Cosmos & Creation Conference 2014

WAS TEILHARD A PANTHEIST?

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Introduction

Before getting into the subject I take the liberty to introduce some ideas that Pierre Leroy offered about Teilhard. In 1987 we decided to add a luncheon talk to the program. Father Leroy, a French Jesuit biologist and close friend of Teilhard was 90 years old at the time. He came over from France to speak at a dedication of the Georgetown Teilhard Center and to our Cosmos and Creation members here. Incidentally, Langdon Gilkey, who was our Guest speaker that year, told me privately that Leroy was one of the three most impressive individuals he ever met. Of course this will be a repeat for a few of you, but what he said seems to me, could be more significant than what I can say. Please excuse this review if you are old enough to have been here in 1987.

According to my notes, Leroy gave what he felt were Teilhard’s three main ideas: 1) Evolution is a universal phenomenon at all inorganic and living levels. Evolution is essential to what we call “experimental reality” because in fact we are not sure what is really real. Evolution is not in itself creative; hence for a believer what is it? It is the expression in time and space of a universal phenomenon – “everything is changing all the time.” 2) Evolution takes place within a universal movement that carries living creatures towards psychism, or psychic existence. The psychic factor becomes more manifest as structures
become more complex. Complexity means that a lot of little things come
together into an order, eventually into the appearance of psychic existence. The
culminating point of this ascending movement is reflection. It is this faculty that
makes the human person a spiritual center of thought, of freedom and of love. 3) Human persons can find their full meaning in convergence of the evolutionary
universe to a super-person, Christ, the point omega, the center in which the
whole universe will be transfigured, like Christ at the Transfiguration in all three
Synoptic Gospels and in 2 Peter. So Teilhard promotes both love of the world
and love of God.

Some say Teilhard reassembled what had been cut up by a combination of
the Judeo-Christian tradition and especially Greek philosophers, e.g. matter-
body-soul etc. The initial energy, what Teilhard called spirit-matter, became
differentiated in time into physical, chemical, and spiritual energy. Thus spirit is
potentially inherent in all matter. In our universe pure matter doesn’t exist, and
as far as we can see, pure spirit does not exist. Leroy emphasized THAT change
of vision as fundamental to a Teilhardian perspective. So when life emerged
deep psychic awareness occurred in an ascending movement towards reflection.
The crowning point of reflection is point omega, the end of convergence. In no
way did Teilhard think he detracted from science, as some have written.

Everything, including Humans that exist in the universe is linked to what
was before it and what comes after it in time. Humans appear on the line of
primate mammals, distinct from all previous species. They are products of the
earth without equivalents, as far as could be known at the time. They form an organic unit, called mankind, humankind. Beyond this uniformity this thinking element stretches like a film on the surface of the planet, like an ultimate envelope in which the soul of the universe seems to be concentrated, at least at that point in time. Teilhard called this layer the “noosphere,” (from nous meaning mind). Like the biosphere, this sphere of living matter makes the earth for Teilhard phosphorescent with its thought – big cities, factories etc. Leroy noted “thinking (going on) everywhere.” Teilhard extrapolated the lines of development through convergence to a decisive end of the human adventure, which will come together in omega. Therefore individual salvation becomes more a collective issue. He concluded saying “for Teilhard we must struggle to see more clearly to act more powerfully out of moral duty.” (In later essays he emphasized the importance of research.) Thus it is not just a question of man but a question of matter as well. For matter gives the necessary structure for spirit to manifest itself; therefore matter has spiritual value. Leroy then quoted from “Mass on the World, the Heart of Matter and Hymn of the Universe,” three essays by Teilhard. For Leroy, Teilhard promoted love of the world and love of God.

My idea of a subject for this talk comes primarily from thinking about many students for the last fifty years, and experience primarily in so-called Jesuit-sponsored institutions like Loyola. I presume students reflect the culture in which they live. Student behavior in general can be predicated by cultural
values. So what are the values of our society? I suggest an increasing strong
current of so-called secular values has dominated cultures for some time, and is
increasing here in the US and in Europe. Webster’s dictionary defines secular:
“...of or relating to worldly things as distinguished from things relating to
religion and church - temporal.” The dictionary defines **Secularism** to be:
“worldly spirit, views, or the like; especially a system of doctrines and practices
that disregards or rejects any form of religious faith and worship.” I wonder if
such a system is not unlike what might be called a form of materialist
pantheism? I am not intending for the defense of any orthodoxy, either scientific
or religious. It is just an effort to express a view of the world as I have found it.
So it could be a topic for some reflection on a scientist like Teilhard’s viewpoint
about pantheism.

First, to put the discussion into context, the dictionary description of
pantheism: “the doctrine that God is not a personality, but that all laws, forces,
manifestations etc. of the self-existing universe are God.”

In his 1960 book, *Teilhard de Chardin*, Dr. Maurice Vernet tells how he
admires Teilhard’s rich nature, (and I quote) “with an unrivalled sense of the
reality of the World and the power, on occasions, to proclaim an eloquent
profession of faith in which Christianity completely succumbs to
pantheism....almost completely to materialism.” In my opinion, this quote is a
brief example of how many authors have misinterpreted Teilhard’s writings. The
*question* might be asked *whether* promises of Christianity or pantheism are
fulfilled in his writings? My purpose is to verify that indeed Teilhard could be classified a pantheist, a Christian pantheist.

This particular issue seems to have been at the heart of many of his essays. As a Christian, who spent most of his professional life in China, Teilhard searched his consciousness in order to relate his experience of the world of matter in space and time with the spirituality he first learned from his Mother and was nourished in a Christian life. This vision is manifested even in his earliest writings. The assessment agrees in general with renowned Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar who wrote: “the theological element of Teilhard’s thought was discovered and developed in the WW I years at the battlefront; after 1920 (he died in 1955) he basically reworked the essential insights he had acquired.” (end of quote) I will concentrate on “Cosmic Life,” the first, and “The Universal Element,” the final of the twenty essays he wrote during those war years, although the issue comes up in some form in most of those early writings.

**Cosmic Life**

As Teilhard became aware of the risks he was exposed to at the Front since being drafted as a stretcher carrier in 1914, by 1916 he decided to write “Cosmic Life” his first essay. At the time, he called the 60 page document his “intellectual testament.” He wrote:

*When a man has emerged into consciousness of the cosmos, and has deliberately flung himself into it, his first impulse is to allow himself to be*
rocked like a child by the great mother in whose arms he has just woken. For some this attitude of surrender is a mere aesthetic emotion. For others it is a rule of practical life, a system of thought, or even a religion; but in it lies the common root of all non-Christian pantheisms....Life is understood and experienced as a function of matter. (Writings, p 28)

This essay, “Cosmic Life,” is prefaced by a dedication: “To Mother Earth and through her especially to Christ Jesus.” Directly under the title Teilhard wrote a subtitle: “There is a communion with God, and a communion with earth, and a communion with God through earth. And Jacob fought with the visitor until day was come.” This preface to his very first essay, in my opinion – introduces a fundamental theme in most of his writings: communion with God, communion with earth, communion with God through earth.

Years ago I asked an internationally known Teilhard scholar about this reference to the Book of Genesis, chapter 32 about Jacob wrestling with the angel. Why, I asked, did that reference appear in prominent places in more than one of Teilhard’s writings? He said he did not know. Some translations of the bible call the angel a visitor. The biblical text continues “You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel because you have contended with some divine and human beings and have prevailed.” My conclusion is Teilhard’s reference to wrestling with the angel (the visitor) can be found in the four headings of this first essay: Awakening to the Cosmos; Communion with Earth; Communion with God; and Communion with God through Earth. The interpretation of the Genesis
32 quotation is Teilhard’s awareness that the only thing we humans can experience and measure is matter in space. Most scientists find that to study matter, including human beings, what we experience and measure, can be a terribly strenuous and life-long task. It can be analogous to coming to knowledge and communion with God. Wrestling with the angel (the visitor) for Teilhard is not unlike a scientist’s exertion to come to know God through his studies.

Writing from the Front, he begins Cosmic Life by expressing his purpose: What follows springs from an exuberance of life and a yearning to live: it is written to express an impassioned vision of the earth, and in an attempt to find a solution for the doubts that beset my action - because I love the universe, its energies, its secrets, and its hopes...I want these pages to express my love of Matter and life, and to reconcile it, if possible, with the unique adoration of the only absolute and definitive Godhead.

Thus his intention is to harmonize these two loves. All Ill-defined Illusions must be rejected so that hearts may be widened from a narrow individualism to the new size of the universe being discovered. He intends as both observer and participant in evolution to rely on the coherence and correspondence of the cosmos of matter and life with a person, what eventually will be Christ. This reconciliation of God in Christ with what he calls sacred evolution was his hope for this, his first essay.
Inheriting both his father’s interest in natural philosophy, his mother’s Christian piety, and his devotion to the person of Christ, - he wrote later in life: “to show how starting from the point at which a spark was first struck, as a point that was built into me congenitally, there was a gradual interplay of three universal components, the Cosmic, the Human, and the Christic – these (at least the first and the last) asserted themselves explicitly in me from the very first moments of my existence, but it has taken me more than sixty years of ardent effort to discover that they were no more than the successive heralding, or approximate outlines, of one and the same fundamental reality…a universe that is Person.” For those familiar with the New Testament you find the same panoramic commentary in the Apostle Paul’s reflection in the first chapter of Ephesians and Colossians 1:15 to 2:23 (also found later in the Christian tradition) on the mystery of the risen Christ as mystery of the world. We find that theme of “universe as a person” in his final wartime essay, which he called “The Universal Element.”

The Universal Element

Teilhard completed his twentieth essay in 1919 after the armistice, before being discharged from the army, and returning to the Paris Museum to continue his research for the doctorate in geology. In this relatively brief essay he presented what he called “the most central exposition of my ideas that I’ve yet produced.” The double attraction for the Absolute and psychological disposition to what he called a life-long sense of Plentitude or fullness through both the
Earth and God and his solutions, seem to be satisfied in this final essay. He treats the subject in three sections that he titles, 1) Existence of the Universal Element, 2) The Nature of the Universal Element, and 3) The Properties of Christ – the Universal Element.

The first section reveals a perspective similar to what poets and philosophers especially call the horizon of knowledge, a kind of cosmic intuition – for those with a capacity for it – the necessary presence of a reality in whose activity the person is included. These psychic states are related to what Teilhard calls a cosmic consciousness. He writes that at different times it is found, not as merely an illusion. Awareness of it has been recorded by poets and visionaries, and it has been an inspiration for many religions and philosophies through the centuries. So he asks, what is this mysterious reality?

In the second section he writes that there are two interpretations regarding the nature of this Universal Element. He calls them two rival attractive stars. One interpretation is pantheism. The element or individual is an absolute singular, and part of a divine substance, for example a human being, who becomes lost or absorbed in the common cosmic substance. According to Teilhard, this religion can lead one astray as individuals become lost like a drop of water, dissolved like a grain of salt in the ocean. He notes in his private journal that there is confusion here between concepts of absorption and union. Absorption engenders homogeneity, but not beauty. Personally, I was struck by the fact that
like many keen observers of nature, even at this early stage of a career, he recognizes beauty in any idea or theory to be an important criterion for its truth. Teilhard’s writes of a second star to look at the Universal Element, namely describe a legitimate and full development of the Christian religion. My talk here is schematic and lacking completeness, but I hope it gives an idea of where he comes from and where he is going. He asks what physical relation between a transcendent Absolute and the cosmos can be found without doing violence to one’s Christian faith? He answers the question by proposing three successive stages of development, which he has gone through himself before arrival at a solution to this personal interior challenge to make one’s way to God. He describes each step of the progression to reach a final stage. It is an organic complex of the uncreated and the created, of God and the world. Teilhard calls this the pleroma, or the fullness of creation. St. Paul implies this reality in early letters such as 1 Corinthians and Romans and then applies the same Greek word, pleroma, in texts in the captivity letters to which I have already referred, that give it a specialized technical meaning, namely reestablishing all things in their fullness at Christ’s second coming at the end of time. Teilhard calls this the Omega point, when realization of the theological notion of the risen Christ as universal center (capital omega) coincides with the ultimate convergence of cosmic evolution (small omega).

Finally, “Pantheism and Christianity”
In 1923 in a lecture in Paris Teilhard took up this topic explicitly. He began saying: “...I want to try to bring face to face two great religious powers: the only two powers, truth to say, that today share between them the world of human thought. They are Christianity and pantheism.” Recall at this stage of his life he was not as familiar with other world religions as he became later, subsequent to his involvement in the discoveries of Peking Man at the Choukoutien caves. Then he became well-known among geologists. This research was followed by invitations to visit paleontological sites and lecture all over the world. He writes:

To put it briefly, my precise aim is as follows: I would like to make it clear that pantheism (in the current restricted meaning of the word) is only the defective form in which is expressed a well-justified (and, moreover, ineradicable tendency in the human soul, a tendency which can be fully satisfied only in Christianity. This tendency is to recognize the importance, in one's religious calculations of the Whole.

In the book titled Letters from a Friend 1948-1955, Pierre Leroy concluded::

Everything that he preached, Teilhard had intensely lived. With all the strength of his soul, he had believed in the Christ of St. Paul and the Christ of St. John. He had fought for the destiny of collective Humanity moving toward Christ, Master and King of creation. The great human machine only advances, he has written, by producing a superabundance of Spirit. If it only brings forth Matter it will work against itself....The day will come when Man will recognize that, for him science is not an accessory occupation,
but the essential form of action….The day will come when Man will realize that it is in order that he might know and be (rather than have) that Life has been given to him….It is not toward endless progress that the world is moving…but toward an ecstasy outside the Universe…. (p 216, 1976, Paulist, NY)

Conclusion

In a 1939 essay, “The Mysticism of Science,” he wrote:

The degree to which Christianity teaches and offers a prospect of universal transformation can never be sufficiently stressed. By the Incarnation God descended into nature to ‘super-animate’ it and lead it back to Him: this is the substance of the Christian doctrine. (p 178)

Jesus lived as a Person. He compels recognition as a World. Thank You!

COSMOS AND CREATION

“For my own part, I am convinced that there is no more substantial natural nourishment for the religious life than contact with properly understood scientific realities. (…) No one can understand so well as the man who is absorbed in the study of matter, to what a degree Christ, through his Incarnation, is internal to the world, how much he is rooted in the world even in the very heart of the tiniest atom.” (Science and Christ, 2/27/21)

WHAT IS THE HUMAN PHENOMENON? In a Vision of the Past he wrote “What precisely is the human phenomenon? In other words, and more exactly, what place is held, and what purpose is fulfilled, in the observed development of the world, by the astonishing power of thought?”