



# Teilhard de Chardin

Toward a Science  
Charged With Faith  
(1881-1955)

<http://www.crosscurrents.org/chardin.htm>



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) stands among the very few leaders of thought in this century to integrate pure scientific research with a religious vocation. At an early point in his career this paleontologist and Jesuit priest made it his personal mission to reconstruct the most basic Christian doctrines from the perspectives of science and, at the same time, to reconstruct science from the perspectives of faith. He would do this by overthrowing all the barriers that had been erected between science and religion in the past one hundred years. He would take the lessons learned from the study of nature as the foundation on which to reconstruct the Christian faith. He would single-handedly remake all the dogmas of his own Catholic Church, and he would at the same time remake the world of modern science on the model suggested by his personal experience of God.

Teilhard was seen by the Vatican as a threat to the integrity of the faith. Rome insisted that his religious writings should not be published; he was forbidden to teach or even to speak publicly on religious subjects; he was banished from his native country. Yet his ideas were disseminated informally and sometimes secretly by friends and colleagues in the church. He became a hero and a role model for a whole generation of younger priests and theologians. He set the stage for the renewal movements which finally came to flower in the era of Vatican II.

At the same time he also suggested a program for the reconstruction of science. He put forward a systematic critique of traditional science which was just as radical and just as provocative as his criticism of traditional religion, and he provoked equally extreme reactions in the scientific community. A small number of world-class scientists have taken his ideas seriously enough to structure their own work on Teilhard's model, but the majority of scientists have reacted as defensively as the Vatican theologians.

## Synopsis of The Phenomenon of Man

by J Felix Raj, SJ

<http://www.goethals.org/teilhard.htm>

In his book *The Phenomenon of Man* Teilhard talks about pre-life, life, the Alpha Point, the Omega Point, and so on. According to him the pre-life is what we call matter. In calling it 'pre-life', he wants to imply that there is already a direction, a tendency, an obscure sort of will in matter. . .

What is new here is that we can see matter under the twin categories of duration and of evolution, instead of fixity and geometry. The whole universe in fact, is found to be engaged in an immense evolution, to which astronomy claims to be able to assign an initial date – between five billion five hundred million and eight billion five hundred million. Teilhard recalls at this point that two principal laws rule matter – that of the conservation of energy and that of the degradation of energy. The more the quantum of energy in the world functions, the more it gets used up. This is the fundamental phenomenon of the world which necessarily leads to the "Phenomenon of Man".

### Law of Complexity

The great factor in the evolutionary phenomenon as expounded by Teilhard is the "great law of complexity and consciousness". It is a law implying a structure, a converging psychic curvature of the world upon itself. This is called the metaphysics of union and fits well into the evolutionary conception of the cosmos. Evolution takes place along the axis of complexification – we pass from the relatively simple to the complex. Thus we pass on to atoms from atomic particles, from atoms to molecule and successively to molecular compounds, carbon compounds, viruses, cells living organism, plants, animals and finally man; briefly pre-life, life and thought.

“All energy”, says Teilhard, “is of a psychic nature.” But this fundamental energy is divided into two distinct components: a tangential energy, which brings together all the elements of the world in an ever-increasing complexities, and a radical energy which draws it in the direction of a state even more complex and even more directed towards the future.

According to Teilhard, matter and psychism were co-created. Just as man’s body goes back to some primordial matter, which has gradually evolved, so does his psychism or soul. The whole matter is permeated by the spirit, although this is not evident at all levels. The whole man, body and soul, thus emerged from matter. Just as matter evolves from the very beginning into a body that becomes more and more human, so psychism from the very beginning evolves into psychism that becomes more and more human. To put it in Teilhard’s own words: “We must accept what science tells us that man was born from the earth. But more logical than scientists when they lecture to us, we must carry the lesson to its conclusion, that is to say, accept that man was born entirely from the world, not only his flesh and bones, but also his incredible power of thought.”

The most revolutionary and fruitful aspect of our present age is the relationship it has brought to light between matter and spirit; spirit is no longer independent of matter and vice versa. It follows from this that spirit and matter are two facets of one and the same thing. Man’s soul and his body, the inside and outside (Teilhard would say “within and without”) have existed at all times. In Teilhard’s words: “In the world nothing could ever burst forth as final, across the different thresholds, successively traversed by evolution which has not already existed in some obscure primordial way.” And this applies to life, to consciousness and thought.

### **The Alpha Point**

This is the “terminus a quo” of evolution and a rather obscure point in Teilhard’s system. It is not what we usually understand by “creatio ex nihilo”. According to Teilhard the starting point of evolution is infinite multiplicity, but disorganized: “Infinite Disorder”. It was like having stones but not the building or like having seeds but not the plant. Creation, for him, is a creative union, viz. what brings about unification out of multiplicity; thus creation is not and cannot be instantaneous. It is still going on.

Evolution does not proceed haphazardly; it is orthogenetic; it has a direction, a goal, an axis of development. The axis passes through the amphibians, reptiles, mammals, the primates and leads straight to man. We can almost pinpoint the axis in the gradual, observable complexification of the nervous system, especially of the brain.

We can follow it almost step by step. If we go back in time, we can follow the axis of evolution as it crosses various thresholds, leading from lithosphere to the biosphere (the vitalization of matter); and from the biosphere to the noosphere, the thinking layer which now covers the world.

### **The Omega Point**

If the cosmic process has a meaning, a direction, a goal, it must have a definite terminus towards which it is advancing. It must have a nucleus. A synthesis can take place only around a nucleus, around which the consciousness of the whole humanity will finally crystallize. In other words, if evolution follows very many lines, there must be a peak in which they must converge.

And this peak, he calls “Omega Point.”

He also describes the attributes of the Omega Point which are:

- (1) It must be already existing;
- (2) It must be personal – an intellectual being and not an abstract idea;
- (3) It must be transcendent;
- (4) It must be autonomous – free from the limitations of space and time; and
- (5) It must be irreversible, that is it must be attainable. He expressly states that in the Omega Point, the human person and his freedom will not be suppressed, but super-personalized. Personality will be infinitely enriched.

Having said these, he passes from hyper-physics to theology and revelation. He finds in the Gospels, especially in St. Paul’s writings, a truly existing personal, transcendental, autonomous and irreversible center of cosmic evolution – Christ. He says that Christ is the Omega Point, and in this all-embracing revealed perspective, he maintains that the Incarnation, Resurrection and the Ascension of Christ should be viewed not merely as historical events, affecting Christ only, but as cosmic events, affecting the whole cosmos.