same time a useful criticism of the defects and omissions which can be charged against his grand synthesis. One of the gravest accusations is his almost total neglect of the problem of evil. The charge was anticipated in an appendix to the first book published, but the answer to it, as given there, is curiously naïve. Père Rabut repeatedly gives evidence of a certain naïvety in philosophical

matters. But his positive achievements are regarded as of the utmost significance. Provided that the point is made, as in this book it is but nowhere in the original writings, that with the advent of the Noosphere the inevitability of the biological process of evolution is progressively overshadowed by the freedom of self-conscious man either to co-operate with the grace now offered him or to refuse it, Teilhard's synthesis will be seen in time to be of the very first importance. The technological advances of modern man might legitimately be thought of as the further extension of a purely biological process, and as such inevitable. Spiritual advance, however, is totally distinct from this. Although one might hope and pray that such advance will be the final destiny of Man, we only delude ourselves if we imagine, as perhaps some of Teilhard's followers have been tempted to do, that there is anything inevitable about it. The final choice is in fact becoming increasingly well-defined. Thinking people everywhere seem to be conscious of an approaching crisis. Let us hope that Teilhard is right, and that it is unthinkable that in this last crisis, when the process of *enroulement* has almost achieved the goal pursued for some three thousand million years, Man will choose to destroy it all. Will the final victory lie with God or with the devil? Teilhard was an incorrigible optimist in questions such as that.

The synoptic views of Teilhard are here shown to be strikingly in sympathy with the general spirit of the post-war world. There is a great movement going on towards synthesis and union in all kinds of fields, social, political, intellectual and spiritual. It will not be surprising if Teilhard's voice is heard repeatedly, and more and more forcefully, in the next few generations. He combines, as both scientist and mystic, the Western obsession with the Manifold in all degrees of particularity, with the Eastern vision of the One. Always he talks in terms of history, but it is history on a time-scale almost inconceivable by those of us who are conditioned to think of 'Ancient History' in terms of Greeks and Romans. Arts men, scientists, theologians and philosophers, none will be able to afford to neglect the fact of Teilhard de Chardin.