

Reviews

The Letters of Teilhard de Chardin and Lucile Swan. Foreword by Pierre Leroy, S.J. Edited by THOMAS M. KING, S.J., and MARY WOOD GILBERT. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1993. 336 pages. \$45.00; \$24.95 (paper).

Some two hundred letters written by the Jesuit paleontologist to the American sculptress, together with selections from her letters and journal, record the growth of an extraordinary friendship which began at a dinner party in Peiping (now Beijing) in 1929 and resonated deeply throughout both of their lives until his death in New York City in 1955. The letters are filled with the observations and thoughts of one of the most penetrating and original minds of the twentieth century, the intuitive responses of the woman who confronted his priestly vows, and the development of a love which would take them on a new path "at the deepest and personal heart of everything" (29 March 1935).

Teilhard's long, intimate letters make available to us the generosity and open-mindedness of the man who, as a scientist, gained international recognition for his dating of the *Sinanthropus* fossils found at Chou-kou-tien and for his updating of the whole Quaternary age in the Far East; and, as a mystic, saw, in the groping evolution of life on earth, signs that could help in understanding the place of humanity in the general processes of the vast cosmos.

Through Lucile's letters, we can follow her education into Teilhard's thought and her role (larger than had been known hitherto) as *inspiratrice* with whom, during the happy, crowded China years, he discussed all of the essays he was working on, culminating in the manuscript, which they talked over chapter by chapter, of his masterwork, *The Phenomenon of Man*.

The running leitmotif throughout the twenty-odd years of correspondence is what Teilhard and Lucile referred to as "the question": her hope that their love would be physically consummated and his offering of a stronger and more lasting love born from contact of mind and soul through God. The letters are frank, strong, filled with feeling and sometimes anguish.

Teilhard and Lucile had each come to Peiping from halfway round the earth to begin new phases of their lives: he, at forty-eight years of age, from France to escape an ultimatum issued by the antimodernist Holy Office of his Church that sought to curtail the influence of his philosophical ideas; and she, at thirty-nine, from a successful career in New York and Chicago, on the rebound from a broken marriage. Teilhard, by the mid-1920s, had been on field trips into the wild terrain of western China, but for him the uprooting from Paris, which had been the center of his intellectual and spiritual life, was curiously freeing. For Lucile, a personal and spiritual unfolding lay ahead. They were two wild birds, he wrote her on 9 March 1934, coming from different starting points, joining in close flight for a

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time, and then maybe the wind would separate their external ways, but they would know that what was born between them would live forever.

Peiping was the cauldron in which their relationship was formed. China, after some five thousand years, was opening up to the West, and Peiping had flowered into an elegance and sophistication which rivaled that of Paris. Lucile set up a studio where she sculpted Chinese portraits and the head of "Nelly" based on the skull of Peking Man. Teilhard, a member of the Geological Survey of China team, was a man of considerable charm and appreciation of all kinds and conditions of peoples: a striking figure in the intellectual and social life of the Legation Quarter. He was often away for long periods of time (hence the letters which give us such a rich picture of their lives): the hazardous ten-month Citroën expedition into the Gobi Desert, his own field trips in China, those with Helmut de Terra into India, Kashmir, Burma, and Java, and many conferences in Europe and the United States.

More and more, as Teilhard studied the evolutionary past, his interest turned toward his hope that human beings would become more aware that they were part of a stream of energy evolving in the midst of improbability. In his scientific work, he confined himself to factual observations, but in his essays he placed questions of meaning in the larger context made available by these new facts. Timorous minds in the Church were displeased, but he had a growing audience in France as stenciled copies of his writings were read by students, seminarians, and an educated public. More and more, when he returned to Peiping, he stopped by Lucile's small Chinese house at five o'clock for afternoon tea, leaving shortly after six so as to reach the Jesuit quarters before the gates closed.

A feminine presence through whom his thoughts could focus and evolve had long been necessary to him. There had been his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon, to whom he had written letters from the trenches of World War I (published as "The Making of a Mind") and, later, the brilliant Léontine Zanta, the first woman to receive a doctorate in philosophy from the Sorbonne, and Ida Treat and Rhoda de Terra. Now there was Lucile, who found him the most attractive man she had ever met; moreover, he opened philosophical vistas and a spiritual vision more alive than anything from her early Episcopal upbringing and more meaningful than the values of the avant-garde art circles she had known.

Friendship developed into love. But, unlike Marguerite, whose French Catholic upbringing never allowed her love to question Teilhard's role as a priest, Lucile was American and Protestant, and she spoke honestly and forthrightly about her feelings. She challenged his loyalty to a church that wanted to silence him, and she challenged his vow of chastity. This was the "subject" they were to discuss throughout all of the years of their friendship.

Lucile's letters and journal entries of 1934/35 show her efforts to break through the inner resistance of her humanist background where people vaguely believed in a greater force and hoped to do some work that could add to the general good in the world; she found it difficult to fit Christ into religion. His concept, as we know, was of a Cosmic Christ, animator of a world in process (25 January 1937). But she pushed on, for Teilhard had "an inner strength and integrity that is unique" (23 July 1934). Teilhard, always open to the opinions of others, found her to be an excellent sounding board.

The question of their personal relationship was more difficult. Teilhard's letters of late 1933 show his sensitivity to her unhappiness because she could not truly understand why their love had to be "different." He wrote his famous essay "The Evolution of Chastity" (February 1934) to explain to her the powerful energy which is made available for God's work in the world when physical love is sublimated. But it is to the letters that we must turn so as to understand the actual experience of love as it was shared by these two exceptional people in the midst of their intellectual and artistic work and a wide range of friends and colleagues. They were not self-absorbed.

Lucile was the more vulnerable and knew horrid days of doubt, for she needed a human love, while Teilhard counseled that "the greatest wisdom is to catch and to receive (and love) life just as it is. God meets us in the rhythms of time which we cannot stop or make quicker" (21 August 1935). There were moments when she realized that "things I have been living on were built on my own imagination . . . it was not his fault" (6 March 1936). Teilhard hoped that he could give her a new energy for becoming more herself but realized he had become for her a *center* which had not a material consistency to support her life (7 May 1936).

Teilhard knew his own dark days, sometimes due to bouts of nervous depression, but they were usually touched off by outside events, as when his admired friend David Black died suddenly: "Either there is an escape somewhere for the thought and the personality;—or the world is a tremendous mistake" (18 March 1934) or when he had to bow to crushing rejection by Rome.

As the Japanese in 1938 expanded their occupation of China into what was now called Peking, foreigners were departing and, in 1939, life was becoming restricted. Teilhard, as a French "neutral enemy," was free to work with his fellow Jesuit and great friend Pierre Leroy at the Geo-Biology Institute, which was located on the same street as Lucile's house. He and Lucile met daily for two years, working on *The Phenomenon of Man* manuscript, meeting with old friends, and driving out to the Western Hills when gasoline was available. Teilhard referred to this period as "two precious years of constant presence and uninterrupted mutual confidence." With war engulfing both Europe and Asia, it had to end. Lucile was finally repatriated to the States on 8 August 1941. Neither could know that they would not see each other again for seven years.

When they did meet in Paris early in 1948, Teilhard was sixty-seven and had suffered a severe heart attack. Moreover, Rhoda de Terra, now divorced, was much in evidence as she helped Teilhard with his professional obligations in those heady days when Europe was adjusting itself to postwar realities. Lucile felt she had been replaced. Her feelings poured out in a letter written in New York in May of 1948 (but never sent) accusing Teilhard of speaking about Peking as though it were a fantasy while for her those were the most real years of her life. But on 30 May, after a visit with him, she wrote that he had given her the courage to go on in the future.

As late as 1953 and 1954, however, "the question" was still being discussed and Teilhard was assuring Lucile that he had needed her in "the Chinese phase" as much as she had needed him. In his last letter to her (30 March 1955), written only eleven days before he died, he assured her that they would be "always here" for each other.

This collection of letters can be read for an engrossing picture of the 1930s and 1940s as seen by Teilhard: the passing scene, the intellectual and political changes in postwar France, the church officials who refused him permission to publish his philosophical work. But, uniquely, they present an absorbing story—sprightly, honest, filled with heart—of two people whose lives enriched, troubled, and changed each other. Lucile's wish is honored that her side of their friendship be told, and a new dimension is added to what we know of Teilhard from reminiscences written by his friends and colleagues. What made him so unforgettable was the integrity with which he held together a great complexity of mind and spirit. Lucile offered a relationship which, entered into with his usual intensity, might have cracked such a unity. As Lucile herself accepted and appreciated, that never happened.

The book is finely edited with just enough helpful material: some insightful background essays, a chronology, an index of names, a few connecting paragraphs to introduce blocks of letters. But it is the letters themselves that tell the story.

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Die Urkraft des Kosmos: Dimensionen der Liebe im Werk Pierre Teilhards de Chardin. By MATTHIAS TRENNERT-HELWIG. Freiburg: Herder, 1993. Preface, ix–xi, 523 pages, index. Price not available.

This work, a 1992 dissertation at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau, exemplifies the high standards of contemporary research on the life and thought of Teilhard. It also reveals the extraordinarily interesting engagement of theology and science that has taken place at this university, spurred by the stimulus of theologian Helmut Riedlinger, who during his tenure as professor sought out interdisciplinary conversation partners, among whom were physicist Hartman Römer and biologist Carsten Bresch. Thomas Becker's work *Geist und Materie in den ersten Schriften Pierre Teilhard de Chardins* (Freiburg: Herder, 1987) is a product of the same academic community. The fruits of this interdisciplinary milieu manifest themselves throughout this book.

Trennert-Helwig has set himself the difficult and important task of setting forth Teilhard's understanding of love, and doing so in terms of the total range of his life and thought. The guiding thesis of the book is that Teilhard perceived love to be a primordial power that proceeds from the God who is love and elaborates itself both in the emergence of microcosmos and macrocosmos and also in their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (p. 3). The evolution of the cosmos is in fact the evolution of love. Hence the title of this book, which translated would be: "The Primordial Power of the Cosmos: The Dimensions of Love as Set Forth in the Work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin." By selecting this focus, the author draws attention to the central

assertion of Christian theology that love is a fundamental principle of reality and also to the pathbreaking role of Teilhard in articulating a comprehensive metaphysical and theological interpretation of the evolution of the universe. Since he included cosmic, human, and cultural evolution in his purview, Teilhard can be said to have dealt with scientific megatheory. Likewise, since he brought the entire range of Christian faith and theology to his work, he can be said to have dealt with megamyth. This is the scope of his attempt and of his achievement: that he brought scientific megatheory and theological megamyth into conversation and synthesis. The thesis is carried through a sophisticated hermeneutic that takes three factors into account: Teilhard's placement in history, the placement of this work itself in the history of Teilhard scholarship, and the placement of the concept of love in Teilhard's own methodology.

Teilhard's historical location is defined to a considerable extent by the way he positioned faith and theology in relation to the scientific understanding of the natural world. Trennert-Helwig identifies himself with Teilhard's conviction that the adequacy of theology depends on its taking into account the empirical knowledge of the world that is provided by the sciences (p. 9). His insights into the essentially evolutionary character of the world described by science, and his ability to reinterpret the Christian faith accordingly, with a world-affirming thrust, resulted in an overarching philosophical and theological vision that captured the hearts and minds of millions of Christians and non-Christians in the decade after his death in 1955.

In the four decades since the heady days of Teilhard's initial worldwide popularity, a great deal has happened in Teilhard studies. The interpretations of the 1960s were not only often naive (whether in adulation or invective), but had only part of the corpus of writings to work with, and these inadequately edited and not clearly correlated with Teilhard's biography. In the last decade, his affirmation of the material world has been seized upon by New Age philosophies, so that presently there is the danger of Teilhard's being coopted by them. For the serious scholar, the last decade has produced better editions of previous works and uncovered significant new writings, particularly "private" writings in the form of letters. Dozens of doctoral dissertations have raised the level of Teilhard scholarship immeasurably. So much textual material now exists that it is not possible, in a book-length treatment, to provide a detailed analysis of any major Teilhardian concept in terms of the entire corpus of his writings. Trennert-Helwig's work takes advantage of all of the recent developments; it copes with the staggering mass of textual materials by focusing on "key texts," employing them as interpreters of the total range of texts.

By far the most important element of Trennert-Helwig's hermeneutic is the manner in which he places the concept of love in Teilhard's own methodology; it provides the outline by which the book is organized, and it is intrinsic to its interpretation of Teilhard. Trennert-Helwig proposes the thesis that Teilhard's thought is structured by three modes of knowing: the physical, the metaphysical, and the mystical. Throughout this study, the author makes it clear that these modes of knowing translate into modes of being. Indeed, the power of his interpretation of Teilhard rests on the forceful manner in which weaves his arguments on the loom of the threefold structure of knowing and being. Such a move is necessary when the aim

is to take the measure of both megatheory and megamyth. The essential character of the evolving cosmos lies in its emergence from a material base (constituted by the totality of the rationally knowable phenomenal world) into a complex network of individuals who are joined and rejoined, morally and spiritually, in a quest for union with God, the ground of their being. The material form is what “physics” encompasses, while the “mystical” consists of the union of the material with God. “Physics” here includes more than what we include in the science of physics; it refers to the entire domain covered by all of the natural and social sciences. “Metaphysics” is the abstract conceptuality that in fact provides the framework for understanding the physical and the mystical.

With the thesis that love is the primordial power of the cosmos, Trennert-Helwig argues that in the Teilhardian framework love is “the most fundamental transaction between God and the world” (p. 208). It is love that empowers the material realm in the quest for unity and individuation that becomes a quest for union with God. It is metaphysics that elaborates this conceptual framework; physics and mysticism constitute the substance of the metaphysical interpretation. The cosmos is characterized, therefore, by an evolution that begins in matter and ends in union with God. Love is the primordial power of this evolution. Love is a human experience, defined by Teilhard in a marriage sermon as “the interpenetration and continual exchange of thoughts, affections, dreams, and prayers” that forms the arena in which two people meet each other (p. 433). This human experience reaches out into both the “prepersonal,” in which it serves to explain the “physical” world, and the “transpersonal,” in which it serves as a medium of relating to God. This view corresponds to an understanding of human beings as standing between the material world from which they have emerged and the divine realm to which they feel themselves called.

Teilhard’s concept of complexity-consciousness attempts to shape a conceptual framework in which individuating and unifying characterize all of prehuman matter and life (reminding us at times of Whitehead’s process metaphysics). This trajectory of individuation and unification is the prepersonal manifestation of love, and it makes the emergence of *Homo sapiens* possible. Love between human persons quests for union with God, which is the transpersonal dimension.

One of the most interesting and original sections of the book deals with how love manifested itself in Teilhard’s relationship with a number of women who were influential in his life. Teilhard believed that his vow of celibacy signalled the fact that all love yearns for a union with the God who transcends this world. On the other hand, he also believed that celibacy became real only when it was tested in the real world of actual love between men and women. He sought out and vigorously entered into deep relationships with women, particularly with the American Lucile Swan. He steadfastly remained celibate, however, insisting that intense platonic relationships, marked by a mutual desire to attain spiritual richness, were symbolic of love’s goal of union with God. His steadfastness, which he articulated at length in his letters, in theological terms, brought both pain and depth to these relationships. Without the actuality of intimacy, love would be empty; if it restricted itself to the physical and psychological levels, love would be incomplete, even debased. Friendship and sexual love between humans stand, therefore, as paradigm cases of

the evolution of matter seeking union with the divine. This evolutionary trajectory attains a special clarity in human evolution, particularly in the experience of love. This love, however, is a primordial power of reality; it is of God. With this conclusion, Teilhard's megasynthesis is complete.

The richness of Trennert-Helwig's work is its own reward, more than repaying readers for the effort of wending their way through its length and depth. It ups the ante of interpreting the evolving cosmos to its highest point, insisting on the one hand that human experience is a quintessential expression of the trajectory of prehuman evolution and, on the other hand, that that trajectory goes beyond itself toward the divine. The author proves to be a superb guide in showing us how Teilhard, the geologist, paleontologist, and Jesuit priest constructed a synthesis that united the material world that his science studied with the poignant experience of a sensitive human being in a quest for God.

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