

The Teilhardian Synthesis

From Spiritual and Practice: Teilhard for our Times: Email 4

Today is the day we actually take the plunge! In this email I want to give you an overview of Teilhard's fundamental cosmological vision, sometimes known as "the Teilhardian synthesis."

Although the canon of Teilhard's writings is voluminous, virtually all of his work is a variation upon this one master theme. So once you have the key, you can open the lock anywhere. His most comprehensive presentation of his grand synthesis is found in his masterwork, *The Human Phenomenon* (unfortunately originally mistranslated as *The Phenomenon of Man*.) But there is really no place in Teilhard's writing that is not deeply steeped in this fundamental vision-- which, he claims, began to emerge during those powerful mystical experiences of his early adulthood and became fully formed in him during the long years of exile in China.

The Teilhardian synthesis essentially consists of four premises, laid out as follows:

1. Evolution -- more properly understood as cosmogenesis (I'll be explaining what this means in the next email)-- is not a theory but a "general condition" affecting every nook and cranny of our planetary history. It is the inescapable starting point for any authentic understanding of ourselves and of our world.
2. Evolution is not random, "winding down," or driven from below by the principle of "the survival of the fittest," but has a direction--a "privileged axis" as Teilhard calls it, furnished by a principle which he articulates as "the law of Complexification/Consciousness."
3. Evolution is not open-ended, but converges to a point, which Teilhard calls the Omega point.
4. This Omega point is identical with the cosmic Christ.

An easy (or at least easier!) way of wrapping your mind around these four points may be with the help of a simple mnemonic device. You'll see that the Teilhardian synthesis consists of "four c's": cosmogenesis; complexification/consciousness; convergence, and Christ-Omega.

I think you'll agree that these four premises pose an ascending order of challenge. At the first rung--cosmogenesis-- for most of us, it's still pretty smooth sailing; Teilhard will have virtually all scientists and the vast majority of educated, liberal thinkers solidly in his camp. By the second rung, however--"complexification/consciousness"-- the ranks begin to thin out considerably: down to something well under 50%, I'd guess, particularly within the scientific community. Secular evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking will be long gone. Still, there are many reputable scientists (David Bohm and Ilya Prigogine among the foremost of these) who believe that evolution does indeed manifest some sort of direction, and that there is a counter-entropic force--an "implicate order" as Bohm famously called it--that causes matter to gain force, not merely lose it.

At the third rung--convergence--Teilhard will have lost virtually all of the scientific community, and I daresay much of the spiritual community as well, for in both these circles there is a strong

preference toward seeing the universe as expanding (rather than contracting), and evolution as open-ended and diffusive rather than convergent. But while this notion of convergent evolution entails a considerable intellectual stretch, Teilhard is not suddenly leaping the fence here into mystical speculation. His conclusion is based on a massive amount of scientific evidence, gathered from his disciplined perspective as a geologist and paleontologist.

Finally, at the last rung -- Christ-Omega -- the only ones still standing will likely be the Christian mystics who have already personally intuited that the risen Christ of the great Pauline "cosmic canticles" (Ephesians 1: 1-12 and Colossians 1: 12-20) is indeed in some real sense a cosmogonic principle, a force well beyond mere guru or spiritual prophet. Skeptics will remain unconvinced, nor does Teilhard attempt to convince them. But for the Christian believer already inclined in that direction, he offers a powerful argument for a deeper reclamation of the original biblical notion of the logocic Christ in all its mystical force and splendor.

Over the next four weeks we will be unpacking each of these premises in turn, attempting to see what Teilhard is seeing at each of these rungs while at the same time working our way through some of the notorious tight spots and challenges his teaching poses. Stay tuned!

Today's spiritual practice

Teilhard put great store on seeing; in fact, this is the title of his short but laserlike prologue to *The Human Phenomenon*. For him, seeing is of a fundamentally higher order of magnitude than thinking. It is not a matter of deducing, inferring, comparing, analyzing, but of some deeper faculty of mind which instantly grasps the larger pattern.

This capacity for luminous insight has long been recognized in the West as the very essence of contemplation. In the traditional understanding, contemplation is not about simply resting in emptiness, as would-be meditators learn today. It is about being present to what arises on the other side of that emptiness, once the overly agitated and calculating rational mind has settled down and yielded itself into a deeper mode of perception. Spiritual teachers both Eastern and Western liken this state to a full moon reflecting upon surface of a still pond.

It is generally true, however, that this deeper perception will not kick in until the usual mental noise has settled down, and this clearing and stilling of the mind is supremely the work of meditation. While Teilhard did not practice formal meditation in a way we would recognize it in our own era, his lifelong, deeply embodied devotion to the sacred heart of Jesus became a way for him of "putting the mind in the heart"; or dropping down into this deeper visionary seeing. It is the real ground, I am convinced, of his remarkable visionary powers.

Today, I invite you to begin your day with meditation, in whatever format you prefer: Centering Prayer, insight meditation, with a mantra, or simply bringing your attention to your breath. Whenever the temptation to get tangled up in thinking arises, simply let that thought go (if you're practicing Centering Prayer), or else return to your breath or your mantra.

Meditate for twenty or thirty, then if you like, read today's teaching for a second time and notice what strikes you. Do you notice any changes when you read with a meditation-composed mind?