

## A NOTE ON EVOLUTION AND RELIGION IN THE LIGHT OF TEILHARD'S *DIVINE MILIEU*

by *Francisco J. Ayala*

Religion in the largest and most basic sense of the word is, according to Paul Tillich,<sup>1</sup> "ultimate concern." Religion is not a special function of man's spirit, but rather the dimension of depth in all the creative functions of man. It cannot exist in separation from the secular realm because its function is to discover and to analyze the ultimate meaning of all human actions. Religion is, then, conditioned by the achievements and beliefs of man in his historical development. Religion must exist in intimate connection with culture.

Perhaps the greatest intellectual achievement of modern man is the discovery of time. The Copernican revolution started with the discovery that the earth is not the center of the universe, as man had naïvely believed. Another stage in the scientific revolution occurred in the nineteenth century. Darwin contributed more than anybody else to the new discovery—that we do not live in a finished universe where movement is cyclic and time is irrelevant, but rather that the inanimate as well as the animate worlds are involved in a continuous process of change that is essentially irreversible. The world was not created finished—and then functioned in a predetermined way like a clock mechanism. Creation is rather a continuing process in which man is not only a witness but a participant as well. The universe, and man within it, is continuously changing, becoming different from what it was before.

Man is a biological species which has evolved from non-human animals and which continues to evolve. The ultimate meaning of man and of man's actions cannot be found without taking into consideration his animal origin and his evolving nature. To be meaningful to modern man, religion must be formulated in an evolutionary context. Attempts have been made to examine the meaning of human life from the perspective of evolution. A case in point is Theodosius Dobzhansky's recent book.<sup>2</sup> The author contends that evolution can be a source

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of hope for man. If we live in an evolving world, it is possible for man to contribute to the betterment of that world and thus to make his life meaningful. It is my purpose to present here the suggestions of another great evolutionary thinker, one who happened to be a professional theologian as well: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest who was a Catholic in good faith, albeit perhaps not an orthodox one.

Separation of religion and science was for Teilhard de Chardin a psychological absurdity. It was his conviction that a congruence of science with religion is not only a possibility but a necessity. Religion can be inspired and nourished by science.

Teilhard's starting point is man's inescapability from fully committing himself to live in the world. Then he proposes, as the fundamental religious question, how to "reconcile and provide mutual nourishment for the love of God and a healthy love of the world." Both this question and his gallant answer are contained in his main theological work, *The Divine Milieu*.<sup>3</sup>

The message of *The Divine Milieu* is addressed, first of all, to the Christians who feel alienated from their religious life by the appeal exercised by the natural sciences and the new scientific humanism. It is the purpose of the book to show them how to see the presence of God in the world, how to see that the true God pervades the universe, the universe whose stupendous size and natural beauty have been discovered by the sciences. Teilhard's attempt to reconcile the love of the world and the love of God is at the basis of his tremendous appeal to so many people, perhaps mostly younger people. And it was Teilhard's conviction that his vision was continuous with the Christian tradition; that it was a reformulation of the most traditional Christianity in terms meaningful to man in the twentieth century.

The main objection to religion presented by the materialist, particularly Marxist, philosophy is that it alienates man from himself and from his inescapable commitments to the world. This is also the objection formulated by some who call themselves "scientific humanists." They either deny religion and all values or maintain that the natural sciences provide the only valid answers to any problems, including the question of the meaning of human life. To aspire to progress, leaning exclusively on his own means, constitutes the true mission of man. Against this task religion represents a dangerous alienation, an escapism, an evasion by man of his duty to himself and to the world.

Such criticism of religion unfortunately does not lack a basis. There

are forms of religiosity which either divert man's attention completely from his earthly mission or propose a completely passive attitude toward worldly things. "Qu'importe le désordre et le douleur d'aujourd'hui / Puisqu'elle est le commencement d'autre chose?"<sup>4</sup> The early Christian anachorettes and the ascetic approach of medieval Christianity demanded absolute detachment of the religious man from things terrestrial. The same approach is not uncommon today among certain Christian groups. Some of the Oriental religions preach a similar philosophy. In the words of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (chap. iv), "He who sees that which is above all action in the midst of the activity of the mind, body and senses, is wise among mankind, is a true Karma Yogi, and a perfect doer of all actions." According to the Yoga philosophy the final goal of all religion is to reach the "Atman," the supreme inactivity and permanence in the middle of the activities and changes of this life.

These forms of religiosity of complete detachment represent an impediment to human progress. They are foreign to the convictions of our times because they deny any lasting value to human work and effort on the temporal plane. But the criticism of the Marxist philosophers and the scientific humanists does not touch the essence of religion as understood by Teilhard de Chardin. According to him, far from alienating man from his earthly tasks, religion may become the most potent stimulus for man to accomplish his earthly vocation as perfectly as possible.

Teilhard's concept of religion and his understanding of the natural world, his *Weltanschauung*, are interdependent. His understanding of Christianity developed in the context of his vision of the universe. In this sense, his approach is profoundly biblical: heaven and earth proclaim the glory of God; God must be reached through his creatures. The world view of Teilhard is fundamentally evolutionary. Man is not, as Sartre puts it, a "hole in being," man is not an entity "fallen in the world," in an evil and absurd cosmos. Rather, man is called to co-operate in the creative work of God; the world will not attain consummation without human co-operation. Creation is in the making, in process of development. Christianity demands of man that he actively co-operate in the development of the world.

We cannot define reality any longer in terms of the three spatial dimensions, says Teilhard. We must define it in terms of time as well as of space. Biological evolution, formulated scientifically about a century ago, has taught man the new meaning of time as an essential

component of nature. With the Darwinian revolution, the concept of evolution has been extended to the total of reality. "It was only in the middle of the XIX century, again under the influence of biology, that the light dawned at last, revealing the irreversible coherence of all that exists. . . . Time and space are organically joined so as to weave, together, the stuff of the Universe. That is the point we have reached and how we perceive things today."<sup>5</sup>

Far from being incompatible with the Christian revelation, for Teilhard the idea of evolution is consonant with and illuminates the Christian view of the world. A noted Jesuit theologian, Jean Daniélou, has pointed out that the chief difficulty preventing Christian faith in the past from making some connection between salvation history and cosmic history has been that while salvation was viewed as a dynamic movement in time, the world of nature was understood as a static and inert mass.<sup>6</sup> Dobzhansky has pointed out that Christianity is a religion implicitly evolutionistic in that it believes history to be meaningful: "Its content flows from the Creation, through progressive revelation of God to Man, to Christ, and from Christ to the Kingdom of God. Saint Augustine expressed this evolutionistic philosophy most clearly."<sup>7</sup>

Teilhard thinks it to be an explicit teaching of the Christian tradition that human action can be sanctified thoroughly. He quotes Paul: "Whatever you do, do it in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ." According to the Christian tradition, he says, that text refers to every action ("whatever you do") and implies that human endeavor has a religious dimension ("in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ").<sup>8</sup>

It has been questioned whether the Christian revelation is compatible with the full commitment of man to material progress. Traditional Christianity believes that life here below is continued in another life, the joy and reality of which are quite incommensurable with the conditions of our present life. This disproportion seems to deprive man of any interest in his terrestrial life and in the present world. Teilhard, however, rejects as Manichaeistic the view that religious perfection means living in a world made divine by the reduction to a minimum of all worldly activities. There has been another subtler, but according to Teilhard equally unacceptable, view in the history of Christianity—that human action can be sanctified through the intention which inspires and directs it. According to this notion, human actions have no ultimate value; but purify your intention, refer your actions to God, and they will acquire a religious dimension. In this view, says Teilhard, the material component of human action is lost.

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But, for our joy to be complete, nothing of our activity should be lost. The solution, he adds, is to understand that human endeavor co-operates to complete the world *in Christo Iesu*. Human activity has a religious dimension because it contributes to the continuing creation of the world. The completion of an evolving world and the consummation of the Mystical Body of Christ are two perspectives of the same reality that Teilhard represents with the symbol of Omega. The life of man becomes religious precisely by the full commitment of man to a developing world and an evolving mankind. To renounce this commitment would be for man to destroy himself. Engaging himself in an evolving world, man co-operates with the evolutionary progress of the world and correlatively with the consummation of the Kingdom of God.

Creation is, for Teilhard, a dynamic process still going on, most exuberantly in the highest zones of the cosmos, in the "noosphere"—the realm of human evolution. Human activity has, then, a religious dimension since the humblest of our works co-operate in the creative process of the world. Man reaches thus toward divinity. "In action I cleave to the creative power of God; I co-incide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living prolongation. . . . This contact enables me to assimilate myself to God."<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on human responsibility toward mankind and toward the whole world is, perhaps, the strongest characteristic of our times. A new humanism, whose center of gravity is placed in the historical condition of man, is being born. Man is the carrier and creator of history; we must dedicate our energy and strength to the obtention of a better and more equitable world where every man may fully develop his potentialities. Teilhard felt definitely in tune with these convictions. In his opinion, the awareness that we are free and responsible toward the future is a precise and definite contribution of modern thought; one which must be taken into consideration from now on by any conception of the world, by any philosophy or religion. Man's contribution toward the progress of mankind becomes the supreme norm of ethics. "To try everything and to thrust everything towards the achievement of a greater consciousness, such is the general and supreme norm of morality; to restrict that impetus, such is sin."<sup>10</sup>

Teilhard pointed out the affinity between the cosmological perceptions of modern science and the dominant tone of the creations of art, literature, and philosophy of our century. The humanities have emphasized the essential transitoriness of the individual life. Science

has produced the image of a world in evolution, continuously changing in an irreversible process. For Teilhard, the "two cultures" follow converging paths toward the same goal. At this point of human history man has become aware that his mission in the world consists in consciously contributing toward the ultimate consummation of the evolutionary process. This perception must be at the basis of any meaningful approach to religion. The Christian, if he understands the demands of his faith, must participate fully in the aspirations of modern man. Salvation is attained through the full commitment to the earthly tasks. Such is, according to Teilhard, the message contained in the Christian symbol of the Incarnation of God: "By virtue of the Creation, and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see."<sup>11</sup> In the words of the poet:

But God's own descent  
Into flesh was meant  
As a demonstration  
That the supreme merit  
Lay in risking spirit  
In substantiation.

ROBERT FROST<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
2. Theodosius Dobzhansky, *The Biology of Ultimate Concern* (New York: New American Library, 1967).
3. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), p. 21.
4. Paul Claudel, *Le soulier de satin* (Paris: Gallinard, 1929), p. 207.
5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), p. 217.
6. J. Daniélou, "Signification de Teilhard de Chardin," *Études* (February, 1962), pp. 145-61.
7. Theodosius Dobzhansky, *Mankind Evolving* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), p. 2.
8. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.
10. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Le Phénomène Spirituel," in *L'Énergie Humaine* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962), p. 134.
11. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, p. 35.
12. Robert Frost, "Kitty Hawk," in *In the Clearing* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), Part II, p. 49.