

THE CHURCH AS THE AXIS OF CONVERGENCE IN TEILHARD'S THEOLOGY AND LIFE

by *Mathias Trennert-Helwig*

Abstract. During the lifetime of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Roman Catholic Church passed through deep changes of doctrines as well as ecclesiastical structures, marked by the First and Second Vatican Councils. In that historical period, the perceived threat of the more and more encompassing theory of universal evolution was the main reason that Teilhard was forbidden to publish anything about its theological or philosophical significance. Teilhard survived these lifelong restrictions within his beloved church by embracing the paradigm of the church as "the axis of universal convergence." His scientific background as a geobiologist gave him the necessary distance from the temporary statements of the magisterium of the Church. Over the whole of human history, however, he believed the Church to be the "phylum" whose development leads to the cosmic Christ as a guidance beam leads to a goal.

Keywords: Christ-Omega; doctrine of the church; evolution; geobiology; heresy; Roman Catholic Church; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

CHANGES WITHIN THE CHURCH, ESPECIALLY OF THE CHURCH'S DOCTRINE, DURING TEILHARD'S LIFETIME

The time between Teilhard's birth and death falls between the First (1869/70) and the Second Vatican Council (1965). These two events signal a serious tension. Within these ninety years the Roman Catholic Church redefined its relationship to the world, especially to a scientific worldview, which more and more described an evolutionary world.

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From the beginning of the century until the First World War, the magisterium of the Church, that is, primarily the Pope and the Holy Office, waged a bitter defensive struggle against all intellectual movements that were considered typically modern. The historical-critical method of biblical exegesis and a theory describing the appearance of new biological species through an increasingly all-encompassing evolution was counted among these modern movements.

When Charles Darwin (1859, 476) wrote that highly critical sentence, "Bright light will shine on the origin of Man and his history," it became evident that the growing acceptance of the evolutionary paradigm would destroy the understanding of the Fall of Man in the first human pair, Adam and Eve, as a historical event. At least as great anxieties must have been caused by the philosophical consequence of an evolutionary theory extended to spiritual domains. The development of new species called into question the invariability of substances, which was the foundation of doctrinal propositions of the Church and therewith as well of the dogma of infallibility as enunciated at Vatican I in 1870. Pius XII summed it up when discussing the theory of evolution: "If such a doctrine were to be spread, what will become of the unchangeable Catholic dogmas, what of the unity and the stability of the Creed?"¹

The first thirty years of Teilhard's life were marked by important official statements of the Church's magisterium concerning the anti-modernistic defensive struggle of the Roman Catholic Church: the *Syllabus* of Pius IX, the Constitutiones of the First Vatican Council (1870), the *Encyclical Aeterni Patris* (1879) in which Leo XIII ordered neo-Thomism to be the obligatory basis of philosophical-theological education. Finally came the encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907, asking the bishops to take immediate action against all persons who were suspected of modernism. This opened a real hunt for modernists, which not only used the worst methods of denunciation and spying, but led even to the establishment of a secret organization of denouncers directed by Monsignor Umberto Benigni in the office of the State Secretary (Aubert 1985, 489-92). Even though the popes coming after Pius X were no longer obsessed by the fear that "the error, which is trying to spread in our days, is even more murderous than Luther's one,"² there were, well into the 1950s, theologians who had to suffer from this suspicion. Today, these theologians are considered officially the most brilliant of our century. For example, Teilhard's Jesuit friend Henri de Lubac (d.1991), who in 1950, together with four other professors of dogmatics in Lyon, lost his chair. In 1983 Father de Lubac was made Cardinal by John Paul II.

Another case is that of the Dominican Yves Congar, who even in 1954, being suspected of modernism, was forbidden to teach and to publish, and who today, past the age of ninety, is indisputably considered one of the greatest French theologians of this century. Congar was rehabilitated in 1963, when the discussion of Vatican Council II regarding the constitution *Gaudium et Spes* was fully under way. This document, without exaggeration, might be considered a milestone in the history of the relationship between the Church and the modern world. Instead of a retreat into the reserve of presumably unchanging truths, we find in this document the proclamation of a program of missionary devotion to the world of today, whose enormous problems are seen and shouldered by the Church even though it cannot present a ready solution:

The joy and hope, grief and anxiety of mankind today, especially the poor and oppressed of all kinds, are also the joy and hope, the grief and anxiety of Christ's disciples. And there is nothing truly human, that has not its echo in their hearts. (Rahner and Vorgrimler 1974, 449)

Was not this the "awaited word,"³ which took seriously the desires and anxieties of humanity today and interpreted them with a renewed theology proclaimed with the authority of the governing body of the Church? Teilhard, who had expressed this hope again and again, was no longer living when the Church finally opened its windows to the modern world, but he was present with his ideas in the halls of the council (cf. Klein 1975). Teilhard is speaking, when Article 5 of *Gaudium et Spes* summarizes the change in the world situation as follows:

The destiny of the human community is becoming one and is already no more split into different historical courses. In this way mankind realizes a transition from a rather static understanding of the order of the universal reality to a more dynamic and evolutionary understanding. (Rahner and Vorgrimler 1974, 453)

FROM MODEL PUPIL TO VISIONARY OF EVOLUTION: CHANGES IN TEILHARD

In the philosophical-theological and spiritual development of Teilhard we can rediscover the outline of this historical evolution, with one essential difference: the Church's magisterium tried with all means and by using all of its strength to hinder the transition to a global and evolutionary way of thinking, and it made this step only belatedly. Teilhard was one of the avant-garde who recognized the new paradigm as inescapable and urgently necessary. Thus he had to accept the fate that he sketched already on 15 August 1917 in his diary:

By necessity, progress is realized by breaking an established order. Now there is a tendency to value the established order as sacred or taboo—to consider it as the true and the good. [Note: The official truth is generally dead (observe the growth of devotions, which are substitutes for novelty).] Therewith the innovator is in danger to appear as blasphemous . . . even though it is his courage that paves the way for the orthodoxy of tomorrow. [. . .] The precursors of the truth. They are the people who sense the first touches of a need, or the first rays of a light. Those who are stronger or younger than their century—those who have been born too early. Their situation is full of danger, melancholy and beauty. If they are not believers, they will not be understood and they are injured by the orthodoxies of this world. When they are believers, their sufferings are worse . . . and yet, their role is fruitful and necessary. By their questions, by their new approaches, they spread a salutary unrest. But the first ones will be crushed like the first wave [of an attack] . . . The great temptation is to revolt. The great joy is to advance in solitude. The great paradox is that the rebellion sometimes seems providential and necessary.⁴

How did the student, certified by his teacher Henri Bremond to have made excellent achievements—but as well “to be such a good boy that he could drive you to desperation”—become an *innovator*?² Up to the age of thirty, we do not find a clear indication that Pierre would question the religious or political heritage of his family. His father Emmanuel was the landowner of the castle of Sarcenat and was interested in history, natural history, horse races and hunting, and politically supported a return of the monarchy even in 1880s (cf. Schiwy 1981, 15–16). To him as to the *Syllabus* of 1864, the republic was the embodiment of the liberal heresy; he hoped for papal authority to overcome the modernistic currents. He was as deeply rooted in his Roman Catholic faith as Pierre Teilhard’s mother Berthe-Adèle, but in another way. She had been educated in a boarding school of the Madames of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and she handed her spirituality of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on to her children (cf. Faricy 1988, 261–77). When Teilhard titled his autobiography in 1950 *The Heart of Matter*⁵ it is clear that he never did away with the religious heritage of his family, even though he transformed its content through the crises of his life.

The *burning Heart of Jesus* became for Teilhard the symbol for the innermost mystery of the world, which he described in 1950: “the world is still slowly lighting up and becoming enflamed around me before my eyes until it is totally brilliant from the inside.”⁶ By writing above these words the title *The Burning Bush*,⁷ the reference to God’s self-revelation at Sinai in Exodus 3, Teilhard indicates that this “diaphany of the Divine in the Heart of a burning universe”⁸ deeply touched him. The fascination with matter in its different levels of development could not but lead Teilhard’s relation with the official Church and its magisterium into a crisis. We may

judge, given available sources, that the crisis started between 1911 and 1916. Sure enough, even though Teilhard's letters to his parents were at most times written under the censorship of his order, we can nevertheless presume the essential expression of his opinion when, on 5 May 1908, he wrote from Cairo:

At present the Coptes are battling one another, and these days the Patriarch had to be summoned to Rome; fortunately Pius X seems to be a real man, who will set things straight without delay. (quoted by Schiwy 1981, 17)

The antimodernist oath, which had just been introduced by Pius X and which was sworn by Teilhard on 26 November 1910, is noted by him in a letter to his parents just as "a sign of priesthood approaching" (cf. Schiwy 1981, 199-200), while it caused serious stomach pain to his friends Auguste Valensin and Pierre Charles.

In 1911, Teilhard was selected as the *defendor* of neoscholastic theology in a formal disputation in Latin. He passed his exams successfully, but admitted, as well, that he was glad to be done with them (cf. Schiwy 1981, 204).

Clear evidence of confidence in his Roman Catholic orthodoxy is reflected when Teilhard is asked to author the article "Man in Light of the Teachings of the Church and Spiritualist Philosophy" for the fourth, completely revised, edition of the *Apologetic Dictionary of Catholic Faith* (DC, 501-14)—his only theological work published during his lifetime! Since the volume was published in 1912, Teilhard must have written it before his final exams. As expected, in this apologetic text, Teilhard defended the magisterial refutation of an encompassing philosophical evolutionism that would have included the human body and mind. Thomas Becker, in his analysis of the earliest writings of Teilhard (1987, 177-228), has shown that even in this text, as well as in an article published in 1911 with the title "Evolution," there is in Teilhard a propensity toward an evolutionary interpretation of geological and biological phenomena.

In his 1916 essay, "The Cosmic Life," we can recognize that the "fire" which shines from the core of matter, had already enflamed Teilhard and we see the sparks that had been glimmering in him. As to the philosophical influences, there is the close contact with his friend Auguste Valensin, who during their years together from 1899 onward had certainly made him acquainted with the ideas of his venerable teacher Maurice Blondel. The latter's book *L'action*, which was published in 1893, and later was put on the index of forbidden books, postulated an "inside of things" based on the relation of the degree of organization with their environment, a

prestige to what Teilhard was later to develop as the “law of complexity and consciousness.”

Besides his fellow Jesuit and friend Pierre Rousselot (for their relationship, see Becker 1987, 24–31), there was especially Henri Bergson, who by his book *L'Évolution créatrice*, according to Teilhard's own testimony, “kindled a fire that was already consuming my heart and my mind.”⁹

More strongly than by his discussion of modern philosophical concepts, Teilhard seems to have been moved by the unmediated contact with nature and its history. In his retrospective of 1950, he evokes a quasi-mystical experience of nature during his studies of theology:

All I can remember, is . . . the extraordinary density and intensity which the English landscape offered me in that period—especially at sunset—when the forests of Sussex charged themselves . . . with all that *fossil* life, which I went after in those days, from cliffs to quarries, in the wealdian clays of South England. For moments it really seemed to me that before my eyes a kind of universal being showed its face in nature.¹⁰

Only brief mention can be made here of the third source of energy nourishing the fire burning in his heart: the feminine in its erotical appearance. Without a doubt, Teilhard thinks of his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon—he met her in 1912 in Paris—when he wrote in 1950:

Since my childhood I was on the road to discover the heart of matter; thus it was inevitable that one day I should be face to face with the female. The strange thing is only that in this case the encounter waited for my thirtieth year for it to come about.¹¹

He entrusted to Marguerite, in numerous letters and in a few encounters with her, his ideas and asked for her opinion concerning the essays he sent her.

His experiences as a stretcher-bearer during the First World War were like strong winds fanning the fire inside Teilhard. Let us listen to the original sound of his “Sturm und Drang” text, *La vie cosmique*, which immediately starts off like an explosion:

I write these lines full of life and with the need to live—to express a passionate vision of the earth, and to search for a solution for the doubts concerning what I am doing—because I love the universe, its energies, its mysteries, its hopes, and because at the same time I have vowed myself to God, the only Origin, the only Solution, the only Goal. I want to vent here my love for matter and life, and to harmonize it, if possible, with the adoration of the only absolute and definitive Divinity.¹²

This paragraph expresses with clarity and passion the program of his life. He had made his irrevocable decision for the earth and its

fascination. His lifelong struggle had started. Teilhard wanted to demonstrate to his Jesuit superiors that his vision was not only orthodox, but was the *expected word* for those people who, like Teilhard himself, found the narrowness of his church unsupportable. His optimistic, sometimes childishly naive mind refused, into the last years of his life, to believe that his enthusiastic ideas remained unacceptable in Rome. As late as 1948—during his only visit in the “holy city”—he estimated his chances of obtaining permission to publish his principal text, *Le phénomène humain*, at fifty-fifty. But his suffering at the hands of the censors, had started much earlier.

EVIDENCE OF SUFFERING FROM THE CHURCH IN TEILHARD'S LETTERS

Only one essay, namely, “La nostalgie du front”¹³ (“The Nostalgia for the Front Line”), which served to demonstrate the loyalty of the Jesuits to the state and to the fighting army, was published during the war. The other nineteen manuscripts written during the war did not pass the censorship of his immediate superior, Father Léonce de Grandmaison. His noble reaction to this lifelong fate indicates Ignatian-military obedience and a nearly invincible trust in the force of truth. After his last hopes for the imprimatur disappeared, he said to his secretary Jeanne Mortier in 1954: “If my writings are from God, they will make their way. If they are not from God, they will just have to be forgotten.”¹⁴ Four weeks before he died, he wrote on the same subject: “All this does not give me bitterness—because I am so very sure of the final result.”¹⁵

But he was, again and again, deeply troubled by the recognition that the strongest human currents, as he found them in such authors as H.G. Wells,¹⁶ Gabriele D’Annunzio and Georges Duhamel (cf. Schiwy 1981, 297–98), Schuré, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others, were calling for an answer from the Church, which presented itself as a narrow world, both alienated and anemic. Already on 27 April 1916, we find an expression of this uneasiness in his diary:

Sometimes I am frightened when I realize how far outside the mass of Catholics I reason, feel, and think. . . . They see nothing beyond a religious manifestation, beyond a Catholic word coming from the mouth of a general. . . . they are not interested in the progress of the world, their only interest is the chapel. O Jesus, widen the ideas of your faithful (. . . or correct mine!)—so that in becoming Christians they do not become inhuman! so that they sense their terrestrial task to be essential! so that they love it! so that they do not separate you from the world, *into which you, Master, have incarnated yourself!*¹⁷

Returning from the war after having gone through a baptism of fire in the battles of Verdun and Ypres, Teilhard was shocked to see that many theologians were still occupied with unworldly problems instead of searching into the present and the future of humanity. In January 1919 he sent his rector, Father de Grandmaison, a "Request to Minister for the Evangelization of Modern Times" (OV, XII: 372-79). There he writes with uncompromising frankness:

Truly, after having shared for some time the anxieties, the hopes, the activities, which preoccupy the rest of humanity, one returns to certain circles of our religion, and one thinks he is dreaming: to see how many efforts are *absorbed* there in the beatification of one servant of God, in the success of one devotion, in the subtle and impossible analysis of one mystery. We build our house in the clouds, and we do not see the reality that is marching on without us. . . .

Preoccupied with speculative disputes, the theologians forget to reconcile practically the natural and supernatural into one harmonious orientation of human activity, which represents a problem a thousand times more acute and important than all the difficulties one might consider about the Essence of Grace. (OV, XII: 372, 375)

Since Teilhard spoke up with similar frankness about the controversial subjects of those days in the universities, in the Institut Catholique, and in the philosophical parlor of Madame Léontine Zanta, there is no wonder he was heading for difficulties. A speculative paper sent to Rome on the nature of Original Sin,¹⁸ which had been taken from his office without Teilhard's knowledge, was the final drop that made the cup overflow. His provincial, Costa de Beauregard, informed him on 15 May 1925, that, after only four years in that position, he had to give up his chair of geology. He was to go to China to do paleontological research.

The letters to his intimate friends show that the decision shook him profoundly even though, after some doubts, he accepted it in obedience so that he would not betray his vocation. On 10 January 1926, he wrote to Auguste Valensin:

In some way *I have no trust anymore* in the outside manifestations of the church. I believe that it is still through her that divine influence arrives. But I do not believe much in the immediate, tangible, and critical value of the official decisions and directives. There are people who feel happy within the *visible* church;—I, so it seems to me, would be happy to be free of her, that is to say to find God, Our Lord, outside of her. (LI, 132)

THE CHURCH AS AXIS OF CONVERGENCE AND AS PHYLUM

Keeping in mind Teilhard's deep roots within the Church, we can imagine how deeply he suffered through the crises from 1925 to

1929. He was finally saved from being shattered by these crises and from endangering his vision by the concept of the Church he had developed—one stimulated by his scientific worldview. By studying geology, he had become familiar with the time horizon of the earth's history; in the same way, he interpreted humanity and both worlds primarily according to broad, epochal parameters. Abstraction from concrete individual destiny transpires again and again in his essays as well as in his private notes. This perspective led to his being accused of “bad habits acquired through his scientific profession.” In his *Apologia: My Universe of 1918*, he admitted referring to Christ: “By tendency I invincibly *universalize what I love in order to be able to love it*” (OV, XII: 273). This principle was applied even more in his view of the Church.

In a letter to Léontine Zanta of 15 April 1929, he sees himself beyond a “violent crisis of hostility against the Church, not to say Christianity.” He self-critically states for himself the need of a wider horizon: “I am almost of the opinion that the source of most of our weaknesses is to be found in the fact that we believe neither completely nor with sufficient breadth” (LLZ[a], 101). A few days earlier, he had written to his trusted friend Auguste Valensin more clearly: “Practically, I live in the Church only by abstracting from a number of matters which are essential for the mass of Catholics; and I am saved by living a style of life that allows me to remove myself from these matters.”¹⁹ What are the concrete manifestations of the Church's life about which Teilhard was thinking?

In his diary during the First World War, we find instances concerning the visible presentation of the Church and its officials. He wrote, “I believe in the Lord” but “hate the cloth (symbol of all the shackles which I disapprove)” (JN, 22 April 1920). On 19 February 1916, he names the wrong attitudes which “like mildew over wine characterize the *holders of the truth*”: “Dogmatic extrinsicism, social pharisaism, the pretension to monopolize all the truth and all the love of your neighbor, laziness and uselessness in the struggle for progress . . .”²⁰ In a decisive way, it seems to have been the narrowness of the neoscholastic theology of those days—a theology pushed by the magisterium uncompromisingly—that was diametrically opposed to the wide horizon of an evolving world as seen by Teilhard. This became even more clear through his encounter with China. A few weeks after his arrival in Tientsin in 1926, he wrote to Auguste Valensin:

In the Christian world, as it comes to us through the documents of the Church and the Catholic movements and ideas, I *am suffocating* in an absolute, physical sense. A thousand years ago we drew a circle with compasses, which pretended

to encircle all of the world's moral and physical possibilities; now all reality is beyond it. In fact, we are no more "catholic"; rather we defend a system, a sect.²¹

Teilhard opposes the static order of the medieval Church with the metaphor of an axis which builds upon the evolutionary paradigm. His letter to Auguste Valensin continues:

Christianity appears to me today much less as a closed and established whole but rather as an axis of progression and assimilation. Outside of this axis I do not see any warranty, any goal for the world. But around this axis I see an immense quantity of truths and attitudes to which the orthodoxy so far has not given space.²²

The notion of a central axis of the evolutionary process is already to be found in the notes of his diary during the First World War (for example, on 1 November 1917). It is grounded in Teilhard's foundational thesis that the evolution of the stuff of the world is to be conceived as a constant, convergent condensation, at the term of which there will be a (differentiating) union in the point Omega. Teilhard used the well-known geometric figure of the cone to visualize his theory. The axis of evolution would then run from the centerline of the base of this cone to its common vertex point.

As another way to visualize Teilhard's axis of evolution, one can imagine (after examination of his various works) looking at a tree trunk from the top down. The bark covers the outside layer; inside of it are concentric layers of the soft timber; and finally one observes the core at the center of the trunk. In the same way, when evolution reaches the sphere of the spirit (noogenesis), the axis develops itself in phases from external layers of practiced religion²³ to further, inner layers formed by Christianity, and, finally, to layers formed by the core of the Roman Catholic Church. As to Teilhard's stance toward the Reformed churches, one may only mention that because of the strong influence of Karl Barth, he saw them as rather suspicious toward any kind of "natural theology." Thus there was no reason for Teilhard to question his Catholic perspective.²⁴ His position on the ecumenical question is marked by a strong tension: on the one hand, he keeps his conviction that "to be Catholic is the only way to be fully and to the very end a Christian"²⁵; on the other hand, he feels himself much closer to people of any religion who believe in humanity than to the official representatives of his Church, from which he expects enormous changes.²⁶ Recall that in his already-quoted letter to Auguste Valensin of 10 January 1926 Teilhard speaks of the "Christian" meaning of "catholic": "More and more it seems to me that there is no axis for world salvation

besides the Christian one. But on this axis I have the impression that I meet at longer and longer intervals the majority of Christian officials.”²⁷

In such texts, it becomes clear that the paradigm of the Church as axis helped Teilhard to withstand situations of greatest tension within the Church. He did not need to give up his deeply rooted faith in the divine origin and the transcendent goal of the Church. He could even believe in the Roman Catholic Church as the historical concretion of the Incarnation. At the same time, the dynamic moment of the axis of evolution made possible a kind of personal “eschatological reservation” concerning the actual historical appearance of the Church. It allowed Teilhard to take his distance, to stay in the Church and in his order without treason. Accordingly, he noted on 1 June, 1920, in his diary: “If I did not see the Church of tomorrow through the Church of today, I think I could not, I should not stay.”²⁸

The Ignatian *sentire cum ecclesia* (“thinking with the Church”) becomes *praesentire cum ecclesia* (“anticipate the Church”)²⁹ by *presuming obedience*—one walks on a tightrope between arrogance and giving oneself up. Along this line he, at age seventy, advised his friend and brother Jesuit, Pierre Leroy, nineteen years Teilhard’s junior: “I do not find anything better to tell you but to propose my own method: love Christ strongly (an ever greater Christ) and yet, if I may so, beyond the Church.”³⁰

Beside the notion of the axis, we find in Teilhard’s later years more often the biological concept of “phylum.” In 1933, Teilhard wrote:

The true religion (let us understand by this word the religious form, which the general groping of the reflected terrestrial action will finally reach) participates . . . like any other reality of “planetary” order, in the nature of a “phylum.”³¹

This metaphor enables Teilhard to interpret the provocative infallibility of the Church, even of the Pope, “who does not formulate and express his own ideas, but the thinking of the Church.”³² On 9 September 1948, he notes in his diary: “Infallibility of the Church: nothing but the phylum-orientation which guides the Christian collectivity along the lines of attraction, which come from this Divine Center.”³³ The Christian phylum therefore finds its goal because of the divine attraction. From “in front,” from Christ-Omega comes the attraction of his love like a guidance beam, orienting a searching subject toward its goal. Those who answer to this love move in the right direction; they participate in their own way in the phylum that will reach the goal, Omega. Teilhard continues the above-

quoted note in his diary: "As long as one loves more the *Universal*, one is surely Christian. . . ."

It corresponds to Teilhard's reflections on Incarnation that, in spite of the above statement, he held fast to the necessary link with the *infallible* church as *phylum* and with its actual historical appearance—even though it appeared far away from its goal. Rome and the Pope were, for Teilhard, the quintessence of the *tangible* church.

How did Teilhard experience his direct encounter with this tangible pole? In October of 1948, he came to Rome to present personally to the General of the Jesuits his magnum opus, *Le phénomène humain*, in order finally to obtain permission to print it. Three days after his arrival, he is "impressed by the vigor and assurance of Christianity as it asserts itself on Vatican hill." He continues this letter to Jeanne Mortier: "The ascending axis of humanity goes at this moment truly through St. Peter (as through Moscow[?] the propulsing axis)."³⁴ This halts his irritation at "clerical and devotional excesses." Teilhard did not withdraw this judgment when he was not only refused the expected permission to print, but also forbidden to accept the chair offered to him at the College de France, the highest-ranking university in the republic. After his return to Paris, he wrote to Henri de Lubac:

In Saint Peter I really felt what is so formidable about the Christian phenomenon. I mean this unwavering assurance, which is unique in the modern world, to be in direct contact with a personal Center of the Universe. . . . By revenge, such as it presents itself today, this center or source of spiritualization completely lacks links with the human world moving around it. Around Rome, there is not an iron curtain, but a curtain of cotton and wool, damping all noises of human discussions and aspirations. At the doors of the Vatican, the world comes to a standstill.³⁵

FIDELITY OUT OF HOPE: EVIDENCE OF TEILHARD'S LOVE OF THE CHURCH

In spite of growing nervous depressions and in spite of irritations about the "little god" whom Rome still taught people to adore³⁶ and supported by his unflinching hope, Teilhard succeeded in avoiding a dreaded "rupture."³⁷ With unwavering courage he confesses his love of the Church, a love refined by his sufferings. When the seventy-three-year-old Teilhard was ordered in 1954 to leave Paris immediately because of a talk he had given, he wrote on 9 September 1954 to Jeanne Mortier:

(1) To my vocation to vow my life (that which is left of my life) to the discovery and the service of the Universal Christ—and this is absolute fidelity to the

Church—I feel myself more and more consecrated in my innermost self. (2) For the immediate future, at least, I definitely shall have to work in obscurity and remoteness.³⁸

Still, his last letter to Jeanne Mortier, four weeks before he died, raised the hope that the Church would fulfill its mission by reorienting itself always anew toward its goal: “I never felt more attached basically to the Church—never more certain, that this Church, by rethinking her Christ more profoundly, will be the religion of tomorrow.”³⁹

FINAL REMARKS

If I am to risk a short concluding evaluation, then we might first remind ourselves that Teilhard’s concept of the Church did not include establishing a new ecclesiology, not even a systematic part of it. Teilhard did not work as a theological specialist; rather he wanted to offer stimuli to theologians, which he as a convinced Catholic and as scientist thought important.

The concepts of an axis of evolution drawn from a geometrical image and of phylum, derived from the field of evolutionary biology, were used by Teilhard in an effort to overcome the static view of the Church as it was proclaimed by the Vatican Council I and teachings of the magisterium. Their model conceived of the Church as an unchanging divine presence in history, one that becomes immediately tangible in person and institution. The teaching had the tendency to identify simplistically the community called by God (*ecclesia*) in its actual historical manifestation. The practical consequence was a defensive struggle against all developments that questioned the status quo of the Church.

Using the metaphor of the phylum, Teilhard tried, with the help of an empirical reality, to interpret through analogy a reality of the faith. This analogy makes possible images of the object using actual historical representations, without defining the object itself. Phylum and Church should be looked at as widely as possible within one’s own perspective. Knowledge about the limitations of one’s own vision must be seen as well within an eschatological perspective and anchored in faith, that is the rooting of the phylum Church in its founder and the one who gives it fulfillment, the historical and cosmic Christ. The differentiation between today’s reality of the Church and its goal, which is only plausibly founded now by the evolutionary paradigm, does not mean, for Teilhard, to separate the evolutionary paradigm into the arbitrariness of subjective judgments which would justify ever new foundings of churches. But

this differentiation allows for the existence of those who are in conflict with the official Church.

Finally, it seems legitimate to use dogmatic orthodoxy, which appears in no decisive way to be in conflict with Teilhard's concept of the Church, as a criterion when considering the spiritual yield. Teilhard's vision of the Church allowed him to stay in his beloved and enduring church and to hand over his work as a true son. Furthermore during his lifetime and up into our days, he has shown to countless people the way out of anguishing doubts. One of the most beautiful testimonies is his answer given in 1921 when asked about his attitude toward the official Church:

I believe the Church is still a child. Christ, out of whom she lives, is immeasurably greater than she imagines; nevertheless, after thousands of years, when the true face of Christ will have become a bit more uncovered, the Christians will still recite without hesitation the Creed.⁴⁰

NOTES

Whenever possible, Teilhard of Chardin texts are quoted from the original French edition: *Oeuvres*, I–XIII, by indicating the volume and the page. Works by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin are indicated by abbreviations of the titles. For a list of these abbreviations, see pp. 7–8.

1. *Osservatore Romano* 19.9.1946: "Si talis opinio amplectanda esse videatur, *quid fiet de numquam immutandis catholicis dogmatibus, quid de fidei unitate et stabilitate?*"

2. Pius X in a letter to Msgr. Bonomelli (1911); quoted in Dal Gal: *Il papa S. Pio X.*, 183 (HKG VI/2, 491).

3. "[. . .] comme on se prend donc à rêver qu'une aussi puissante antenne se mette enfin à diffuser (la parole attendue)!" (LJM, 44–45).

4. "15 Août 1917. Le progrès se fait nécessairement par rupture d'un ordre établi. Or il y a tendance à faire sacré, ou tabou, ce qui est établi,—à le considérer comme le Vrai et le Bien.*—Dès lors, le novateur risque de paraître sacrilège. . . . Et cependant, c'est son audace, souvent, qui fraie la voie à l'orthodoxie de demain. [. . .] «Les Précurseurs de la Vérité». Ce sont les hommes qui éprouvent les premières atteintes d'un besoin, ou les premiers rayons d'une lumière.—Ceux qui sont plus forts ou plus jeunes que leur siècle,—ceux qui sont "nés trop tôt".—Leur situation est pleine de risques, de tristesse, et de beauté.—S'ils ne croient pas,—ils ne sont pas compris, et ils se heurtent aux orthodoxies du monde—S'ils sont croyants, leur souffrance est pire. . . .—Et pourtant leur rôle est fécond et nécessaire. Par leurs interrogations, leurs nécessités nouvelles, ils répandent une salutaire inquiétude. Mais les premiers sont écrasés, comme la première vague. . . . La grande tentation est celle de la Révolte. La grande joie est celle de foncer dans la solitude. Le grand paradoxe est que la Rébellion paraît quelquefois providentielle et nécessaire. . . .

*La vérité officielle est généralement morte (observer les poussées de «dévotions», succédanés de la Nouveauté)". (JN, 212)

5. As a motto, Teilhard wrote on the first page: "Au Cœur de la Matière, Un Cœur du Monde, Le Cœur d'un Dieu" ("At the Heart of the Matter, A Heart of the World, The Heart of a God").

6. Teilhard, *Le cœur de la matière*, p. 21: "[. . .] le Monde [. . .] s'est peu à peu allumé, enflammé à mes yeux, jusqu'à devenir, autour de moi, entièrement lumineux par le dedans."

7. "Le buisson ardent" (OV, XIII: 21).

8. "La Diaphanie du Divin au cœur d'un Univers ardent" (OV, XIII: 22).
9. "[. . .] je discerne clairement que l'effet sur moi de ces pages ardentes ne fut que d'attiser au moment voulu, et un court instant, un feu, qui dévorait déjà mon cœur et mon esprit" (OV, XIII: 33).
10. "[. . .] tout ce que je me rappelle [. . .] c'est l'extraordinaire densité et intensité prises pour moi, vers cette époque, par les paysages d'Angleterre,—au coucher du soleil surtout—, quand les forêts du Sussex se chargeaient [. . .] de toute la Vie fossile que je poursuivais alors, de falaises en carrières, dans les argiles wealdiennes. Vraiment, il me semblait par moments qu'une sorte d'être universel allait soudain, à mes yeux, prendre figure dans la Nature" (OV, XIII: 71).
11. "Parti, dès l'enfance, à la découverte du Cœur de la Matière, il était inévitable que je me trouve, un jour, face à face avec le Féminin.—Le curieux est seulement qu'en l'occurrence la rencontre ait attendu, pour se produire, ma trentième année" (OV, XIII: 71).
12. "J'écris ces lignes par exubérance de vie et par besoin de vivre,—pour exprimer une vision passionnée de la Terre, et pour chercher une solution aux doutes de mon action,—parce que j'aime l'Univers, ses énergies, ses secrets, ses espérances, et parce que, en même temps, je me suis voué à Dieu, seule Origine, seule Issue, seul Terme. Je veux laisser s'exhaler ici mon amour de la matière et de la vie, et l'harmoniser, si possible, avec l'adoration unique de la seule absolue et définitive Divinité" (OV, XII: 5).
13. Published in *Études* (Journal of the French Jesuits), CLIII (1917): 458-67.
14. "Si mes écrits sont de Dieu, ils passeront. S'ils ne sont pas de Dieu, il n'y a qu'à les oublier" (LJM, 78).
15. "[. . .] tout ceci ne développe en moi aucune amertume,—parce que je suis trop sûr du résultat final" (LJM, 178).
16. *Journal I* (JT), 11 Janvier 1919. Teilhard had read *God the Invisible King*.
17. "27 avril 1916: Et parfois j'ai peur, en voyant combien je raisonne, je sens, je pense, en marge d'une masse de catholiques . . . qui ne voient rien au-delà d'une manifestation religieuse, de la parole glanée sur la bouche d'un général. . . qui ne s'intéressent pas au progrès du Monde uniquement attentifs qu'ils sont à LA CHAPELLE . . . O Jésus, élargissez les idées de vos fidèles (. . . ou bien corrigez les miennes!)—qu'ils ne deviennent pas inhumains en devenant chrétiens! qu'ils sentent leur tâche terrestre essentielle! qu'ils l'aiment! qu'ils ne vous séparent du Monde, ô Maître qui vous y êtes incarné!" (JN, 71).
18. *Note sur quelques Représentations historiques possibles du Pêché originel* (OV, X: 59-70).
19. "Au fond, je ne vis dans L'Église qu'en «faisant abstraction» d'une foule de choses qui sont capitales pour la masse des catholiques; et, ce qui me sauve, c'est d'avoir un genre de vie qui me permet justement de «faire abstraction» de ces choses [. . .]" (LI, 130-50).
20. "19 Février 1916: extrinsécisme dogmatique, pharisaïsme social, prétention à monopoliser toute vérité et toute charité, paresse et inutilité dans la lutte pour le Progrès . . . autant de défauts attaquant (par une déviation ou perversion naturelle) les Détenteurs de la Vérité, comme le mildious s'en prend aux vignes [. . .]" (JN, 38).
21. "Dans le monde «chrétien» tel qu'il se présente à nous dans les documents ecclésiastiques et les gestes ou conceptions catholiques, «j'étouffe» absolument, physiquement. Nous avons donné, il y a mille ans, un tour de compas qui prétendait encercler le monde des possibilités physiques et morales; et maintenant toute la réalité est au-delà. Nous ne sommes plus «catholiques» en fait; mais nous défendons un système, une secte" (LI, 137).
22. "[. . .] le Christianisme m'apparaît maintenant beaucoup moins comme un ensemble fermé et constitué que comme un axe de progression et d'assimilation. Hors de cet axe, je ne vois au monde aucune garantie, aucune issue. Mais, autour de cet axe, j'entrevois une immense quantité de vérités et d'attitudes auxquelles l'orthodoxie n'a pas encore fait de place" (LI, 137).
23. 30 Janvier 1917: "axe de la charité" (JN, 188).
24. "[. . .] Une figure intéressante, rencontrée il y a deux jours, est un certain M. Corti, éditeur à Zurich [. . .]. Il gémit sur l'esprit «barthien» des Suisses (il m'a cité des textes affolants!), et paraît connaître plus ou moins, personnellement, tous les «penseurs»

de langue allemande. Pas «illuminé» le moins du monde.” [Two days ago I met an interesting person, a certain Mr. Corti, publisher in Zurich. (. . .) He laments about the “Barthian” spirit of the Swiss (he quoted maddening texts to me!), and he seems to know more or less personally, all the German-speaking “thinkers.” Not at all “enlightened.”] (LJM, 63).

“In spite of the froth of existentialism and barthism, which do not stop to expand and to ‘poison’ us these last years [. . .]”—“Malgré la mousse d’existentialisme et de barthisme qui n’a pas cessé de foisonner et de nous «empoisonner» au cours de ces dernières années [. . .]” (OV, X: 256).

25. “Être catholique est la seule façon d’être chrétien pleinement et jusqu’au bout” (OV, X: 197).

26. Cf. LJM, 163: “Ecumenism, I insist, not of diffusion or of regression, but of progress in a convergent milieu” (9 Sept. 1954)—“Oecuménisme, je dis bien, non pas de diffusion ni de régression, mais de progression en milieu convergent.”

27. “Je crois voir de plus en plus qu’il n’y a pas d’axe de salut du monde en dehors de l’axe chrétien,—mais sur cet axe j’ai l’impression de ne me rejoindre avec la majorité des chrétiens officiels que de plus en plus loin” (LI, 132).

28. *Cahier VIII*, unpublished: “. . . Si je n’entrevois pas l’Église de demain à travers l’Église d’aujourd’hui, je crois que je ne pourrais pas, ni devrais pas rester . . . [. . .] Dieu peut demander tous les renoncements à la jouissance,—mais point ceux à la loyauté, ni à la lumière, ni à la vérité naturelle.”

29. Cf. OV, X: 208: “Being innermost convinced, for reasons grounded in the very structure of my perspectives, that the religious thinking does not develop but [. . .] ‘in phyla,’ I have only one desire and hope, [. . .] to *sentire*, or more exactly, to *praesentire*, cum Ecclesia.”

—“Intimement convaincu, pour des raisons tenant à la structure même de mes perspectives, que la pensée religieuse ne se développe que [. . .] «phylétiquement», je n’ai d’autre désir et espoir, [. . .] que de *sentire*,—ou, plus exactement, de *praesentire* cum Ecclesia.”

30. “[. . .] je ne trouve mieux à vous dire que de vous suggérer ma propre méthode: aimez fortiter le Christ (un toujours plus grand Christ) à travers, et cependant, si j’ose dire, au-delà de l’Église” (Leroy 1976, 61).

31. “La vraie religion (entendons par ce mot la forme religieuse où aboutira un jour le tâtonnement général de l’Action réfléchie terrestre) participe donc, comme toute autre réalité d’ordre «planétaire», à la nature d’un «phylum»” (OV, IX: 143).

32. “To localize, as the Catholics do, the permanent organ of this infallibility of the phylum in the Councils,—or by further concentration of the Christian consciousness, in the Pope (who does not formulate his own ideas, but the thinking of the Church), is very much in conformity with the great law of ‘cephalisation’ which dominates the whole of biological evolution.” [“Localiser, comme le font les catholiques, l’organe permanent de cette infallibilité phylétique dans les Conciles,—ou par concentration plus avancée encore de la conscience chrétienne, dans le Pape (formulant et exprimant, non pas ses propres idées, mais la pensée de l’Église) ceci n’a rien que de très conforme à la grande loi de «céphalisation» qui domine toute l’évolution biologique.”] (OV, X: 181).

33. *Journal* (JN), unpublished: “Infaillibilité» de l’Église: rien autre que le Sens phylétique guidant la collectivité chrétienne le long des lignes d’attraction émanées de ce Centre Divin.—Tant que l’on aime plus l’Universel, on est sûrement Chrétien. . . .”

34. “[. . .] je me sens impressionné par la vigueur et l’assurance du Christianisme, tel qu’il s’affirme sur la colline du Vatican. C’est vraiment par Saint-Pierre en ce moment que passe l’axe ascensionnel (comme par Moscou (?) l’axe propulsif) de l’Humanité moderne. Et quand on voit cela on cesse de s’irriter devant les débordements cléricaux et dévotieux de la piété locale” (LJM, 44).

35. “A St.-Pierre, j’ai vraiment senti ce qu’il y a de formidable dans le «phénomène chrétien»: je veux dire cette assurance inconfusable, unique dans le monde moderne, d’être en contact direct avec un Centre personnel de l’Univers. [. . .] En revanche, tel qu’il se présente en ce moment, ce centre ou foyer de spiritualisation manque certainement de connexions avec le Monde humain en mouvement autour de lui. Autour de Rome, ce

n'est pas le rideau de fer, mais un rideau de ouate, amortissant tout bruit des discussions et des aspirations humaines: le Monde s'arrête aux portes du Vatican" (LI, 377).

36. *Journal* (7 Sept. 1951, unpublished): "If the world turns around, Rome will turn with it. The thing is to avoid bitterness or disdain: by the appearance of the Universal Christ beyond the little fixed God whom one obstinately wants us to adore." ["Si le Monde tourne, Rome tournera avec lui. Le tout, c'est d'éviter amertume ou mépris: par apparition de l'U[niversel] Christ au-delà du petit Dieu fixé qu'on s'obstine à vouloir nous faire adorer."] (Copy of a letter to Pierre Leroy. These lines have been omitted in the publication.)

37. 9 May 1951: "Without any bitterness, and with growing optimism, I see (I believe I see) brighter and brighter the 'new' God mount over the horizon. And I may well say this is the greatest joy which I will ever have known in my life. *Nunc dimittis* . . . —It is just a shame that this vision puts me apparently into conflict with the magisterium. Let us hope that I die before somethings breaks. A rupture would risk to do more harm than good." ["Sans aucune amertume, et avec un optimisme grandissant, je vois (je crois voir) de plus en plus lumineusement le «nouveau». Dieu monter à l'horizon. Et je puis bien dire que c'est la plus haute joie que j'aurai jamais connue de ma vie. *Nunc dimittis* . . . —Dommage seulement que cette vision me mette en apparence de conflit avec le magistère. Espérons que je mourrai avant que rien ne casse. Une cassure risquerait de faire plus de mal que de bien à la cause."] (Leroy 1976, 99).

38. "1. Que, à ma vocation de vouer ma vie (ce qui reste de vie) à la découverte et au service du Christ Universel—et ceci dans une fidélité absolue à l'Église—, je me sens de plus en plus consacré par le vif de moi-même. 2. Que,—pour un avenir immédiat, au moins,—c'est décidément dans l'ombre et l'éloignement que je dois travailler" (LJM, 161).

39. "3 Mars 1955: "Je ne me suis jamais senti plus lié, par le fond, à l'Église;—ni plus certain que cette Église, en repensant plus à fond son Christ,—sera la religion de demain . . ." (LJM, 178).

40. *Sur mon attitude vis-à-vis de l'Église officielle*: "Je crois que l'Église est encore un enfant. Le Christ, dont elle vit, est démesurément plus grand qu'elle ne se l'imagine; et pourtant, dans des milliers d'années, quand le vrai visage du Christ sera un peu plus découvert, les chrétiens d'alors réciteront encore, sans réticences, le Credo" (OV, XIII: 137).

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Works by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin are indicated by abbreviations of the titles. For a list of these abbreviations, see pp. 7–8.

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