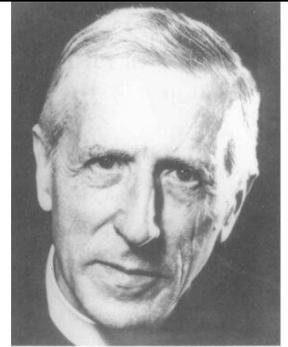


THE TEILHARD NEWSLETTER

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Editorial

Welcome to the 26th edition of the Teilhard Newsletter.



This edition sees the departure of Rod White from the editorship of the newsletter. Rod has valiantly managed the publication of the newsletter since the sad demise of Bill Cranston. Having stepped into the breach, Rod dutifully remained there as long as he could. Thanks for all your hard work Rod.

For the time being I will try my best to keep you all updated with news, reviews and articles of interest.

May I take this opportunity to invite all members to get involved in the newsletter by sending news, reviews, updates and interests to me by email or post at the above address.

Once again the annual British Teilhard Association International Conference is well on its way. Thanks to the Committee for their hard work in arranging what promises to be a challenging exploration of Teilhard's contemporary relevance. I enclose a copy the Conference booklet which includes the booking form. It would be extremely helpful if members could send this form at their earliest convenience so that all practicalities can be addressed in good time.

Stephen Retout has provided us with some insightful reflections following the unveiling of the plaque at Ore Place in Hastings. It was originally written for a wider audience, though I am sure many members will appreciate it.

We also thank Bronwen Astor for her update about Ursula King's latest book as well as Rod for providing a review of Provenzano and Kropf's book *Logical Faith*.

This edition features a particularly interesting article concerning the experience of Teilhard as stretcher-bearer. It offers insight into the conditions of the trenches as well as the context of Teilhard's wartime writing.

Members News

Obituary

Oliver Knowles OBE (b.1920 – d.2008)

It was with sadness that we have to announce the death of Oliver Knowles, an old and very valued friend, who died on 22nd August 2008. An early supporter, Oliver was a one-time member of the Executive committee, and always gave sound advice on financial matters: (he was Hon Treasurer of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre for 17 years after his retirement from a distinguished career in the Colonial Office). Born in 1920 Oliver was educated at Mill Hill and Oriel College Oxford, where he obtained B.Litt and MA degrees. Following war service in the

Royal Indian Army Service Corps in Burma (making the rank of Lt. Col.), he entered the Colonial Service as District Officer in Kenya, and held various posts there rising to the rank of Acting Permanent Secretary Ministry of Finance. He was awarded his OBE for his work on Kenya Development Aid Flows. He later became Inter-regional Advisor on Co-operation amongst Developing Countries at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Geneva, before retiring in 1984 to live at Watlington near Oxford. To the end, he maintained a close interest in the activities of the Association, and attended most of the annual conferences. He will be sadly missed – and our deep sympathies and condolence go out to his wife, June, and to his family.

2009 Conference Announcement

28th International Teilhard Conference

Conference Theme: Teilhard and the Politics of Globalisation

Venue: Pastoral Centre, London Colney

Friday 1st May to Sunday 3rd May 2009

Please refer to the attached booklet for full details of this year's conference and booking form.

Other forthcoming events

Assisi 2010

In 2005 a project placed under the auspices of the Paris and New York Teilhard Foundations with international interest and global reach was developed called **Teilhard 2005**. Ten International Colloquiums were organised across 4 continents with the aim to offer people around the world an opportunity to discover the significance of Teilhard de Chardin.

Assisi 2010 follows on from this initiative by developing a new international program. The ideas are in formation stage at the moment though seems to be culminating in an International 3-day conference in October 2010 in Assisi. We will keep you posted as and when we hear more.

New Books

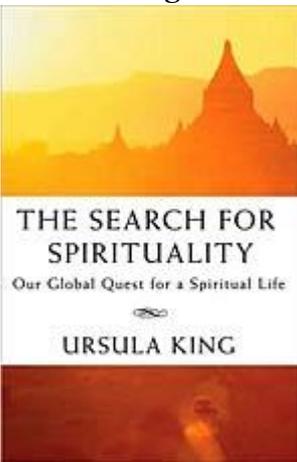
The Search for Spirituality by Ursula King

Ursula King Professor Emeritus of Theology at the University of Bristol well known for her books on Teilhard de Chardin has written a comprehensive and brilliant book soon to be published on spirituality, *The Search for Spirituality (Our Global Quest for a Spiritual Life)*. A much needed and relevant book with chapters on inter faith, the arts, spirituality in a global world, education and health, nature and science etc and a particular section on the zest for life and the power of love.

I particularly like her emphasis that "spirituality is not a permanent retreat from the world into the monastery, desert, or cave, not even into the silence of ones own

heart, or the depth of ones mind. Rather, a rising out of the midst of lived experience, spirituality implies the very point of entry into the fullness of life by giving meaning, value, and direction to all that humans do and are."

- Publication Date: 28 March 2009 By Canterbury Press
- Binding/Format: Paperback
- Pages: 256
- Price: £12.99
- ISBN: 9781853119422

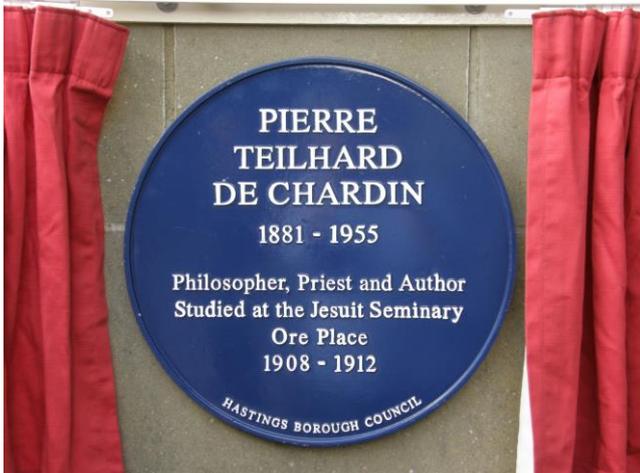


The Unveiling at Hastings

Some reflections by Stephen Retout
Photos by Rosemary Cattell

On Wednesday afternoon, 8 October 2008, a small group of about thirty stood at Ore Place on the outskirts of Hastings for the unveiling of a blue plaque to commemorate Teilhard de Chardin. Who was this man, why did he once study at Ore Place in Hastings and why was he worth a blue plaque?

The “theologate” at Ore Place was one of the buildings which the French Jesuits acquired in England after expulsion from France towards the end of the nineteenth century. They had a number of buildings in the Hastings and St Leonards area including Hurst Court on The Ridge at Ore which was a junior seminary. This was boarded up when I last looked this year, sadly due for demolition. Ore Place was used by the Jesuits from 1902 to 1926 when the French Jesuits returned to France. The building was then bought by the Society of African Missions. The full story of Ore Place can be found in the Hastings Reference Library where there are detailed extracts and newspaper cuttings about the building.



Teilhard arrived in Hastings in September 1908 to study theology and stayed till 1912 although he later made return visits. He was ordained by Bishop Amigo (of Southwark) on 24 August 1911 and said his first mass at Our Lady Star of the Sea in Hastings. Bishop Amigo was one of this country's longest serving Bishops and was still around in the 1940s! You can read about Teilhard's time at Ore Place in the book “Letters from Hastings” which is again available in the Hastings Reference Library.

Teilhard had developed a strong interest in Palaeontology whilst in Jersey and Egypt prior to his arrival at Hastings. He and his fellow student Felix Pelletier spent much of their free time fossil collecting in the area. Many of these fossils were donated to the Hastings Museum and also the British Natural History museum. In April this year at the Hastings Museum the Teilhard Society was able to inspect the Teilhard collection of fossils which are normally kept in store. Many of them are carefully preserved in

cigar boxes wrapped in Jesuit examination papers of the time! Before the visit I was able to find out that Professor T.M. Harris from Reading University had looked at the collection in the 1930s before returning in the 1960s. I also contacted Professor Joan Watson from Manchester University who explained that this second visit was to introduce the collection to her for the purposes of starting a Ph.D. in the Teilhard plant fossils and these became her life's work. I also contacted the Natural History Museum and they have details of fossils collected by Teilhard and Pelletier but nobody I e-mailed there had any idea who either of these people were.

Teilhard's time at Ore Place and his work on fossils convinced him about the basic truth of evolution. Much of his later life was spent on reflecting and writing on evolution and integrating it with his Christianity. Unfortunately at the time the Catholic Church was not quite ready to accept the idea of evolution and Teilhard's writings were banned during his lifetime. I find it amusing but also significant that over fifty years after his death, Teilhard's embrace of evolution is still thought worth attacking on the internet by evangelical fundamentalists in the U.S.A !

I also find it fascinating how some of Teilhard's ideas became part of Vatican II orthodoxy, such as in *Gaudium et Spes*. How this happened has a clear link with Ore Place. Whilst at Ore Place, Teilhard studied Newman's writings, who clearly embraced evolution much earlier despite the opposition of the church during the time of Darwin. Newman is often described as one of the “missing Fathers” at the Second Vatican Council. The influence of Newman on Teilhard is acknowledged by the great French Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac who was a friend of Teilhard and later studied at Ore Place himself. De Lubac was influenced by Teilhard's ideas and went on to popularise his work and became an adviser to the then Bishop of Krakow at Vatican II in the early 1960s. In 1981, twenty five years after Teilhard's death, Pope John Paul II as he had then become sent a message to the International Assembly of Teilhard Societies encouraging them to celebrate Teilhard's contribution to

spirituality and culture. This suggests a much greater acceptance of Teilhard than is realised by many Catholics today.

The significance of Ore Place in twentieth century Catholic theology is wider than Teilhard. Apart from Henri de Lubac there were a number of other key Jesuit theologians and biblical scholars who took their work back to Lyon in 1927 when the Jesuits left Ore Place. The future Pope John XXIII's experience of the ferment of the French "Nouvelle" theology while he was a Papal Nuncio in Paris during the 1950s was possibly a major stimulus to the calling of Vatican II itself. It is strange to think that the 'French connection' of much of this progressive conciliar theology had its origins in Ore Place at Hastings. It is very sad that the building was demolished in the 1980s, since it had a unique place in Catholic history in this country.

When I visited Ore Place in April this year, I was not alone in thinking that parts of that estate, despite now being mostly built up with new houses, had a real 'sense of place'. Physically, Teilhard lives on in the Teilhard fossil collection, in his writings and is now commemorated by the blue plaque. But for me, Teilhard's reflections on a Pauline vision of an incarnation which includes the whole of creation, not just humanity, is the real legacy of the man and the challenge that he offers to us today. At a time where secularism is in the ascendancy, the Teilhardian vision of constructive encounter of science and religion, and an

Book Review – Logical Faith by Joseph Provenzano and Richard Kropf

by Rod White

How should individuals of faith respond to the growth of science and technology? Progress has become so rapid that it is possible to sense we are under attack on all fronts. The threats pose questions about faith, family life, morality, health and often the blame is placed on science and the prominent spokesmen of science and technology whose mission seems to be to eradicate religion.

action-centred spirituality that offers some hope for ecological salvation, is definitely a challenge for Catholics and all humanity to avoid introspection. When we visit the plaque at Ore Place and as we recite the Creed each Sunday we might recall Teilhard's call for a New Nicaea to redefine the "...cosmic face of the incarnation" as well the relationship between "...Christ and a universe that has become fantastically immense and organic (at least a thousand billion galaxies each surely containing life and thought ...".

John Paul II alludes to this in a Teilhard inspired passage in his 1986 encyclical 'The Lord, The Life Giver': "The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God, not only of a human nature, but ...of everything that is flesh – the whole of humanity, the entire visible and invisible world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance and a cosmic dimension."

I have been privileged over several decades to walk around much of the Hastings countryside and coastline which inspired Teilhard's ecological spirituality. It is wonderful to think that this unique part of God's creation has in some way inspired the above words.

The editor would like to express warm gratitude to Stephen Retout for providing this article.

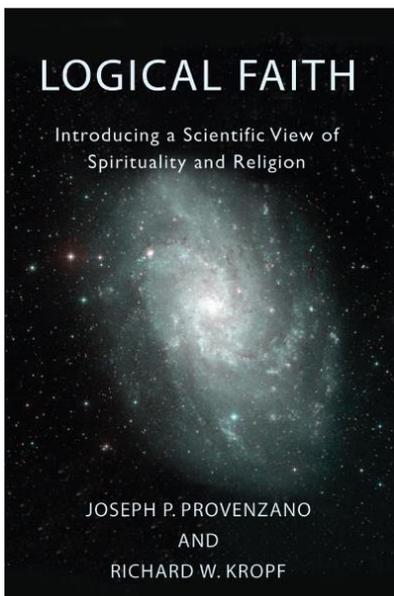
When I was writing this review two events happened. NASA had just launched the Phoenix spacecraft on a mission to Mars – a magnificent achievement. Meanwhile in the UK the destructive 'foot and mouth' virus leaked from a research lab in England. The last outbreak of this disease devastated the agriculture industry. The media images of piles of burning carcasses of cattle remain embedded in the minds of many people.

These examples illustrate the 'two sides' of science. In reality there are many sides to science but the media likes to create an image of science as something to be feared.

It is more difficult for people of faith to reconcile science and religion, they may feel they lack the necessary knowledge to analyse scientific claims and they may feel wary of the arrogant claims that are made against religion.

This also means that for people of faith who are involved in science and technology - they have a dilemma. Their skills enable them to succeed but they are working in hostile territory both from science and from their religious friends. Clearly there is a need to address the general believer of the reasons to integrate science and religion.

This book is addressed to a general audience – those people of faith who want to learn more about science and to those people of



science who want to investigate whether science does necessarily remove the need for religion. The future of science should be for the benefit of all people and it is certainly right to encourage people of faith

to explore and learn more about science.

The authors of this book propose a new attitude to science – a ‘third paradigm’ for science and religion. They describe the world of science and the world of religion as two separate paradigms, each not understanding the other in the same way that after a paradigm shift – (as described by Kuhn) practitioners find each other mutually unacceptable. To achieve this they draw on the work of Teilhard who was one of the first people to suggest that science and religion should be integrated. Teilhard was passionate in his vision of the future and he is very relevant to this situation as many people saw his views as ‘ahead of his time’

and he caused a great deal of controversy over ideas that are generally accepted today. Essentially he called for science, society and religion to be integrated and work in harmony.

In Chapter 1 we read a re-appraisal of science and religion. There is a call for greater understanding of science and of the need to re-evaluate the Biblical reasons that would lead believers to reject evolution. There is in reality no need to perpetuate the Biblical view of the ‘three-layer’ universe. With the discovery of space we need to look at the Bible in a new way, one that integrates science and belief.

They introduce the idea that we now have two paradigms in action – science and religion and both operate individually in terms of knowledge acquisition, belief and worldview. It is only when a third paradigm – one that integrates science and religion is in place that we will achieve unity, not only between science and religion but in religion. Teilhard saw this unity as being essential to any future progress. He believed that ‘union differentiates’ that in unity there will be a greater fulfillment of the individual religion and individual. They also rightly call for individuals and religion to look beyond themselves and not to remain questing for the individual. It is only in losing our selves that we are able to gain – it is this essential paradox that is the essence of many of the major religions.

As beneficial and exciting as this appears I do have a certain level of reluctance to the use of ‘paradigm’. Kuhn has repeatedly stated that he did not intend it, paradigm shift has been used for many to call for an end to objective truth. Relativism is something, especially in morality that all religions are especially careful to avoid.

Chapters 2 to 3 begin to assert that although science may claim to be able or soon be able to ‘explain everything’ this does not mean that science necessarily is the reason to reject religion. Evolution still causes a great deal of problems to religious people. Teilhard embraced evolution and saw it as a general ‘condition’ of reality. The authors

explain how evolution does not necessarily contradict the Bible – indeed they point out that without evolution, certain theological problems such as the existence of evil would make belief in God even more difficult.

Chapter 4 calls for a new approach to the idea of the soul. Many believers perceive that evolution negates the idea of the soul. The authors argue that our idea of a soul is not inherently Biblical and it is a superimposition of Greek thought. A close reading of essential passages by St Paul would lead to this conclusion.

Chapter 5 takes the same approach to the idea of life after death, arguing that science and religion can be reconciled and that Greek thought has caused untold confusion and led people away from the Biblical meaning. A new approach to human nature is now possible in the light of new science and it is possible to integrate this with Biblical thought.

This book is thought provoking, lively and exciting. I believe that Teilhard would have agreed with this approach and essentially the

three main aims of the book are ideas that Teilhard endorsed:

- A new approach to evolution, one that integrates science and religion
- Unity of all religions but unity that strengthens the individual nature of each religion.
- A faith for the future that involves a transcendence and determinism to acquire ‘ultimate meaning’. When we take this attitude to the world it enables an ability to create a world where we can acquire lasting worth and meaning.

Many people have questions about the future, few are willing to suggest answers, for this we should acknowledge their bravery. It is a call to create a better future – something that Teilhard was passionate about and something that is essential for all of us to work towards.

Thanks to Rod White for providing this review.

‘Ninety Years Ago: Teilhard At Verdun’ By Gérard-Henri Baudry

From *TEILHARD aujourd'hui*, no18, 2006, p. 52-59

The following article has been kindly translated from French by Rachel Moriarty to whom the editor is most grateful.

‘I did not think I would come back’

The battle for the camp entrenched at Verdun lasted from February to December 1916. It began on 21st February with an extensive German attack on the right bank of the River Meuse. On 25th February Fort Douaumont fell into enemy hands. At that point Teilhard’s regiment was deployed on the Belgian Front close to Coxyde and Nieuport, near the part of the coast they had reached at the end of January 1916. At the end of April his unit set up camp at Fort Mardick at Dunkirk, where it stayed until mid-May, when it was transferred to the

Verdun sector with a view to active engagement in that battle. After that, we can identify five distinct operations, each lasting about ten days, carried out by his regiment on the Verdun Front, and followed by rest-periods behind the lines:¹

¹ Readers may consult the map of the battle in reference-books and histories of the 1914-18 war, for example Pierre Miguel, *Les Poilus*, Plon 2000, p 512. Documentary sources for Teilhard are, first, his *Journal*, Fayard, 1975, pp, 84-134 (abbreviated as J, followed by the page-number); second, *Genèse de l'une Pensée (The Origin of an Idea)* (= Teilhard’s letters to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon), Grasset, 1961, pp. 126-199 (abbreviated as GP, followed by the page number); third, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et Jean*

Five Operations at the Front at Verdun

1) The first operation took place on the left bank of the Meuse, between Avocourt wood and the well-known 'Cote 304' (Hill 304) in June 1916, followed by a rest-period behind the lines at Mognéville in the Bar-le-Duc (Meuse) area, which began on 23rd June (GP 126-133; J 84).

2) The second, again on the Avocourt Front, took place in July and was followed by a rest-period at Andernay, near Sermaize, in the Bar-le-Duc area, from 21st July (GP 141; J 91).

3) The third, on the right bank of the Meuse between Thiaumont and Fleury (Côte de Froideterre, Fort Souville . . .), took place around mid-August, and was followed by a rest period from 22nd August at Nant-le-Grand, near Ligny-en-Barois (Meuse) (GP 150-162; J 99).

4) The fourth, in the Douaumont sector, lasted from 21st to 30th October, and was followed by a rest period at Fouchères-aux-Bois, near Ménil-sur-Saulx, not far from Ligny-en-Barois (Meuse) (GP 175; J 132).

5) The fifth, at Louvemont, near the 'Côte de Poivre' (Pepper Hill) to the north of Douaumont, lasted from 12th to 21st December. It was the brigade to which Teilhard belonged which on 15th December 1916 stormed and captured Louvemont the surrounding area (GP 195-198; J 169).

After that Teilhard's regiment was finally withdrawn from the Verdun Front. After a rest-period behind the lines at Givrauval near Ligny-en-Barois (GP 196; J 169), on 17th January 1917 the regiment began to move on foot in stages; after crossing the Marne and passing Avrainville, Montier-en-Der (Haute Marne), Bagneux (Marne) about 10 km from Romilly-sur-Seine, the men reached Pavant (Aisne), about 20 km from Château-Thierry, where they encamped from 12th February to the end of March. I mention these details to show that the periods of time away from action on the front line were the longer ones, and

provided Teilhard with free time to write up his notes.

The 'Soldier-Padre (l'aumônier-poilu)'

The period after Verdun marked a change in Teilhard's military status. He was given the title of 'honorary stretcher-bearer', or, more precisely, 'independent stretcher-bearer', with the clear intention of allowing him to work as a chaplain, but without the title, which would have given him the rank of officer. Nevertheless he remained, in his own words, an *aumônier-poilu*, a 'soldier-padre', that is to say, in the ranks as a corporal stretcher-bearer. But to make it easier for him to carry out his ministry as a priest, he was attached to the headquarters staff of his regiment (GP 219-221), which gave him greater freedom of action and even a degree of autonomy. I draw attention to this fact, because there is often some confusion over his position in the army. What follows is a chronological account of what happened.

When war was declared in August 1914, Teilhard was not immediately called up, because he had not done military service. That had been postponed in 1902 and 1903. Then, in 1904, he was classified as fit for auxiliary service. This is surprising, and I find it hard to explain, given his good physical condition. One of his biographers claims that 'as a priest, he could not take part in active service'. That is indeed the rule according to Canon Law, but it did not apply in France, where since 1889 clergy had not been exempt from military service. '*Curés sacs au dos*' ('vicars in uniform') became a republican slogan. In fact, many seminarians and priests took part in the war as active combatants, as ordinary soldiers, non-commissioned officers and even full officers. For instance, among Teilhard's clerical colleagues, Père de Belinay was a captain in the 8th Foot Chasseurs (see GP 173).

While he waited for his call-up, Teilhard returned to England to complete the last stage of his Jesuit formation, known as 'the third year', in Canterbury. In December 1914, he appeared before a new Medical Examining Board, which declared him fit for mobilisation. He was then enrolled in the 105th [Regiment], and attached to the 13th section of stretcher-

bearers; he wrote to his cousin Marguerite on 13th December, making clear to her that he belonged to the ‘army stretcher-bearers’, who were not allowed to work in hospitals. He meant by that that he did not belong to the Army Medical Service, but to a fighting unit. At the end of January 1915 he was sent near to the Front, to Cuvilly, a small village 22 km north of Compiègne, to ‘Ambulance no 2, the 4th Moroccan Brigade’. A few days later he was attached as ‘stretcher-bearer-chaplain’ to the 8th Tirailleurs (Sharpshooters) (GP 53 et seq.).² This special attachment, made by his colonel at the suggestion of a medical major, Dr Salzes, is explained by the fact that he was the only priest in the regiment. He did not, however, have the official title of ‘Chaplain’. In a letter to Claude Cuénot, Dr Salzes described the arrangement, explaining that he had done it ‘to give him the title of “supernumerary stretcher-bearer with the rank of corporal”’. With this title he was not bound to any group. In camp, on the battle-line, during operations, he had a free hand, and organised his work as he thought best.³ This explanation clarifies a situation which many commentators have not understood. After Verdun, as I stated above, his situation changed. He gained more autonomy as he was then attached to a central service group, free to work across the whole battalion. He was effectively chaplain in an unofficial capacity.

I should also point out that in secular France the organisation of the military chaplaincy system was extremely inadequate. At the beginning of the war there were only ‘divisional chaplains’, that is, one per division, and it was widely recognised that this was not nearly enough. At the instigation of catholic *Deputés*, voluntary chaplains were recruited from among priests who had not been called up, and these acted as assistants to the

divisional chaplains. But it was a long way from meeting the needs of fighting units. Some commanding officers therefore took the initiative in nominating as a semi-official ‘chaplain’ a priest in their regiment who ordinarily served as a medical orderly or stretcher-bearer. The priest nominated in this way kept his official military position, but opportunities were arranged for him to carry out his ministry as a priest, celebrating Mass, going round the trenches to meet fighting soldiers . . . This was Teilhard’s own situation.⁴ He remained a soldier in the ranks like his comrades, sharing their quarters and their canteen. From the start his position was clear to all, and that explains how he conducted himself throughout the war: ‘This is the ideal model of the commonplace and undistinguished life which I have often set out for you’, he wrote to his cousin (GP 54).⁵ It is worth analysing this distinctive position.

The first striking point is that his attitude fits logically into his view of apostolic engagement in the world. He wanted to be a priest-scientist among scientists on the frontiers of modern science. For him, this was a principle of action that would never vary; and it is easy to understand how it was later to underpin the worker-priests experiment. Stretcher-bearer-priest, scholar-priest, worker-priest – it was the same struggle, like yeast in the heart of the human condition – ‘in the heart of the masses’, in the familiar phrase. At the Front, he wanted simply to be the priest-comrade, at everybody’s service, French or Magrébins [*soldiers from French North Africa, usually Muslims*]. On the march he carried his kit like any infantryman. From time to time his Major wanted to relieve him of his pack. He refused shortly: ‘like the others!’ The demonstration of this fundamental principle leads me to my second point.

² On 22nd June 1915 this regiment was to become the 4th Combined Regiment of ‘zouaves’ (Algerian soldiers) and tirailleurs (sharpshooters). Its history is the subject of a booklet published at Bizerte (Tunisia) in 1919. I have not been able to consult it.

³ See Claude Cuénot, *Le P. Teilhard de Chardin*, Plon, p. 41 [English version, Claude Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin*, tr. Vincent Colimore, Burns & Oates, 1965, p. 25]

⁴ When he became a corporal in 1915, he wrote, ‘this will perhaps make my role as chaplain easier’. In practice, as he was now closer to the medical Major Dr Salzes, he found he was strategically placed to intervene and make personal contact with the men.

⁵ Later, however, during rest-periods behind the lines, he took advantage of a civilian billet, sometimes at the presbytery.

From the first, Teilhard presented himself as an outsider in relation to his professional background, or, better, as a 'pioneer'. While his brothers would spend the war as officers, and numbers of seminarians, religious and priests would become non-commissioned officers and full officers, he would refuse all promotion, remaining an ordinary corporal to the end of hostilities. In the army, as every soldier knows, a corporal does not hold a commission, but simply serves in the ranks.⁶ Nevertheless, what he achieved at this modest level at the heart of his regiment was such that it inspired astonishment and admiration; he earned citations and decorations exceptional for an ordinary soldier – the *Croix de Guerre* in 1915, the *Médaille Militaire* in 1917, the *Légion d'Honneur* in 1920.

Let us look at what happened in practice on the front line, taking Verdun as an example. Teilhard went with his company and worked as usual with his team of stretcher-bearers at a First-Aid post in a hut or an improvised shelter. Artillery attacks were frequent. When it was necessary, they went out to look for the wounded. As Teilhard was working as a chaplain, he was able to go of his own accord to visit soldiers as they lay in the trenches or in dug-outs. This required determination and courage, for movement was extremely dangerous in the communication-trenches under enemy fire.

The Experience of Verdun: 'The Monade (Individual Entity) lost in the great clash of brutal energies'.

Verdun was the most terrible experience of the war years for Teilhard, when his fundamental optimism almost broke down. The battles at Artois in 1915 had certainly been a testing time, but he had put up a better psychological resistance. At

Verdun, he broke down. After two spells on the front line in June and July, beside Cote 304 (see above), he felt 'a kind of numbness', which made him function 'rather like a machine' (GP 127-128), and he suffered 'the loss of his appetite for life', probably a period of depression. It is often forgotten that throughout his life he was subject to depressive episodes, which he overcame with an effort of will, and by mystical abandonment of himself to the creative action of God.

After the third, though the most demanding, operation near Thiaumont in August he recovered his spirits. The position was dramatic: there were no more trenches; it was 'truly like a lunar landscape', and the men dug themselves into shell-holes. 'I have spent two days in a hole', he wrote to his cousin Marguerite, 'shut in for hours at a time by shells falling no more than a metre away'. Then there is the story of the attack, which deserves a place in the story of Verdun. 'For 48 hours I occupied a shell-hole set rather like an eagle's nest on the side of a hill, from which I could see close up the line from Thiaumont as far as Fleury, 200 metres away. As the barrage began, all the hills and ravines began to smoke: you would have said it was a huge volcano with its slopes pierced with countless lava-holes. Then, all at once, a hundred metres away, I saw waves of infantrymen retreating on foot back to Fleury, strangely unhurried, throwing grenades into shell-holes. . . . We have had a good many losses, and sad ones. Many of my best friends in the battalion did not come back down from there . . .' (GP 151). Faced with this 'chaos' and so much suffering, he noted in his journal, 'On these charred and smouldering slopes, there is room for only one memorial: a great Christ. Only the figure of Our Lord on the Cross can express and do justice to the world of anguish, mystery and secret hope awakened in our souls by the vision and memory of what has been achieved in these places . . . O, the pain of the World! How deeply is it felt there!'. Then at once there comes the surge of optimism embedded in his vision of human evolution: 'I believe that the suffering of the world is the sign of a great labour coming to fulfilment. As the cosmic mass

⁶ Claude Cuénot records the following anecdote (probably from Dr Salzes). General Guyot de Salins, commander of the 38th Division, wanted to appoint Teilhard official chaplain to the division, with a rank equivalent to Captain. Teilhard refused, in order to stay close to his men. (op. cit., p. 42 [English version (cited above) p 25-6].)

speeds up and grows, its elements crumple, break, cry out in protest and transformation takes its course . . . (J 100) ’.

It was during the third operation that Teilhard distinguished himself by an act of exceptional courage. Captain Courtiaux, a man he knew well, fell before German machine-gun fire. Lt- Colonel Vernois asked for volunteers to form a patrol to find his body. Because of the risks the patrol would run, Teilhard suggested to the colonel that he should go alone. After some hesitation the colonel gave his consent. The German lines were about 200 metres away. Teilhard set off about 10 o’clock, under cover of darkness, crawling between the shell-holes. He returned before daybreak carrying the captain’s body on his back – quite a feat of strength in itself. Teilhard was already seen in the regiment as one blessed with divine protection; after this he became a hero. On 17th September he was mentioned in Dispatches as ‘an example of bravery, self-sacrifice, and cool courage. From 15th to 19th August he led teams of stretcher-bearers over terrain ravaged by artillery and hammered by machine-gun fire. On 18th August he went to within 20 metres of the enemy lines to look for the body of a fallen officer, which he brought back to our trenches.’⁷

The fourth attack at the Front was part of the great offensive to capture defensive installations on the ridges where the Germans were dug in. Teilhard’s regiment recaptured the village of Douaumont (or what was left of it) while other units of the brigade stormed the famous Fort Douaumont. As his battalion was held in reserve, he did not see the attack, which was in any case ‘invisible in the smoke, the fog, and the mud, where mud-coloured men moved about’. As soon as dawn broke the next day he was in the conquered territory, but confined for the whole day with his commanding officer in a

shell-hole, amid incessant bombardment. How depressing to feel death so close, and be powerless to do anything!

‘There really is the greatest difficulty in consenting to vanish in death! (...) I feel that only Our Lord could make the true sacrifice for us, sincere, profound and real. – In fact, I believe this kind of mental anticipation is worse than the reality, – for all the people I have seen die have done it with such simplicity! (GP 175-177).’ * The battlefield was an apocalyptic vision, ‘a chaos of enormous shell-holes and slimy mire’. In this ‘sea of mud’, one can imagine the difficulty of evacuating the wounded and securing supplies for the men. . . to say nothing of the shells which were falling constantly. They lived, or more accurately survived, in a half-conscious state. Later, behind the lines, they felt as though they were emerging from a dream. It was an experience nobody could forget.

In September 1918 he wrote, ‘Unless you have felt the shadow of death pass over you, you cannot comprehend how much loneliness, danger and terror there is in the march towards the Future, as it goes on and on (...) Those who have never narrowly escaped death have never fully seen what lies before them The others, those who have felt the terrible dread which made them raise their heads and look Time in the face, have often been seized by fear, even in the midst of a path through life until then secure from the abyss, and in their anxiety could only feel themselves being dragged down.’⁸ He noted with sadness the death of a young priest, Père Blanc. Once again, he was the only priest in his regiment.

The fifth and last operation in the Verdun sector seems to have been less testing for him in spite of the risks it involved. Teilhard’s brigade was charged with taking Louvemont and occupying its neighbourhood, which it successfully accomplished. As at Douaumont, he noted,

⁷ Text quoted in Louis Barjon, *Le Combat de Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard de Chardin’s War)*, Les presses de l’Universitaire Laval, 1971, p. 63. I have also used the account of events reported by Lt Jacquemot, quoted by Cuénot, op.cit., p. 41 [*English version (cited above) p.24-25*].

* *Translator’s Note: The inverted commas to close the quotation beginning ‘There really is the greatest difficulty. . .’ are absent; I am assuming that the quotation ends here, but have not had access to the original.*

⁸ *La foi qui opère (Faith in action)*, Œuvres(Works), vol XII, p. 143

there were few casualties during the actual attack, but more through bombardments. He followed the waves of attack with the stretcher-bearers. Crossing a deep gorge beneath a hail of bullets was hazardous. As in previous attacks, he felt that it produced a sort of ‘depersonalisation’: ‘one becomes a “fighting entity”, a depersonalised element of a supra-personal activity’. It was a surprise for him to notice that the Germans surrendered while their concrete bunkers were still undamaged. ‘It is quite clear’, he concluded, ‘that those men could not hold out without their artillery. We, on the other hand, held out in front of Verdun without any back-up beyond heavy shells; but they let themselves be rounded up in their hundreds in shelters which protected them from all kinds of bombardment! (GP 198)’. He spent the first night in one of these shelters, with three wounded Germans. The next day the prisoners were deployed in moving the wounded behind the lines, through the horrendous mud which dragged them down, and the winter cold which froze their feet. As Teilhard the stretcher-bearer had learnt German in his youth he was able to communicate with the prisoners.

In spite of everything, Teilhard continued to record his reflections.

A year earlier, beginning on 16th August 1915, Teilhard had begun to record ‘a kind of diary’ in an exercise-book. Altogether he filled five exercise-books during the war, and wrote fourteen essays before the Armistice⁹. Some have been amazed that he wrote so much in such critical circumstances. But his is not an isolated case. Many books and articles were written during this war by soldiers at the Front. It is easy to forget, too, that units engaged on the front line were withdrawn after attacks, to regroup and prepare for more front-line duties. For example, in the case of Teilhard’s regiment, we have noted five operations during the Verdun period, lasting on average twelve days, that is, about sixty days on the line over about six months – which leaves four months behind the lines. It was during these quieter periods that our stretcher-bearer could do his writing.

Before Verdun, he had only written two essays, one on evil in 1915, which has not been found (see J 20), and *La Vie Cosmique (The Cosmic Life)* (24th April 1916). In this he sets out his vision of the world, and offers it as his last ‘intellectual testament’. In the face of possible death, he wanted to leave behind a testimony of the spiritual message with which he felt he was charged. In fact, the essay contains the essence of the great ideas which he was to develop later (XII, 19-82). During the Verdun period he wrote two new essays, taking advantage of a rest-period behind the lines of nearly two months after the third operation: *La Maîtrise du Monde et la Règne de Dieu (The Mastery of the World and the Kingdom of God)* (20th September 1916) and *Le Christ dans la Matière, trois histoires comme Benson (Christ in the World of Matter: Three stories in the style of Benson)** (14th October 1916) (XII, 83-105 and 107-127). This last text, full of mysticism and poetry, comes to a climax by imagining the death of its author (this is just before the Douaumont operation):

‘And, if I am not to come down again from those hills, I should like my body to stay moulded into the clay of the forests, like living cement, scattered by God among the stones of the new City’ (XII, 127).’

Gérard-Henri Baudry

(Translated, Rachel Moriarty, Chichester, August 2008)

* *Translator’s note: Mgr Robert Hugh Benson (1871-1914) was an English convert to Roman Catholicism, and a noted apologist and novelist*

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⁹ They were published in 1975 by Fayard.