

# THE BRITISH TEILHARD ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

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## EDITORIAL

### THE HUMAN PHENOMENON

For many years now we have heard talk of a new translation of *Le Phénomène humain*. Now talk has become reality with the publication next month by Sussex Academic Press of the translation by Sarah Appleton-Weber under its correct title of *The Human Phenomenon*. Ursula King rightly reminds us that when first published in English 'Teilhard de Chardin's seminal work attracted worldwide attention and immediately became a bestseller, but few realised then how many mistakes the first translation contained. Sarah Appleton-Weber has done us a great service by providing a much more exact, more coherent and more poetic text based on many years of meticulous research.'

Teilhard speaks of many phenomena - christian, cosmic, human, mystical, religious, social, spiritual... In *Le Phénomène humain* he speaks of the human phenomenon. 'The very choice of title,' he says, 'makes this clear. It is a study of nothing but the phenomenon; but also, the whole of the phenomenon' (*The Human Phenomenon*, Sussex Academic Press, 1). The English title *The Human Phenomenon* correctly reflects this emphasis. The title of the original translation 'The Phenomenon of Man' was not only wrong. It was seriously misleading.

We were not alone in believing that a new translation was long overdue. And this is a good moment to remind ourselves of the prophetic words of Teilhard's friend and biographer René d'Ouince: 'Almost certainly his "ideas" and especially his cosmology will, like all cosmologies, become dated. What will remain is that at a particular moment of history, in a particular cultural milieu, a particular believer had a vision of the undoubted grandeur of the world. After a certain period of decline I believe that the influence of Teilhard will take on a new lease of life. He will be read as we read the great classics...' (René d'Ouince SJ, *Un prophète en procès*, Aubier, II, 266-267, our translation).

No one will pretend that Teilhard's French is easy. It is hardly surprising that his early translators often found it difficult to reflect the depth and breadth of a work that is both scientific and mystical and, above all, wholistic. Nothing can detract from the pioneering work of Bernard Wall and others but we should not blind ourselves to the fact that for the last forty years the essential coherence and truth of *Le Phénomène humain* have frequently been obscured for English-speaking scientists and general readers by what scholars see as fundamental errors in the first English translation. Sarah Appleton-Weber is a poet who has spent much of the last twenty years comparing four versions of the French text as well as studying Teilhard's other essays, letters, notebooks and retreat notes. She has worked with scientists, theologians and others. The result is a translation which in the words of Thomas Berry 'will in the future be the basic text for any serious study of Teilhard in the English language.' Teilhard helps us to see purpose and direction in an evolutionary process that is cosmic in scope. This new translation ensures his place as one of the truly great prophets of the third millennium.

*The Human Phenomenon* will be published in hardback in September at £49.95. It will be available to UK-based members of *The British Teilhard Association* at the special price of £37.50 (plus £3.00 post and packing). Please contact to the Secretariat in Beaumaris for further details.

## WHAT TEILHARD MEANS TO US

*Siôn Cowell sees Teilhard meaning different things to different people*

One of the most stimulating rewarding tasks of editing *The Newsletter* over the last few years has been reading through members' contributions telling us what Teilhard means to them. And we would still like to hear from those members who have not yet written in or, indeed, from members who wrote in some time ago and now find that what they then wrote does not necessarily reflect the development in their own understanding of what Teilhard means to them. I know, for example, that what first drew me to Teilhard more than twenty-five years ago is not what keeps me walking and talking with him today.

I was first drawn to Teilhard by what I saw as the strength of his intellectual thought. I have stayed with him because of the depth of his mystical insights. But ‘what Teilhard means to me’ is not necessarily what he means to others. We tried to reflect this in the title of the present series of contributions from our members. We did so in response to Alison Williams who said she could say ‘what Teilhard meant to me’ but not ‘why I am a teilhardian.’ She was right to make the distinction. Teilhard means different things to different people. He appeals equally to christians and non-christians, catholics and non-catholics, believers and non-believers, intellectuals and non-intellectuals... The universality of his appeal was reflected in the attendance at the 1981 UNESCO Symposium in Paris which brought together contributors from north and south, east and west, christians, moslems, hindus, humanists, marxists, atheists and many others.

The very breadth of Teilhard’s vision makes it almost impossible to encapsulate in a few words the essence of Teilhard’s vision. One can say what he means to us individually, but not what he means collectively. I think, incidentally, that we are right to speak here of his ‘vision’ rather than his ‘thought’ since he himself attaches so much importance to ‘seeing’ - something he brings out at the very beginning of *The Human Phenomenon*.

Teilhard tried the impossible when he prefaced his 1934 essay he called *How I Believe* with a short statement of belief which he modified in a footnote in his autobiographical essay *The Heart of Matter* (1950). The original statement was prepared at the request of his close friend Bruno de Solages, rector of the Catholic Institute of Toulouse:

*French*

*English (our translation)*

Je crois que l’univers est une évolution	I believe the universe is an evolution
Je crois que l’évolution va vers l’esprit	I believe evolution is oriented (orients itself) towards spirit
Je crois que l’esprit, dans l’homme, s’achève en personnel	I believe spirit, in the human, is completed (completes itself) in the personal
Je crois que le personnel suprême est le Christ-Universel	I believe the supreme personal is the Universal Christ

Teilhard’s great friend and defender Julian Huxley (whose scientific credentials equal if not exceed those of his great detractor Peter Medawar) later wrote that he was ‘quite unable to follow him in his conclusions about christification, Point Omega, and the like. But this in no way detracts from his essential achievement of linking science and religion across the bridge of evolution’ (Foreword, in George Barbour, *In the Field with Teilhard de Chardin*, Herder and Herder, 9). Huxley is not alone. He speaks for many who are attracted to Teilhard’s vision of a universe in movement towards its ultimate completion in a supra-personal cosmic centre of evolution Teilhard sees making itself known (revelation) and becoming human (incarnation) but who find they cannot identify this cosmic centre with the Cosmic Christ of christian tradition to whom Teilhard is so strongly drawn.

The Association seeks to respond both to those who can ‘go the whole hog’ with Teilhard (as Newman once said of Darwin) and to those who like Huxley can go so far but no farther. But it also seeks to present the whole Teilhard - ‘warts and all’. And this in conformity with our Rules which require us ‘To promote the study of the works, thought and teaching of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ and to develop such study in accordance with his own words: “If I have had a mission to fulfil, it will only be possible to judge whether I have accomplished it by the extent to which others go beyond me.”’

In our last *Newsletter* I expressed the belief that the Association’s management committee has remained faithful to this injunction. No one wrote to disagree. But I accept that there may be some who feel we should put more emphasis on one aspect or another of Teilhard’s vision. Not so long ago, for example, a member wrote asking whether we should not take a stand on what the member in question saw as the trend towards the concentration of power in Brussels. I agree the long-term consequences of economic and political union are matters for serious discussion. I recognise the very idea of closer European integration arouses strong passions - for and against what some see as ‘a Europe of peoples’ and others as ‘a Europe of States.’ I have lived and worked on the continent most of my professional life and have long believed in what the Great Napoléon once called ‘a large European federal system.’

My own approach to Europe is guided by Teilhard’s well-known dictum: ‘The Age of Nations is past. The task before us now, if we do not wish to perish, is to shake off our ancient prejudices and build the Earth...’ I see this being reflected in the construction of a democratic Europe grounded in the principle of subsidiarity which is synonymous with the modern concept of ‘grass-roots decision-making’ and pleas for the respect of cultural and regional diversity in Europe. This principle finds expression in this country in the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament and the establishment of the Welsh National Assembly. These are matters on which views within the Association may differ. They are not issues on which the Association could or indeed should take a stand.

This does not mean we should not engage in dialogue on these and other questions of importance to contemporary society. There is much to be found in Teilhard’s writings which can help to inform the way we decide complex social, moral and political questions. Teilhard cannot decide for us. But he can help us to make up our own minds on current issues such as abortion, euthanasia or homosexuality. I should like to hear from members on these and other questions.

## **THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN TODAY**

*Paper given by Max Payne at the Teilhard Conference, All Saints, 16-18 April 1999*

Since a full survey all the aspects of philosophical significance in Teilhard’s thought is the proper subject of a postgraduate seminar course of at least 10 weeks, the this piece really should be re-titled ‘A brief look at some aspects of Teilhard’s thought.’

Teilhard’s evolutionary vision spans the whole way from biology to cosmology, and on to religion, and the path of personal human development. His particular interpretation of evolutionary biology is the core of his work, and the core of his fame, and evolution inspires his ideas, either directly, or by implication, in the other three departments of human experience and knowledge, as well. At the time he wrote it was accepted everywhere outside the Roman Catholic Church that scientific biology was evolutionary. It was less clear that cosmology and sub-atomic theory were evolutionary as well. The recession of the galaxies was only just being understood. The full theory of the ‘big bang’ and the generation of all the subatomic particles in the universe in the infinitesimal interval afterwards was not worked out until the end of

Teilhard's life, long after he had written his major works, but his prophetic vision had seen the necessity for cosmological evolution from the electron to the total universe and beyond to God.

Very clearly the evolutionary nisus that has driven life upwards from the virus and the bacteria up through the fish to the human<sup>1</sup> has not stopped with us. Physical evolution may have stopped with humankind, but before us lies the path of conscious evolution which we have hardly begun, and that leads us onwards and upwards to the Omega point of God. This is a profoundly exacting and inspiring vision of human destiny.

Although his vision of religion is evolutionary as well, Teilhard does not spell this out anywhere near as clearly as he does the other evolutionary implications of his thought. In fact his interpretation of religion is totally at odds with the static and soi-disant eternal claims of traditional dogmatic theology. During his lifetime, he was forbidden to teach his ideas. It could be that two obscurantist popes saw the implications of Teilhard's thought more clearly than he did himself, for the implications are, in fact, profoundly subversive...

I want to raise four issues about Teilhard's work:

1. Are his ideas scientific?
2. What implications do his ideas have for the problem of consciousness?
3. How does his life and work relate to the problem of christianity in the 21st century?
4. What vision of meaning and moral values does he offer us?

A recent book on philosophical biology failed to mention Teilhard at all, even though a whole chapter was given up to biology and religion. It merely examined the claims of creationism at length. Present day working biologists tend to dismiss the evolutionary theories of Teilhard as unscientific. Strictly speaking they are correct. Teilhard's theories are not 'scientific' in the sense that they yield precise quantitative experiments that can be confirmed or refuted. But then very few theories in biology do that. The 'selfish gene' and 'nature red in tooth and claw' are ways of looking at the biological facts and making sense of them. They are meta-science rather than science. Teilhard's theories are meta-science which make sense not only of biology but of total human experience as well. Other theories do not. A key issue is the idea of progress. Teilhard sees evolution as leading from inanimate matter upwards through a process of complexification to the appearance of consciousness, and then up beyond the individual human to a noosphere that converges to a final Omega point beyond and above humanity. In contrast both Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould, who otherwise disagree in so many ways, are both united in their denunciation of the idea of progress in evolution. On their view it is dubious as to whether life even has any real tendency to complexity. According to them it is illogically anthropocentric to declare that the line of evolution leading to intelligence represents progress. The appearance of intelligence is merely a wildly improbable accident with no cosmic significance...

The nihilist scepticism of the extreme neo-Darwinians contradicts many cosmologists who assume that if there are conditions favourable to life on other planets orbiting other stars, then not only will life arise, but given time some of that life will evolve consciousness, and consciousness will evolve to intelligence. If this is so, what is it in the fundamental nature of the universe which makes the appearance of intelligent consciousness inevitable? If there is an inbuilt skew in the nature of things which ensures that matter will evolve into conscious life, what is the cause of the skew? Ibis is the question which the neo-Darwinians try to avoid. They are ideologically committed to believing that the universe is random and meaningless. But this scientific nihilism is not scientific, it is an act of faith just like its opposite. Intelligent consciousness cannot be regarded as an arbitrary fact. Scientific biology is the product of intelligence. Through human intelligence the material universe has become self-conscious of itself. A line of development that has led to this self-conscious is 'progress' in every sense of the term. Teilhard makes sense of this fundamental logical philosophical point; his detractors do not.

Teilhard sees existence as the product of two energies, radial and tangential. These are the energies of the within and the without. The tangential energy is the material energy described by physics, but the inner radial energy leads through complexification and convergence from sub atomic particles to the Omega Point. This union of two different energies at the heart of existence makes sense of the paradoxes of human consciousness. No other perspective does so. We live in the material world presented to us by our five senses, yet our inner conscious is something totally other than the external world. Split open our skulls and all that can be seen is blood and neurones. The thoughts and emotions that were there are invisible. Electrodes on our heads attached to sophisticated electronic equipment may give meter readings when we see colours or hear music. But the actual seeing of a colour, or the perceiving of a melody is another order of reality. It is not a meter reading. Reductionists ignore the philosophical paradox that all theories that reduce mind to matter are themselves merely theories in the mind. They depend on mental processes of logic for their verification or falsification. In reductionist materialism, consciousness is trying to saw off the branch on which it is sitting. Consciousness is something other than the operations of the brain.

On the other hand consciousness is very much interwoven with physical brain states. To be reminded of this it is only necessary to get drunk, have an anaesthetic, or watch a once loved person decline into senile dementia as their brain hollows out. How are mind and matter to be connected and reconciled? Teilhard's picture of reality as a combination of tangential and radial energy points the way to an answer. The paradoxical unity of opposites is the nature of reality. In sub-atomic theory both wave and particle are necessary to the full description of what is there. That which is, is a combination of mind and matter and requires both dimensions to explain it.

Teilhard's writings relate directly to the dilemma of christianity in the 21st century. Here was a deeply spiritual man who worked out an impressive synthesis of science and religion, and yet he makes no use of the traditional sources of religious teaching and authority. *The Human Phenomenon*<sup>2</sup> does not appeal to scripture or the authority of the Church, but to biology, physics and human reason. He writes suffused with a spiritual vision, but it is the inward vision of a mystic who has been touched by the presence of the divine. It is in no way the work of an apologist trying to relate the Church's doctrines to science. For 2000 years christianity has interpreted God, humankind and Jesus within the narrow categories worked out by St Paul. The forms of thought worked out by a Greek Jewish rabbi no longer apply in the coming 21st century. We require a spiritual vision consistent with the modern scientific world view. Our planet is four and half billion years old, life may be even older than the earth, this universe is at least three times older than the planet, and may even be merely one in a series of multiple

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<sup>1</sup> Title of the new translation of *Le Phénomène humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber published by Sussex Academic Press (September 1999). See Editorial above.

<sup>2</sup> In line with editorial policy inclusive language is used wherever possible. (Ed.)

universes. Teilhard's grand evolutionary vision is consistent with modern knowledge, creation in the Garden of Eden, the Fall, and the traditional doctrine of the Atonement are not.

Yet Teilhard remained a loyal member of the Jesuit order to the day of his death despite being forbidden to publish his ideas by papal authority. Was this sheer mental and moral inertia? Did he lack the courage to make the break? Was he too comfortable within his order, and too secure in its covert protection? It could be that he was wrestling with something more important even than his own conscience. He suggested a new philosophical vision that goes beyond the dogmas of traditional theology. Yet he also remained within the Church. In this way Teilhard affirmed something profoundly important for the 21st century. Quite fundamental teachings of the Christian Church, like the doctrine of the Atonement, have been rendered obsolete by the advance of science. Western civilisation has entered its post-Christian epoch. We need a new spiritual vision to match the vastness of the modern scientific world-view. Yet we would be most unwise to abandon the accumulated wisdom of the Christian tradition in our search for a wider vision. The Church with its doctrines, rituals, and austerities represents a profoundly sophisticated way of spiritual discipline for individuals and for society. Not only is it unwise and psychologically unhealthy for the West to reject its Christian past. That past is a necessary step on the ladder. If we are to rise to greater spiritual insight in the future.

Teilhard was not primarily a moralist, but his teachings have a profound resonance for those who contemplate the black hole that is late 20th century culture. We live in a hedonistic, consumer-driven, sex-mad society. We send rockets to outer space, but down below our urban underclass sinks into a drug-ridden squalor. For all our scientific and technological achievements, or perhaps because of them, we have no vision of the human other than as a bundle of conditioned reflexes, a super computer whose software is inscribed in neurones rather than silicon chips, or just a naked ape standing at the end of an evolutionary process which is fundamentally meaningless. Teilhard points otherwise. Humanity stands but half way in a vast cosmic process. Science and mysticism combine to show that behind us lies the upward drive from matter to life, and from life to consciousness. Before us lies the possibility of progress towards the divinisation of human consciousness. This cosmic vision makes each individual human life profoundly important and it points a way upward through enlightenment and love to the divine.

If Western civilisation pulls itself out of its present cultural slump, in the retrospect of history Teilhard de Chardin will be seen as one of its most significant redemptive prophets.

## **ASSOCIATION DES AMIS DE PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN**

*Maurice Ernst steps down as President*

Members who have been involved with the *European Teilhard de Chardin Centre* over the last ten years will be sorry to hear that Maurice Ernst retired as President of the *Association des Amis de Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* on 1 July. He tells, however, us he will continue to serve as Administrateur-Délégué of the *Fondation Teilhard de Chardin* where he is currently engaged in preparing the Foundation for the challenges he sees emerging in the next millennium. We are grateful for everything he did to promote closer cooperation between the European Associations. We wish him and his successor as President of the Association Raoul Giret well in the future.

## **EUROPEAN TEILHARD DE CHARDIN CENTRE**

*Annual meeting of the Centre at All Saints Pastoral Centre, London Colney, 28-30 July 1999*

The annual meeting of the European Teilhard de Chardin Centre was held at London Colney on 28-30 May 1999 attended by representatives of the British and French Associations under the chairmanship of Siôn Cowell. Sadly, the Belgian, German and Italian Associations were unable to attend this important meeting during which in-depth discussions focussed on the future direction of international cooperation at a European level. Members of the British Association joined French delegates in the Open Forum which was held on 29 May (a full report on the Forum by

Barbara Hogg will appear in the next Newsletter). One of the most exciting ideas to emerge from the discussion was the suggestion by Richard Brüchsel SJ for the creation of a Teilhard Institute offering diploma courses focussing on understanding and building on Teilhard's thought and vision. Much work will be required before this idea can be put into effect. More on this in due course.

## **RECEPTION AT THE REFORM CLUB**

*16 September 1999*

The reception being hosted by the Association on Thursday 16 September at the Reform Club to mark the launch of *The Human Phenomenon* (see Editorial above) is evidence of our commitment to preparing the ground for what we believe will be a distinct renewal of interest in Teilhard's thought and vision in the wake of its publication. Guests will include a wide range of people deeply involved in the current science-religion debate (we might call them "high flyers from the world of science and religion") - the sort of people whose views on Teilhard can help determine whether he can regain in this country that reputation as a thinker of world repute that he already enjoys elsewhere. The standing of this distinguished member of the French Academy of Sciences has long suffered from ill-considered attacks by those who ought to know better. The blame for this must lie at least in part with Peter Medawar and, more recently, Richard Dawkins. Their influence has been such that even wholistically-minded scientists like Paul Davies and Steve Jones have appeared reluctant to put their reputations "on the line" by saying anything favourable about Teilhard. And this is not all. The Catholic media in this country have never been able to generate the enthusiasm for Teilhard's ideas found in other countries - which says something about a mentality that is still deeply suspicious of the mystic who happens to be a scientist!

'In the beginning was power,

intelligent,  
loving,  
energising.

In the beginning was the Word,  
supremely capable of mastering  
and moulding  
whatever might come into being  
in the world of matter.

In the beginning there were not  
coldness and darkness:  
there was fire.'(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Mass on the World*)