

# The idea of Evolution in theology : from Newman to Teilhard

by **Gérard Donnadieu** on 25 August 2011

President of the French Association Teilhard de Chardin  
Professor of fundamental theology at College des Bernardins (Paris)

The concept of evolution, ubiquitous in the scientific fields of the Earth, Life, the history of some human activities such as sciences and techniques is very cautiously regarded, to say the least, when studying religion, by many believers at least. For them, the notion that religion may have evolved and is not that timeless projection of the divine Absolute in humanity is something of a blasphemy. In Christianity, the fundamentalist trends among Protestants and Catholics are an illustration of the refusal to recognize the contingency of the dogmatic, liturgical, devotional forms through which the Christian message has been expressed along centuries.

Still, the idea of the evolution of religious forms in order to maintain the fundamental message better is received in most churches today, even if that has happened after long, fierce and often passionate discussions. In such discussions, Newman principally, and then Teilhard played a major part in their times. This is what the present article intends to show, first by recalling the dominant position in the Catholic church today, a position that is the result of the research and abundant thinking that followed Vatican II.

## 1. Tradition and its metamorphosis

There is a first way of applying the concept of evolution to the religious phenomenon. Attempting this transposition on a macro-historical level, in the way of "the religious evolution of humanity", as Edward Tylor, Georges Frazer or Sigmund Freud wanted to do after Auguste Comte, and as Marcel Gauchet tries to do today. In some of his writings regarding the various religions in the world and the future of Christianity, Teilhard de Chardin has followed that path too.

But there is another approach, more of a micro-sociological one, focused on the following question: what are the "fine" mechanisms that make any given religion show itself more or less able to welcome a change, and then to start an evolution? It is this second approach I intend to explore here, as I see there some basis to answer the challenges of hyper modernity that all religions in the world are confronted with nowadays.

### 1.1. Religion and tradition

Let me first recall the definition of religion proposed by the great sociologist Emile Durkheim<sup>1</sup> at the beginning of the 20th century: "*A religion is a solidarity system of beliefs and practice related to sacred things, i.e. separate, forbidden beliefs and practice uniting all adherents in the same moral community, called a Church*". What is called "sacred" here means a group of symbolic materials (the contents of the beliefs), definitely different from the "profane". And this "sacred" is also basically the social link that unites the believers. One knows that for Durkheim, such social link was crucial and constituted the very essence of

---

<sup>1</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Paris, 1990) p.65

religion in primitive societies. A symbolic corpus and a social function, these were what defined a religion, for Durkheim.

Without breaking from this approach, the contemporary sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger<sup>2</sup> takes quite a distance from it in her will to take into account the characteristics of the ultra-modern society where we now live. In such a society, the symbolic corpus which is the reference of the believer's subjective experience is not sufficient in order to base a religious identity. And in the same way, the great social functions traditionally filled by religion have lost their power to integrate. Thence the new approach of the religious act of faith proposed by Daniele Hervieu-Leger, who gives the following definition of a religion: “*a particular mode of organization and functioning of the act of faith*“, based on the authority of a tradition.<sup>3</sup> Such tradition can be recalled by a founding text supposed to be having an eternal value (the Koran for Islam, the Bible for protestant fundamentalists) and/or by a religious authority (the Vatican in the Catholic Church, a spiritual master in oriental religions).

In order to have a religion, three intermingled notions are necessary:

- the existence of a minimum symbolic content. This is a pre-condition to the act of believing,
- the contents of the belief must show a continuity in time for the believer. It entails an act of memory beyond the immediate character of the emotion,
- the belief demands the reference to a tradition in order to be legitimate. The believer is not content with believing out of habit, of respect for a custom; he recognizes he is as engendered by the lineage to a tradition.

Which is what Danièle Hervieu-Léger<sup>4</sup> sums up in this way: “*The existence of a practice of anamnesis, through which a group of believers signifies for themselves and for others it is inscribed within the continuity of a lineage that entirely justifies its relationship with the present, is what enables one to consider that he is in the presence of a religion, and not of a wisdom, a philosophy of life or morals*”. For Danièle Hervieu-Léger, it is the mechanism of the historical reproduction of an act of faith that makes the past into the present and projects it into the future that constitutes the essence of the religious. In a way, religious believers must be able to say<sup>5</sup> “*as our fathers have believed, we believe too*”.

I deem Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s conception of religion highly interesting in order to analyze the phenomena of evolution. Indeed the model is intrinsically linked to time. First the time of faithfulness to the message and its reproduction, which would appear to exclude all possibilities of change. But one knows that in an evolving environment one must be able to change forms sometimes in order to keep the spirit of a tradition alive. Tradition seldom is a simple repetition of the past; it can be creative too. As Danièle Hervieu-Léger writes:<sup>6</sup> “*What is important before all is for the demonstration of continuity to be able to blend even the innovations and re-interpretations required by the present*”. The operations of selection and shaping that will alter the heritage, without ceasing to show it as a heritage, are also going to regenerate it as a standard of living for the present and for the future.

Therefore one notes that the relation to the founding past, i.e. tradition, can either:

<sup>2</sup> Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire*, (Paris: Cerf, 1993)

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.110

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.180

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.118

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 127

- help open the door to change by recalling the original belief that is to be made actual in the new situation of living,
- or lock the change by recalling the “official” interpretation of the article of faith, that is declared inviolable.

One can well imagine that this debate represents a strong issue for religious actors, particularly for the ones that until then were enjoying some monopole in the manipulation of symbolic objects. But the very existence of such a debate forbids tradition from being the simple carrying on of the past into the present.

### **1.2. At the origin of tradition**

Rather than religion in general, one must then wonder about what lies at the origin of one religion in particular and will constitute the founding kernel of its tradition (in theological terms, one would talk of kerygma). In order to answer this question, I will take up the main ideas in the analysis of Mircea Eliade, who considers<sup>7</sup> that “all religions have a 'center, a central conception that inspires and animates the whole corpus of myths, rituals and beliefs... But the ‘centre’ of a religion is not always obvious. Some researchers, sometimes, do not even guess there is one”.

According to Mircea Eliade, who was considered as one of the great world thinkers of the religious phenomena in his days, basically all religions rest on an experience of transcendence (whatever the interpretation of that transcendence). For him, the experience of transcendence is common in humanity and, on a subjective level, it is felt by numerous human beings. It is realized during “hierophanies”, often described as a poetic form by mystics and characterized by:

- the acute feeling of a relation with some mysterious “Altogether Different”,
- the sudden and generally short character of the experiment,
- the need for an objective aid (an object, a place, a book, a person, an event ...) that plays the part of a go-between in order to ensure the relationship.

For Eliade, religions stem from primary hierophanies lived by “religious geniuses” in humanity, hierophanies that have strongly impressed the people around. They will then get frozen and will go down in the shape of socio-cultural productions (myths, rites, proscriptions, wisdom and theology lessons) that become the basis of a tradition. But the tradition always includes a founding kernel (or kerygma, or basic faith) which is the reminder of the primary hierophany, the story of which will very quickly be written, after writing has been invented, in a text engraved on stone, or on brick, written on parchment, papyrus or paper. Coming as a support for a failing memory or in order to prevent alterations (modifications, deletions, embellishments, etc.), such a text then becomes, at least for a part, a founding scripture, assuming a sacred quality.

As with primary hierophanies, kerygmas (or basic faiths) are of an extraordinary variety, even if two pure types among them, generally prevailing ones, can be singled out (they are typical ideals, as Max Weber calls them):

- *the revelation of a law*: gift of a law or commandments that are imposed upon the members of the group and is to be interpreted as the will of the gods (or *the* God). Such law may be

---

<sup>7</sup> Mircea Eliade, *La nostalgia des origines* (Paris: collection Folio Essai, Gallimard, 1991) pp. 30-31

written in a Book which consequently becomes sacred.

*Examples:* the law given by God to Moses in the Sinai, engraved on stone tables kept in the Ark of the Covenant. In Islam the Koran, the uncreated word of God, revealed to the prophet Muhammad, containing the religious (the five pillars) and social (the main elements of the Islamic law or *charia*) obligations a Muslim must obey.

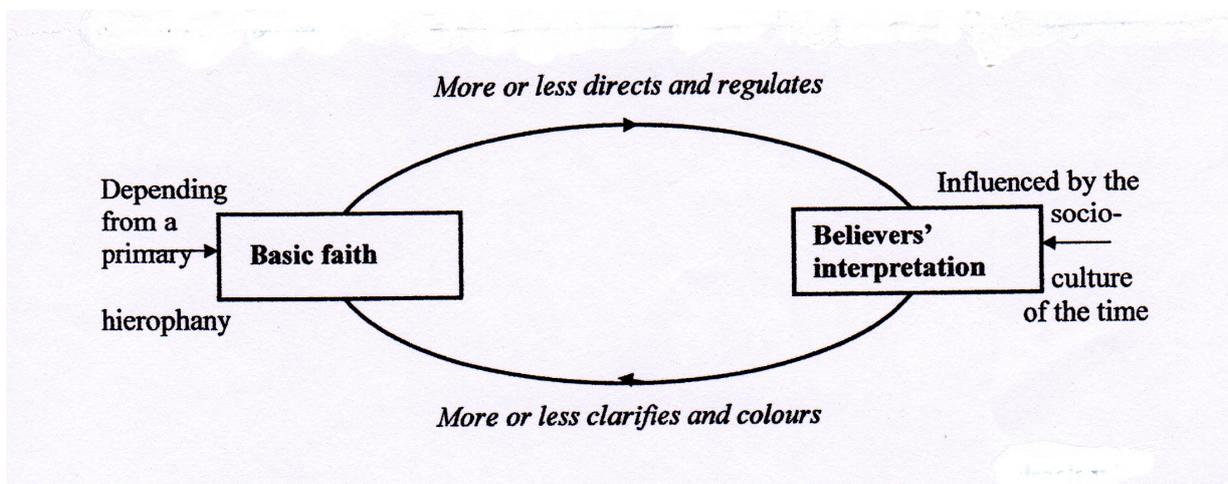
- *an extraordinary encounter:* in archaic religions, it often is the encounter with a natural phenomenon that may be spectacular, extraordinary or terrifying (lightning, tempest, a dangerous animal, etc.) which leaves you unharmed. But such hierophanies can also be met in universal religions in the form of an encounter with an outstanding event (prodigies and miracles).

*Examples:* the burning bush where Moses' call originated, the miraculous crossing of the Sea of the Reeds that is going to become the founding event of Judaism.

Christianity has pushed this type of hierophany to its ultimate consequence. The Christian faith originally rests on a historical event: the encounter with a man from Palestine in the first century, crucified by the Romans and that his disciples pretend they have seen resurrected. For the latter, such "resurrection" even is the primary hierophany! Mircea Eliade will go so far as to write:<sup>8</sup> *"From the point of view of the history of religions, judeo-christianity offers us the supreme hierophany: the transfiguration of the historical event into a hierophany"*.

### 1.3. Opening to evolution and hermeneutical loop

Therefore, in order to understand the evolution of a religion, one has to refer to the nature of its kerygma (or basic faith) and the more or less plasticity of the latter, all things that will enable the considered religion to enter, or not to enter, the reinterpretation process described by Danièle Hervieu-Léger. In order to be received by the faithful, Danièle Hervieu-Léger says, such basic faith needs to be made present permanently through a believers' interpretation which is carried out by the whole community of believers. It is obvious that such interpretation depends on the cultural characteristics of the society where the community of believers lives. Thus is built the hermeneutical loop that can be visualized with the following diagram.



<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Traite d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Payot, 1975) p.223

The pole on the left-hand side, the basic faith, constitutes the real basis, the bedrock without which no religious experience is possible. As primary hierophanies are varied, one will note the extreme diversity of this basic faith of which the founding scripture is the reflection. And one can guess that the status of such sacred text will not be exactly the same according to the primary hierophany. Now, from this status depends the possibility or not of the opening of the text to interpretation, as we shall see!

The pole on the right-hand side, the believing interpretation, regards the system of representation (mythological constructions, theological rationalizations, symbolic projections etc.) that is produced by the faithful individual or community in order to give an account of the basic faith. For a large part, such system of representation depends on the cultural means (being able to abstract, to represent, to symbolize...) of the society where the faithful live.

Between both poles a circular relation gets going: the believer receives the mark of the basic faith at the same time as he colours and clarifies it through the interpretation he gives. All religious traditions that are alive rest on that circular relation. Opening the loop with a better understanding as an excuse is reducing the tradition to one of its poles: either the basic faith may get frozen into the sacredness of an idol, or the interpretation system may easily be transformed into an ideology. It is only the permanence of the systemic link between the two poles that allows tradition to keep its depth, its complexity and its dynamism. Moreover, the hermeneutical loop is ago-antagonistic, which means that according to circumstances and moments, it may:

- play in favour of the conservation of the state of the system (*negative retroaction*). The basic faith sorts the perverted interpretations and the believers' interpretation confirms the basic faith,
- play in favour of the system evolution (*positive retroaction*). The basic faith allows a number of interpretations and a new believers' interpretation opens on the basic faith insights that were not imagined until then.

The second mode of working is of course the one that is met in all phenomena of evolution within a religious tradition. But for it to take place, it is necessary for the basic faith (written out in the founding scripture) to offer a sufficient plasticity to allow re-interpretations. And here we are back to the status of the sacred text!

We have seen that two pure types can be imagined for the basic faith, and therefore for the founding scripture:

- the text is the hierophany itself and gives itself as the revelation. It is typically the case with Islam as a result of the quasi-exclusive role given Koran. In such a conception, the text calls for the unconditional adherence of the reader and the margin left for interpretation is very thin,
- the text is the story of the hierophantic event left by the persons who claim they have been witnesses. Its purpose is to bring the reader to believe this account in order to be able to participate in the witnesses' experience of faith. Typically this is the case with Christianity where the main role is the event that is Jesus Christ. The American Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles<sup>9</sup> (the first theologian to have used the models theory, he was made a cardinal by John-Paul II in 2001): "*The Bible is not the revelation, but the*

---

<sup>9</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1984) p.54

registration of the testimonies of the revelation“. In such a conception,, not only does the scripture allow an interpretation but it demands it.

## **2. Newman or how to go back to the living tradition**

In the process that takes place all along the 19th and 20th centuries in order to rephrase the Christian faith in the socio-cultural categories coming from modernity, Newman and Teilhard represent two strong and privileged moments that are to be set in their historical contexts.

### **2.1. The coming back to the roots of Christianity**

In a time of social and cultural transformations, it is very natural for a religious community to try and reassure its identity by going back to the roots of its tradition. As Daniele Hervieu-Leger (quoted before) observes, such going back to a founding past will result either into the opening to change through the recalling of the original faith, or the locking of the change through the reminder of the intangible character of the letter of the said faith. This critical choice will play on the capacity of the hermeneutical loop to switch from a negative retroaction where conservation gets the better to a positive retroaction where interpretation, influenced by socio-cultural modifications, colours and outlines the basic faith anew. Now, such capacity depends for a large part, as we have shown, on the status attributed to the sacred scripture. Depending on whether the text leaves more or less of a margin for interpretation, the evolution is possible or not!

The basic Christian faith is the event that is Jesus Christ: *the Word became Flesh* (prologue of the Gospel by St John), he has not become Book. This event, very mysterious and paradoxical in itself, calls for an interpretation and the whole effort of Christian theology during the first centuries will be to try and think it within the framework of the Greek philosophy categories. Among the numerous possible interpretations, some will be rejected by the church as being too far away from the common faith. This regulating function has been carried out by means of the dogma, expounding at a given time, for a given culture and in a rational form, the minimum corpus constituting the orthodox interpretation. Contrary to a common idea, dogma is neither absolute nor final; it evolves in the course of history, as Cardinal Newman will demonstrate.

However at certain times, some interpretations of believers happen to become dominant, if not exclusive. The risk is then to make the interpretation sacred to the point of forgetting the basic faith. One can think that this is what happened within the Catholic church at the end of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) within the context of the conflict with Counter-Reformation, to be true. In order to counter the Protestants who made the text of the Bible sacred, the Catholic interpretation of the same text (a scholarly neo-Thomism) was considered as self-sufficient. It went so far as to forbid the reading of the Bible by Catholic faithful!

At this level of deadlock, the only way out is putting the hermeneutical loop back into movement, particularly in its positive retroaction mode. The whole 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century tell the stories of the numerous attempts made by clerics, theologians, philosophers, men of action to launch the hermeneutical loop anew; attempts that were followed by a condemnation from Rome most of the time. Let us recall the successive condemnations of social Catholicism (Lamennais), of Christian democracy (with

Le Sillon), of modern exegesis (with the modernist crisis and the Loisy affair), the catholic scientists forbidden from publishing (Teilhard de Chardin), the theologians forbidden from teaching (de Lubac, Congar, Danielou, Karl Rahner ...). Now, all these positions that were condemned are going to triumph during the Vatican II council (1962-1965) and even the suspected theologians are going to be made into cardinals. How could such a reversal be possible and how could the hermeneutical loop be launched anew?

The reasons for that certainly were many and one can think that the new ideas, after having gone underground for a long time, ended up reappearing taking the opportunity of the generational change, when the church hierarchy was replaced. Still, something appears to have played a leading part. Faced with the impossibility to develop their demonstrations as to the place of interpretation, suspected exegetes and theologians made it a point to broadcast the works of the church Fathers (the religious authors venerated by all Christians who wrote between the second and the sixth centuries). To that purpose, they translated the enormous amount of these writings into modern languages, generally starting from the Greek version. In French, the result was the collection “*Christian roots*” widely broadcast among catholic intellectuals, clerics, priests in Theology Universities, in seminaries and even the Vatican. Now, the believing interpretations given by the church Fathers, that cannot be suspected as far as faith is concerned, are many and partially contradictory. By contrast, such diversity makes the interpretation of the Council of Trent partial, contingent and to say it in a nutshell, relative. It then becomes legitimate to re-examine this interpretation by the light of the new developments that have occurred in culture and society. The hermeneutical loop is then launched anew and the result is the whole doctrinal work realized by Vatican II, this time carried out with the agreement of the doctrinal authority.

## 2.2. Newman and the revival of interpretation<sup>10</sup>

Newman was born in London in 1801 in a bourgeois family member of the Church of England but not very devout. At the age of 15, he lived a spiritual experience that he himself will call his first “conversion”. A brilliant and precocious student, he entered at the early age of 16 the prestigious Oriel College at the University of Oxford. He will stay there 28 years, first as a student, then as a Professor (Teaching and Research), finally as a fellow. But at the same time, he also wanted to be a “minister of Christ” and he conceived his ordination as a religious *consecration* that implied the choice of remaining single (something quite extraordinary in the Church of England at the time).

At Oriel College, it is with enthusiasm that he discovered the church Fathers that scarcely anybody read at the time and he started reading them systematically in the original text (Greek or Latin). Little by little such reading and studying made his own thought an in-depth new one. He discovered what he himself called the “catholic” (i.e. universal) dimension of the church as well as its “apostolic” characteristic, i.e. its roots *in a Tradition* that goes back to the Apostles and how an *uninterrupted continuity* dating from the origin is important. Now the Church of England in his time had lost such “catholic” and “apostolic” conscience; it had become a *national* church first and foremost and it considered it was “protestant” essentially. It is by studying the meaning of catholicity and apostolicity again and again that Newman came to doubt the faithfulness of the Church of England to the

---

<sup>10</sup> Sections 2.2 and 2.3 owe a lot to an unpublished text by Keith Beaumont, a priest from Oratory, Professor at College des Bernardins and President of the French Association of the Friends of Cardinal Newman. Such text was the basis of a lecture given by Keith Beaumont in Brussels on 10 October 2010.

church of the early centuries, the “Church of the Fathers”, that had become the referring model in his opinion. And little by little he came to feel that it was the Roman Catholic church that was the true heir of that model, a church he will eventually join on 9 October 1845, at the age of 44.

A book – *Essay on the development of Christian Doctrine* – written from 1844 to 1845, will play a crucial part in Newman’s conversion to Catholicism. In fact, in order to be able to adhere to the Church of Rome, he must answer the accusation of Protestants according to which Catholics have “corrupted” the faith of the Primitive church by adding beliefs and practices about which no trace can be found in the Bible or in the works of the former Fathers.

The wide historical investigation launched by Newman will convince him that far from being “corruptions”, such “dogmatic developments” correspond to a global phenomenon regarding not only the doctrine but the whole life of the church. He sees them as a phenomenon that is unavoidable, necessary and positive at the same time. He stresses the spontaneous and apparently disorderly character of the process which makes it necessary to have a magisterial authority in charge of sorting what is right from what is wrong, in the long run. He sees this process is governed by some laws that make it possible to discriminate between “true” developments on the one hand and “corruptions” on the other. For him, two principles are at the basis of the whole thing that are to be taken jointly and not separately: *continuity* in change and *fidelity* to origins. The *forms* may change, and they do change; but the same *spiritual Presence* remains, Christ’s, the divine Word made Flesh, still there among us in the church, in sacramental life as well as in the heart of each and every Christian.

The *Essay on the development* constitutes a major contribution to the evolution of Christian theology, Catholic theology particularly. When pondering the historical context, the comparison with *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin, published 14 years later, in 1859, was inevitable. Both works assert the validity of the paradigm of evolution, a framework that, from that moment on, cannot be ignored when carrying out whatever relevant thinking about the world, about man and even God. On the other hand, their difference is drastic regarding the interpretation to be given evolution: materialistic with Darwin who thinks that chance and natural selection are at the basis of the process; spiritual with Newman who thinks that if the *forms* of Christianity change, it is in order to better remain *faithful* to its Spirit revealed right from the beginning. One then understands why, long before becoming pope, theologian Joseph Ratzinger wrote:<sup>11</sup> “Newman has given us the key that has made us able to include historical thinking in theology, and better still he has taught us how to think theology historically, giving us the possibility to recognize the identity of faith through its changes”.

His conversion to Catholicism will be the occasion of a terrible break, personal and professional, for Newman. He lost his post at Oxford, his comfortable income, most of his friends and he found himself ostracized by the English society. He even was rejected by his own family. Now a Catholic, his situation was difficult and often extremely painful. While rejoicing about the triumph of his “conversion” (as people used to say at the time), the Catholic Church didn’t know what was to be done with such a brilliant, original man, enjoying a prophetic way of thinking that often was out of phase with the narrow Catholic thinking of the time. He was entrusted with missions that were short-lived, due to the absence of support of the hierarchy, and at a certain time, he even was reported a heretic in Rome! He

---

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in the Newman dossier, p. 17, *Il est vivant Magazine*, 274, September 2010.

will have to wait until 1879, i.e. 34 years after he entered the Catholic church and 11 years before he died for the new pope Leo XIII, who wished to give a new direction to the church, to end up recognizing the validity of his views by making him a cardinal.

### 2.3 Newman, a forerunner of Vatican II

The influence of Newman on the Council of Vatican II has been brought out often. Philosopher Jean Guittou called him "*the invisible thinker of Vatican II*", and pope Paul VI has seen in him a "*brilliant pioneer*" of the Council. His influence is a certainty. But it was applied indirectly through other great theologians attending the Council, among whom we can name the future French cardinals Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac; the American cardinal John Courtney Murray, the main architect of the *Declaration about religious freedom*; and the young theologian expert with cardinal Frings, the archbishop of Kohl, a certain Joseph Ratzinger.

The future pope Benedict XVI has several times underlined the profound influence of Newman on his own views as well as on all his generation. In a lecture of 1990 the title of which is *Newman belongs to the great masters of the Church*, he declared that the two lessons of Newman about the primacy of conscience and about the development of the doctrine (which we have just presented) constitute "*a significant contribution to the renewal of theology*". This is why, when he became pope, he hurried to declare him blessed, even going to Birmingham for that purpose on 19 November 2010. We feel entitled to consider this is but a step towards being made a saint and over all being acclaimed a *Doctor of the Church*. Introducing Newman to the very select club of the Doctors of the Church (30 men and three women today) appears as a very fond wish of Benedict XVI.

## 3. What Teilhard owes Newman

Cardinal Jean Honoré, in the book he has dedicated to Newman's aphorisms,<sup>12</sup> presents Teilhard as an avid reader of Newman, enjoying the polished and paradoxical formulas that illustrate and condense the thoughts of the great Cardinal. He quotes a letter by Teilhard where he admits he owes Newman "*a mass of ideas, ... so vast, so frank, so realistic, ... they have entered my mind as in a dwelling where they had been living for a long time already*". What are these ideas, and how did Teilhard make them his own?

### 3.1. When Teilhard discovers Newman

It was in the course of the year 1908 that Teilhard arrived at Ore Place near Hastings in order to study theology; he stayed there until 1912. The Jesuit scholasticate that was obliged to go into exile in England following the anti-religious laws of the 3rd Republic in France was run, at the time, by a group of able, dynamic and available professors. The settling in England was favorable to an opening to new ideas and inter-religious dialogue (one did not speak of ecumenism as yet). It is in this dream framework for a high-quality nourishing work that young Teilhard (he was 25 by then) read Bergson (*L'evolution creatrice*) and Newman (*Apologia*, then people think it was the *Essay on the development* and *The Grammar of Assent*).

The effect was spectacular. Not only did he talk about Newman in his letters to his family, but he took advantage of a journey to Malvern where, as a very new priest, he was

---

<sup>12</sup> Jean Honoré, *Les aphorismes de Newman* (Paris: Cerf, 2007)

sent to preach a retreat to exiled French nuns, to stop at Oxford on his way back. In a letter of 8 October 1911, Teilhard describes that stop to his parents:<sup>13</sup> “*This time I made a one day’s stop at Oxford thanks to the generous hospitality of our English Fathers, ... I was particularly attracted by St Mary’s because of the memories of Cranmer and Newman*“. For Teilhard, more prone to go on a geological trip than a touristic, even spiritual one, we may suppose that he was influenced by Newman’s prestige.

In the hell of the First World War, when the great spiritual intuitions that will be developed in his whole work were being wrought out, Teilhard very often referred to Newman in his Journal as well as in his correspondence. For instance, the letter sent on 22 July 1916 to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard-Chambon:<sup>14</sup> “*In order to escape from the boredom of the trenches, I have read The Catholic Newman by Thureau-Dangin. More than ever have I sympathized with the great Cardinal, so bold, so full of faith, so “full of life and of thought” as he himself says, and so contradicted, at the same time ... And I found all the more comforting to find this community of tendencies and appreciations as the one who felt them so much has experienced the hard way, without being shocked, the hard temptation of having been born before the time or season of his views*”.

### 3.2 The evolution paradigm being validated

When Teilhard arrived at Ore Place, the amateur geologist and paleontologist he had become had for a long time subscribed to the idea of evolution, in the domain of natural sciences. He thinks it is a total fantasy to consider the accounts of creation in the Bible as historical, when they have to be read and interpreted in a spiritual and allegorical way, and not literally.<sup>15</sup> This did not prevent him from detecting in the evolution of matter and of life an orientation, what he will later call an orthogenesis, where the Christian will have the possibility to read the creation by God at leisure. He anticipated the essential distinction made by Michel Morange<sup>16</sup> today between:

- *the evolutionary fact*: a group of ever more numerous observations that are put in relation in a logical way and show a genealogy of living beings,
- *the evolutionary process*: the explanation by a principle or a law of this “evolutionary fact”. It is what Darwin was looking for with his principle of “*natural selection*” which will result, by the middle of the 20th century, in the synthetic (or neo-Darwinian) theory of evolution, a theory of a narrowly positivist making which Jacques Monod will refer to in his famous book *Chance and Necessity*,

Teilhard already asserts himself and he will do it more and more as a phenomenologist of the fact of evolution,<sup>17</sup> as he prefers to leave open the discussion about the evolutionary process, so complex in his view that it cannot be reduced to simple material mechanisms.

It is not indifferent to note that nearly a century later, pope John Paul II found himself in a

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Lettres d’Hastings et de Paris, 1908-1914* (Paris, Aubier, 1965) p.262

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Genèse d’une pensée, 1914-1919* (Paris: Grasset) p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> One will note that such position is in conformity with the doctrine of the four meanings of the Scriptures as spelt out by Origen as early as the second century and taken up by the Catholic theology since then.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Morange, a famous biologist, professor at Ecole Normale Supérieure (Paris)

<sup>17</sup> As an illustration, let us quote the striking synthesis of his epistemology that Teilhard writes up 15 months before he dies – *Un sommaire de ma perspective phénoménologique du monde* – given in Volume XI of the Complete Works.

very similar position with Teilhard's when, confronted to an array of scientists coming from the whole world, he declared on 22 October 1996: "*Today new discoveries tend to recognize in the theory of evolution more than a hypothesis. Indeed, it is remarkable that this theory has imposed itself to the minds of researchers, further to a series of discoveries made in various fields of knowledge. The fact that, without being sought or provoked, the results of works led independently converge is by itself a strong argument in favor of that theory*". Of course, the pope talks here about the evolutionary fact, he does not intend to enter the scientific discussion regarding its explanatory mechanisms.

Reading Newman, after Bergson, made Teilhard all the more attached to the paradigm of evolution; he got convinced its value was universal. In his following works, he will not hesitate in using it in the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, religious science, even making it an instrument of his prospective view of mankind. Numerous passages in his war journal (1914-1918) are testimonies to this debt of his to Newman. For instance these pages dated 16 and 17 July 1915 at Avocourt:<sup>18</sup> "*The more I read Newman, the more I feel his mind and mine (very humbly of course!) are parents. A consequence of such parenthood is how excited I get with his example to realize "my" work In this very place, in these trenches at Avocourt where shells may fall on poor passers-by, I feel my soul is swollen with the great hope of things to be realized tomorrow, after the war ... Yes, I wish I could bring back to God all that is good in the modern World, its scientific intuitions, its social appetites, its legitimate criticisms. One the hand, I can see the natural Universe going a sacred march, whereas on the other I can glimpse God penetrating and saturating every natural energy ... The New Earth is being formed, everywhere. (...) Newman, at least, was able to put fundamental "organic" matters above disputes between confessions. He could see that the basic interests of the reign of God lie in the conciliation of the relations Science-Religion, Nature-Super Nature, Progress-Faith, etc. Moreover, he felt objections, ... recommended courageous and bold studies, founded on research and fight, and not on intellectual "confinement". Let me remember too this luminous idea, that the role of the doctrinal Authority may very well be slowing down, sorting out, whereas the expansive and evolutionary power is set among the believers, particularly the pious and intellectual ones (cf Darwinism: the doctrinal Authority's function can be compared to natural selection)*".

### 3.3 The liberty of the Christian

At last, there is another matter where Newman will influence Teilhard. It is in his role of spiritual guide, of a companion of consciences looking for sanctification. In fact during his whole life, even before the beginning of the Oxford Movement, Newman will be such a minister. As a Catholic and founding father of the Oratory of Saint Philip of Neri, he chose him as his patron saint and model, he whose humanity was transfigured by the presence of the Holy Ghost in him, without Philip ever losing his humor. At a time deeply impressed by the Jansenist mentality that considered grace and nature were opposed, Newman reminded one of the traditional teachings of Catholic theology: grace is not opposed to nature but it completes it in its very order, transforming it progressively. But of course it is necessary for man to freely accept God working in himself in this way: our liberty remains full and God calls for our "cooperation". God is even able to make us progress through our mistakes and failures! When he composes *the Divine Milieu* in China at the beginning of the twenties, Teilhard will remember Newman's advice. Many are the places where we can witness this

---

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Journal vol. 1, 26 Aare 1915 – janvier 1919* (Paris: Fayard, 1975) pp. 89-91.

Newman spirit, particularly in the part devoted to “*Making passivities divine*” and also in what he writes regarding the Christian asceticism that takes care not to separate activities and passivities, these “*two hands of God*.” First develop yourself, Christianity says to the Christian. You have to discover, to invent, to undertake, and to build in order to continue the divine Creation. Nothing is too great, too beautiful, too learned in order to give the Universal Christ something to be made divine, that is to say a Creation to be transfigured. But in a further step, the same Christ said: leave that world you have just been caring for and follow me ... follow me beyond death ... for this something to be made divine, I will make divine. Being part of the world, being out of the world: Teilhard’s mystique remarkably knows how to combine both attitudes as “*the two times of the soul breath, the two components of the momentum thanks to which it takes hold of things in order to go beyond them*”.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) p.111