

# **The Ecological Spirituality of Teilhard**

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TEILHARD STUDIES is a monograph series concerned with the future of the human in the light of the writings of Teilhard de Chardin. Two issues each year are planned, to be sent to members of the Teilhard Association.

# TEILHARD STUDIES

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# The Ecological Spirituality of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Mary Evelyn Tucker

*Abstract.* For Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) the sense of the earth and its evolution was a source of inspiration in both his scientific work and his theological reflections. Thus in writing about the ecological spirituality of Teilhard it can be noted that Teilhard was continually meditating on the nature and formation of the universe. This was a primary source of revelation for him. The book of nature is where he encountered the divine. At the same time the sense of the scale of the global ecological crisis that we are now facing was not evident in his lifetime. Thus in articulating Teilhard's ecological spirituality we are observing that there are rich resources here for our own period. Indeed, Teilhard's ideas are both timely and timeless. As we experience the growing extinction of species and the devastation of ecosystems we are in need of a large-scale cosmological framework to understand and interpret our loss. Teilhard's comprehensive vision of the earth and its interconnected life processes evolving over time is a well spring of hope for the critical work ahead to create a sustainable future.

## A Journey into Teilhard's Thought

I first encountered Teilhard in high school and was immediately fascinated by his language, sense of poetry, and fervor. His writings seemed possessed of an inner fire and while I could not absorb all of their complexities, their sheer intensity and scope captured my imagination. College intervened in the politically volatile times of the late sixties leaving Teilhard far behind. The turmoil of those years saw more of an existential angst among my peers than a groping toward spiritual answers. It was not until the decline of the political whirlwind in the mid-seventies that the deeper seeds of youthful discontent and frustration began to emerge. Many turned to forms of Hinduism and Buddhism to assuage the tides of a growing wave of alienation. There, in rituals and meditative disciplines, they sought paths of interiority, which were perceived as absent or as fossilized in our Western religious heritage. For some a passage to traditions such as Buddhism or Hinduism resulted in a rigid adherence to that

*Editor's Note:* An earlier version of this essay appeared in 1985 as *Teilhard Studies* #13. The timeliness of its message persuaded us to offer it in a revised form to our members old and new.

teaching, while for many more it became a vehicle for turning to secularism. Others came to appreciate the effectiveness of certain rituals or meditation previously rejected as archaic or ineffectual which allowed them to reenter and repossess their Western tradition.

My own wanderings followed more of the latter pattern, although not always smoothly. After college I went to Japan to teach for a year and a half. I was fascinated with the different cultural and religious environment in which I found myself. This led to a particular interest in Zen Buddhism, in its meditative practices, and in the arts it had encouraged. My immersion in Zen came at a time when I was also given some of Teilhard's works to read. The gardens and temples of Japan opened me to the larger process of nature's unfolding. By fortunate synchronicity the experience of a cosmic sensibility which Zen provided was analogous to the expansive evolutionary framework Teilhard described so richly.

On reading Teilhard in Japan I was captivated once again by his poetic intensity, but this time the words themselves took on a deeper meaning. It was, however, a very gradual process of understanding that began with Teilhard himself and then his thought. It was Teilhard as a person who was initially so appealing as I read through his letters written during World War I (collected in *The Making of a Mind*). An extraordinary personality emerged in these letters. They record a touching friendship and correspondence between Teilhard and his cousin Marguerite. While serving for four and a half years on the front lines of the French army Teilhard was baptized in the crucible of war. Marguerite later wrote of this experience: "Of the outside events in Pierre Teilhard's life the war was probably the most decisive of all. It had a profound effect on his whole being."

Reading these letters I was struck with Teilhard's extraordinary humaneness and breadth of mind. His concern for those around him while undergoing the shattering effects of war was remarkable. Even more compelling, however, was his conviction that, despite its destructive effects, the war could have some mysterious purpose in the larger evolution of things.

Teilhard's affirmation in the midst of destruction was singularly appealing. Of what did this faith consist that was at once so poetical and so practical? Seeking an answer I turned to examine this question in Teilhard's short essay, *How I Believe*. Here his intense love of the world and of God stand as the dual poles of his own faith. An attraction to both matter and to spirit made up the heart of his belief. At an early age he was drawn to rocks as enduring, solid substances, an interest that found

expression in his work as a paleontologist. His early religious zeal likewise found fulfillment in his vocation as a priest. A dual commitment to the divine and to the world became the seeds of Teilhard's great spiritual vision.

As I continued my reading of Teilhard I became fascinated by the spiritual drive which so animated his life and work. *The Divine Milieu* revealed this dynamic impulse most explicitly with its concern for the "sanctification of human endeavor" and the "humanisation of christian endeavor" (pp. 65, 68). In this book, published almost half a century ago, Teilhard details the process of divinizing one's activities, or actions that contribute to the world, and one's passivities, or the sufferings that humans undergo. He confronts boldly the great problem of a two-fold spirituality, namely love of God and love of the world. He observes how many people become schizophrenic in their religious practices, seeing their activity in the world as only something to be endured until the next life. For Teilhard, the problem of human action is central to the whole spiritual venture as few people withdraw from the world to spend their lives solely in contemplation and prayer. Rather, we labor in the midst of the world and our activities become part of the unfolding of the earth process itself.

Teilhard develops this idea by urging people to be conscious of the larger dimension of their efforts. He says in *The Divine Milieu*, "the human must construct ... a work, an opus, into which something enters from all the elements of the earth." The human "*makes his own soul* throughout all his earthly days; and at the same time he collaborates in another work, in another *opus*, which infinitely transcends ... the perspectives of his individual achievement: the completing of the world" (p. 61). This sense of the importance of human action in the world for a larger good is what Thomas Berry developed in his book, *The Great Work* (1999).

For Teilhard, then, the human and the world are intimately linked, for it is in the earthly milieu of the divine that human beings find their purpose and direction. It is the ability to express this groping toward meaning that so impressed me in the three books I have mentioned. In *The Making of a Mind* it was his vision of a mysterious purpose in life's unfolding despite the awesome tragedy of the war around him. In *How I Believe* it was his powerful attraction to both matter and spirit as a perspective for faith. Finally, in *the Divine Milieu*, it was his concern with the practical and the personal, with the importance of human action in relation to the world at large.

Before developing these points of perspective, purpose, practicality and

personalization as keys to Teilhard's thought, I would like to sketch the context in which Teilhard's spirituality takes on a special significance. In our age of extraordinary scientific and religious exploration, an ecological spirituality is emerging which both expands our ideas of science and deepens our understanding of religion as never before possible in history. It is against this background that Teilhard's thought acquires a special meaning for our own time.

## **The Roots of an Ecological Spirituality**

An ecological spirituality is emerging as we penetrate the earth scientifically and technically and as we examine other cultures spiritually and historically. The search for origins, for the nature of the primeval fireball, for the residual energies of the "big bang," comes at a time in human history when we are exploring ever more vigorously the origins of our spiritual traditions for sources of wisdom in the contemporary world. As we press further into the past for guides to the future, we are translating each other's great religious texts and experimenting with one another's ancient spiritual disciplines. Since the end of the Second World War when we encountered Asian traditions and began to establish departments of Asian studies in North American universities, we have entered into a new phase of the dialogue of civilizations. This encounter has resulted in one of the most comprehensive processes of inter-religious dialogue the world has ever seen. The potential of this encounter has still to be fully realized, perhaps in a common concern for the ecological crisis of the planet. At the moment there are still competing claims of the religious traditions to reassert their uniqueness in the values of justice in Judaism, of salvation in Christianity, of submission in Islam, of insight in Buddhism, of liberation in Hinduism, and of integration in Confucianism.

These values were not the primary concerns of early religious beliefs among indigenous peoples. In modern times many of the world religions have confined themselves to personal salvation and interpersonal ethics which have become the norm for defining the religious life. Indigenous peoples, broadly speaking, do not isolate the human from the divine but rather relate the human to the numinous creative world of nature. This is a perspective that we need to reevaluate in our discussion of religion and its role in the future. If religious concerns are limited to human salvation and interpersonal ethics, where will we find the models for interacting



with the natural world in a mutually sustainable and non-destructive manner? Our obsession with the divine-human relationship causes us to lose sight of the very sphere in which the divine has traditionally been encountered, namely, in and through the natural world itself.

Would we understand death and rebirth symbolism as well without its constant reflection to us in the natural world? Would our sacramental symbols, such as water for baptism, have the same rich implications if we were not first to witness its natural cleansing and purifying powers? With our divorce of the natural from the supernatural begins the burden of secularization, the loss of transcendence. We now lament the death of God, the impact of atheism, and most especially, the absence of the sacred in the modern world.

One may wonder if this yearning for transcendence and mourning of the impact of secularization does not represent on another level the subconscious search for an ecological cosmology that would reintegrate the supernatural and the natural. How to do this, at what cost, and for what ends are questions that may be justly raised. Yet the issue of an ecological spirituality presents itself in many forms today with a resurgent interest in mythology, in ritual, in symbol systems, in native religions, in esoteric traditions, and in feminist spirituality. These may very well be elements of a more widespread groping toward a convergence of the natural and the supernatural spheres. How this can be done is an issue that deserves to be at the forefront of our thinking, theological and otherwise.

We cannot simply turn to native traditions in a romantic back-to-nature quest that tries to incorporate ancient mythologies or symbol systems into a contemporary setting. Yet we must not merely dismiss as so much superstition or pantheism the religious beliefs of much of the human community that searches for an intimate spiritual experience of the natural world. Indeed, we may be well advised to take seriously their experience of the numinous in nature and thus realize a spirituality that embraces the very life process which sustains us.

The reintegration of the natural and supernatural spheres occurs at a time when we are plumbing the earth in a scientific quest to understand the macrophase: the origins of the universe and the dynamics of the evolutionary process. At the same time we are exploring the microphase: the basic life of the cell, the constituent building blocks of molecules, and the inner structure of the atom itself. These studies are uncovering structures and patterns in the natural world which co-exist with random change and mutations. Here we find the great paradox of apparent purpose and pur-

poselessness mutually present in nature and are faced with the reality of order and disorder, of necessity and chance, at the heart of our evolution.

This great paradox becomes even more striking when we see its bifurcation in the scientific and the religious communities. Scientists, for the most part, reject purpose or meaning in the natural world and in evolutionary processes. Similarly, theologians are unwilling to relinquish their scriptural context for interpreting the purpose and direction of the universe. The scientist reads the book of nature and often finds it filled with random, chaotic, disconnected events. At the same time, the theologian reads the book of scripture and finds nature to be a purposeful expression of a divine creator. For the scientist, nature is a primary source of scientific truth; for the theologian, God is the primary source of revealed truth. Teilhard recognized this problem clearly. In *The Human Phenomenon* he writes, "As I said, all scientists are now in agreement about the general fact that there is an evolution. But whether or not this evolution is *directed* is quite another matter. Ask a biologist today if he accepts that life is going *somewhere* in the process of its transformations, and nine times out of ten he will answer no - even vehemently" (p. 91).

This clash between claims of truth remains unresolved in contemporary society. As a result, we continue to conceptualize and pass down in our educational system two ways of knowing that seem to be mutually exclusive — the scientific story of the universe as objective fact devoid of meaning and the religious story of salvation encompassing all questions of meaning and calling forth a response of unswerving faith and belief. The clash of objective fact and interpretive meaning, of randomness and purpose or chance and necessity, perpetuated by the scientific and religious communities is one of the unconscious sources of the secularization of the modern world. There is an acute need for an ecological spirituality that will reunite the religious drive of the human with the earth process itself. The starting point for such a spirituality can be located in the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and so it is to him I turn to suggest the ground from which an ecological spirituality can and will emerge.

### Teilhard's Cosmic Perspective

The seminal ideas of Teilhard's spiritual vision may be discussed under the themes of perspective, purpose, practicality and personalization.

Teilhard was able to take the spiritual and material poles of his faith and see in them the dynamic undercurrent of the whole evolutionary process. One of Teilhard's greatest contributions to modern religious thought is his conception of reality as composed of both spirit and matter. This is what he called the psychic and the physical components, the within and the without of things. To demonstrate that the numinous dimension of life was present from the beginning was Teilhard's aim in the early chapters of *The Human Phenomenon*. This radically alters our perspective of matter itself. No longer is matter seen as dead and inert. Consequently, the divine is no longer to be sought only in a transcendent union with a merciful God. Here is a great change in our religious quest, which has previously been directed toward other-worldly goals realized only after death. In *The Human Phenomenon* Teilhard appeals to ordinary experience to assert the within of all things:

Indisputably, deep within ourselves, through a rent or tear, an "interior" appears at the heart of things. This is enough to establish the existence of this interior in some degree or other everywhere forever in nature. Since the stuff of the universe has an internal face at one point in itself, its structure is necessarily *bifacial*; that is, in every region of time and space, as well, for example, as being granular, *coexistence with its outside, everything has an inside*.

Although disconcerting for our imagination, the picture of the world that logically follows from this is in fact the only one our reason can absorb. Taken at its lowest point, ....matter at its origins is something more than the particulate swarming so marvelously analyzed by modern physics. Beneath this initial mechanical sheet we must conceive the existence of a "biological" sheet, thin in the extreme, but absolutely necessary to explain the state of the cosmos in the times that follow. Inside, consciousness, and *spontaneity* are three expressions of one and the same thing....

*In a coherent perspective of the world, life inevitably presupposes a prelife before it, as far back as the eye can see* (pp. 24-25).

Teilhard redirects our vision to what is close at hand and yet co-extensive with the birth of creation itself, pointing out that the essential spiritual structure of the universe is a key component to all future forms of spirituality. He notes repeatedly that unless there were an interior aspect to matter, consciousness and spontaneity could not emerge in the human.

The human should not be seen as something extrinsic or added on to the evolutionary process, but as a culmination and outgrowth of what went before. To understand that all reality from the tiniest atom to the most intelligent human is composed of a within and a without gives us a very different perspective on our universe.

The effect of this insight for spirituality is to achieve a reciprocity with both the particular and the whole of the natural world in a way scarcely imagined until now. Before, our hope was transcendent union; now that is balanced by a new understanding of an immanence in the depths of matter. That is not, of course, to disallow the considerable differences in the intelligence and intentionality of a human, an animal or a plant. Yet not to see the essential link between all phases of life is to deny the very capacity of life to structure and reproduce itself. The mystery behind the process lies precisely in the interiority of matter that finds one of its greatest expressions in human beings, especially in their spiritual life.

Teilhard believes this new perspective will permit the human to appreciate again the fundamental unity of life. Knowledge of such unity is beginning to dawn on human consciousness through the discoveries of science. A sense of the cosmos is becoming a part of the popular imagination. A cosmic sensibility is actually quite old in the human community but has been lately lost beneath data, verification and empiricism. We scarcely see the forest for our focus on the tree. Yet Teilhard recognizes how ancient this sensibility of the whole really is. In his book on *Human Energy* he writes:

... The cosmic sense must have been born as soon as man found himself facing the forest, the sea and the stars. And since then we find evidence of it in all our experience of the great and unbounded: in art, in poetry, in religion. Through it we react to the world as a whole as with our eyes to the light (p. 82).

He describes the effects of this new perspective on the unity of life as follows:

Whereas for the last two centuries our study of science, history and philosophy has appeared to be a matter of speculation, imagination and hypothesis, we can now see that in fact, in countless subtle ways, the concept of Evolution has been weaving its web around us. We believed that we did not change; but now, like newborn infants whose eyes are opening to the light, we are becoming aware of a world in which neo-Time [evolution]

is endowing the totality of our knowledge and beliefs with a new structure and a new dimension (*Future of Man*, p. 88).

For our age, to have become conscious of evolution means something very different from and much more than having discovered one further fact, however massive and important that fact may be. It means (as happens with a child when he acquires the sense of perspective) that we have come alive to a new dimension. The idea of evolution is not, as sometimes said, a mere hypothesis, but a condition of all experience (*Science and Christ*, p. 193).

This is something that we must fully understand once and for all: for us and for our descendants, there is a complete change of psychological time-relationships and dimensions (*Activation of Energy*, p. 256).

Such a change in the understanding of evolution might be defined as one of perspective and purpose. It is undoubtedly this new evolving context of human life that remains one of the richest sources for dynamizing human energies. We are awakening to the fact that the earth and its inhabitants are much older than we thought. Although the theory of evolution was discovered a little more than a century ago, its implications are still being absorbed by the human mind. As we gradually begin to connect ourselves both scientifically and poetically to this vast evolutionary process, we are tapping unexplored resources in the human psyche and spirit for redirecting our sense of perspective and purpose. It is Teilhard who has given us some of the first metaphors to describe our role as the consciousness of the earth itself.

In terms of perspective, then, Teilhard offers a vision of the unity of life that resituates the human in the whole cosmic order. It provides a means of reciprocity and reverence with the natural world, which our previous scientific view of matter did not take into consideration. Matter was dead, inert and radically different from the human. Our capacity for communication with nature is greatly enlarged and revitalized when we recognize its essential connectedness with ourselves. Surely this has important implications for our understandings of spiritual purpose.

## The Issue of Human Purpose

Purpose may be the greatest problem facing the contemporary human community. We have already witnessed considerable inroads into the tele-

ological thrust of religion by the existentialist and postmodern critics who wish to bracket out all concepts of shared purpose or values of evolutionary processes. Such critics speak of a sense of purposelessness in the universe mirrored by the apparent lack of direction so deeply imbedded in individuals and in our society at large. At the crux of the problem of purpose is the meaning of human life in an evolving universe. To ask the question "Does evolution have a goal?" becomes a vital question for spirituality, not simply an academic endeavor. In our spiritual quest we are now learning to seek the largest possible frame in which human energies become activated and dynamized.

For Teilhard this rests precisely on the evolution of spirit and matter over time. Teilhard's ability to see the relationship between spirit and matter or mind and nature is the starting point for understanding the larger patterning of things. As the Georgetown University theologian John Haught notes in *Nature and Purpose*, it is precisely the capacity to understand the relationship between mind and nature, which may have such an enormous effect on the sense of human purpose and commitment. He stresses the significance of this unity for the crisis of meaning in the modern world.

It is possible in theory to anticipate, therefore, the enormous implications that a new alliance of nature and mind might have for the contemporary crisis of meaning. Nothing less imposing than the significance of our lives is bound up with the quest for a union of mind and nature established on solid grounds compatible with reason, common sense and science. If we could grasp somehow that our subjectivity is a blossoming forth of nature itself, and not some enigmatic nothingness or separate substance over against nature, we would have at least the context in which to discuss once again the question of nature and purpose (*Nature and Purpose*, p. 14).

The starting point of a link between mind and nature described by Haught is at the heart of the question of spiritual purpose. If matter did not have an inner intentionality or entelechy the larger scheme of things would also lack such direction. Here arises the complex issue of the evolutionary process in terms of random change or underlying purpose, often noted as the problem of chance and necessity. In other words, is evolution simply a series of arbitrary mutations over some four and a half billion years with no explanation or long range goal? Or does the very fact that life has evolved into increasingly complex forms suggest a deeper patterning and purpose?

This debate is currently being carried on in the halls of academia and in public discussions with many subtle variations on the broad positions outlined above. Part of the problem for the Western monotheistic traditions lies in their inability to embrace both sides of the discussion as they try to maintain the traditional perspective that the universe has purpose because God created it and set it in motion. Thus the most heated controversy of creation versus evolution has appeared across the country in classrooms, in churches, and in courtrooms.

Many religions have been unable so far to include both chance and necessity in the newly emerging perspective on evolution. To accept change and mutation at many points in the microphase by no means negates the sense that evolution has a direction in its macrophase. Just as in human life we cannot deny the existence of malformations, disease or death, so in evolution the survival of the fittest has resulted in the adaptation or extinction of many species and forms of life. Nonetheless, when we step back from the particular to the general sweep of evolution we cannot but be impressed with the sense that self-organizing processes are leading to greater complexification.

One may well ask what effect this has on contemporary spirituality. The answer is, quite simply, a very significant one. If spirit and matter are the dynamics of evolution, we have a radically new perspective for situating the whole idea of purpose. No longer can the human be viewed as some existentialists and some scientists have proposed, as a random event in an empty, purposeless universe. Rather we are intrinsically linked to the evolution of spirit and matter in the universe as a whole. In fact, we are at a moment in history when we must take responsibility for guiding this evolutionary process in a sympathetic awareness of its profound connection to ourselves.

For the first time, and on a global scale, we have the capacity to say which species may live, what air or water will remain pure, what land or sea areas may be exploited, and even when human life might be conceived or terminated. The numerous issues confronting us in genetics and medical ethics are only phases of an important process in the increasing responsibility of humans to work for the continuance and survival of life in all its forms. All of these are profoundly intricate questions that bring new challenges to scientists and theologians alike. They especially challenge us to expand our idea of spirituality, to see it as more than an other-worldly goal or as a series of ritual acts which put us in communion with the divine for the sake of personal salvation. Rather it is something that requires our

energies on a scale never imagined before. As Teilhard advises, we can live with the explicit consciousness of being an atom or a citizen of the universe. This sense of perspective and purpose is now so widely drawn as to be a dramatic challenge to all traditional spiritualities.

We are now confronted with the challenge of resituating the world's religions, which embrace some four thousand years of history, into a perspective that reveals the earth to be four and a half billion years old. The imperative is to shift from human historical time to cosmic and geological time. The epochal change is from the divine as simply transcendent to the world to a sense of the divine within the world — from a perspective which saw spirit and matter as always separate to one that sees their destinies intertwined in evolution; from a perspective that saw the Logos as given from without to one which begins to discover an inner ordering Logos at the heart of all matter.

The transition in terms of purpose is from a wish to embrace patterning and directionality while rejecting change and mutation. In other words, it is a movement from a radical separation of good and evil in nature and in the human to that which sees these two forces as the dynamizing drive of evolution itself. There is much in modern depth psychology that has contributed to our awareness here. These two forces should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but rather in a creative tension within the human psyche and spirit. Our spiritual goals are thus reoriented from a quest toward otherworldly perfection and goodness to a quest toward the dynamic evolutionary process close at hand. Our spiritual purpose and perspective, then, is expanded and refocused to embrace both four and a half billion years of earth history and the immediate contemporary challenges to the planet and the evolution of human life.

### **Practicality and Personalization**

I come, then, to my last two points with regard to Teilhard's spiritual vision, namely practicality and personalization. If Teilhard has expanded our sense of spiritual perspective and purpose, what are the consequences for human action and spiritual practice? Teilhard's vision is eminently practical, not simply a misplaced abstraction for spiritual growth. Rather it has consequences for spiritual practice in at least three ways, specifically for prayer, sacrifice and action.

With regard to prayer, Teilhard gives us numerous examples of his devo-



tionalism, the spirit of which may be instructive for our own prayer life. Teilhard's cosmic purview gives us a context in which to pray with and through all the elements in the universe. We can pray with a new organic and ecological sense of reverence. The winds, the stars, the waves and fire become a symphony of praise to the divine — something the Psalmists and St. Francis understood intimately. This grand dimension of life in Christocentric prayer found early expression in the epistles of Paul. In the early modern period of Christianity this cosmological sense of Christ waned and an emphasis on redemption predominated based on a devotional imitation of Christ. We may now reintegrate a focus on the historical Christ of social justice with the Cosmic Christ, the Logos at the heart of the universe.

A sympathetic resonance with nature and an understanding of the Cosmic Christ become sources of enormous riches for prayer, worship, and meditation. To pray with all the elements and with matter itself becomes a way of drawing strength from the enduring powers of nature in the evolutionary process. Finally, to pray in this enlarged context becomes a means of overcoming the awesome forces of alienation and impersonalization that pervade modern culture. We are indeed citizens of the universe and our prayer is the voice of all the elements in this extraordinary creation. Teilhard gives us many examples of such an expanded mode of prayer, one of the most striking of which is his *Hymn of the Universe*. Here he offers his Mass on the World without bread or wine while on a scientific expedition in the Ordos desert of China. Teilhard also recorded his powerful "Hymn to Matter" which demonstrates a new ecological mode of prayer.

I bless you matter and you I acclaim; not as the pontiffs of science or the moralizing preachers depict you, debased, disfigured — a mass of brute forces and base appetites — but as you reveal yourself to me today, *in your totality and your true nature*.

You I acclaim as the inexhaustible potentiality for existence and transformation wherein the predestined substance germinates and grows.

I acclaim you as the universal power which brings together and unites, through which the multitudinous monads are bound together and in which they all converge on the way of the spirit.

I acclaim you as the melodious fountain of water whence spring the souls of men and as the limpid crystal whereof is fashioned the new Jerusalem.

I acclaim you as the divine *milieu*, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay molded and infused with life by the incarnate Word ( pp. 69-70).

In terms of sacrifice, which is one of the most central ideas for spirituality, Teilhard again provides us with a frame that enlarges our understanding of traditional ideas. From the supreme sacrifice of Christ on the cross, Teilhard points to the sacrificial nature of the whole evolutionary process in which the human has a central role. In other words, he sees the backward movement of evolution as its entropy phase and the forward movement as its energy phase. These are the catalysts in the larger dynamic of spirit and matter evolving. Teilhard situates evil or entropy in the cosmic order, not simply in the human due to original sin. He sees natural disasters, mutation, sickness, and tragedies as part of the groping of both nature and the human to fulfill its deepest purposes. Without the struggle of life there would not be the heroic potential of the human to overcome his or her particularity. This drive for communion with the Divine through the Earth lies at the heart of an ecological spirituality.

Such a spirituality should offer us the largest context possible to situate our own yearnings toward meaning. In this way, for Teilhard and for us, sacrifice takes on a powerful cosmic dimension. Through the sacrifice of the human in suffering and of the earth itself in physical changes, evolution unfolds. Teilhard describes its unfolding in terms of the power of human suffering to transform energy into activity:

Human suffering, the sum total of suffering poured out at each moment over the whole earth, is like an immeasurable ocean. But what makes up this immensity? Is it blackness, emptiness, barren wastes? No indeed; it is potential *energy*. Suffering holds hidden within it, in extreme intensity, the ascensional force of the world. The whole point is to set this force free by making it conscious of what it is capable... If all those who suffer in the world were to unite their sufferings so that the pain of the world should become one single grand act of consciousness, of sublimation, of unification, would not this be one of the most exalted forms in which the mysterious work of creation could be manifested to our eyes? (*Hymn of the Universe*, pp. 93-94).

Finally, in terms of human action, Teilhard's spiritual vision again has eminently practical implications. By now it is clear that Teilhard's expansion of our perspective and purpose has enormous potential for dynamizing human energies. His concern to activate a zest for life and a will to participate in evolution was one of the major recurring themes in his writings. Human action assists the evolutionary advance and applies to every field of enterprise — business, science, education, law, agriculture, social services, cultural, and artistic pursuits — all of which are involved in a transforming process much greater than themselves. How to activate human energy and consciousness to this connection was one of Teilhard's greatest concerns for spirituality.

We come now to our final point, that of personalization. Teilhard was intensely concerned that his spiritual vision might be misunderstood as a pantheistic union with the cosmos. He also recognized the growing tendency of the modern world to depersonalize or impersonalize reality. In *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard cites two reasons for this depersonalizing tendency (p. 257). The first is the technique of analysis and objectification that we have inherited from the scientific method. The second is the discovery and exploration of outer space that seems to dwarf the human in relation to the cosmos. Having identified these two factors, Teilhard goes on to acknowledge that it may seem incongruous or inappropriate to associate an Ego with the All of the universe. In other words, we cannot simply anthropomorphize the cosmos, nor can we easily embrace an impersonal cosmos. We are left straddling a heritage of personal deity, while groping towards a larger intuition of a numinous presence in the cosmos.

Here is one of the most critical transitions that our period is facing in terms of spirituality. For centuries many of the world's religions have concentrated on a divine-human relationship expressed in personal devotionism. While this dynamic has been and will continue to be an energizing force in the human community, the scope in which we acknowledge such a relationship must be greatly enlarged. This is precisely what Teilhard has begun to do for us.

We are now at a point of contemplating the role of the human in the vast evolutionary process. Just as the immensity of geological time is revealed to us, so do doubts about the human and our past begin to plague us and we draw back from anthropomorphizing the cosmos. A complacent anthropomorphism no longer seems a satisfactory stance. In reexamining history we are less inclined to exalt the human in light of a continuing

inhumanity to persons and of an assault on the earth. More than ever before, we question our purpose, our function, and indeed our very being. Perhaps terrorism and the nuclear threat are only a shadowy manifestation of the deep doubts that lie buried in human consciousness about our own existence. Doubts about ourselves leads to doubts about the whole cosmos.

In earlier periods the universe was seen as the Great or Cosmic Person. To reassert meaning for the human venture we must first rediscover the personal in the cosmos. Teilhard points toward this when he identifies personalization with centration whence there are, in the heart of matter, various centering elements and attracting forces. These forces are currently being explored in quantum physics as we seek to explain the attraction of particles to one another in patterns that are becoming comprehensible while still retaining elements of indeterminacy and mystery.

For us, then, the act of reawakening both our primordial sense of the cosmos as a whole along with our scientific insight into nature may point toward a new vision of the numinous dimension or patterning within material reality. In this spirit Teilhard articulated the personal quality of the universe as a center which draws all elements to itself. This is what he described as the divine milieu. The following passage may illustrate the power of the center as the sustaining force of all reality:

However vast the divine milieu may be, it is in reality a *centre*. It therefore has the properties of a centre, and above all the absolute and final power to unite (and consequently to complete) all beings within its breast. In the divine milieu all the elements of the universe *touch each other* by that which is most inward and ultimate in them. ...

There we shall one day rediscover the essence and brilliance of all the flowers and lights which we were forced to abandon so as to be faithful to life. The things we despaired of reaching and influencing are all there, all reunited by the most vulnerable, receptive and enriching point in their substance. In this place the least of our desires and efforts is harvested and tended and can at any moment cause the marrow of the universe to vibrate.

Let us establish ourselves in the divine milieu. There we shall find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where the matter is most dense. There we shall discover, with the confluence of all its beauties, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive, the ultra-active point of the universe. And, at the same time, we shall feel the plenitude of our powers of action and adoration

effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves. (*The Divine Milieu*, pp. 92-93).

One aspect of the centering power of nature to draw all elements together is known in the physical order as gravity; its counterpart in the human is love. Both of these become expressions for the attractive forces of centering, individualization, and personalization. Again Teilhard speaks most eloquently in this regard:

Love dies in contact with the impersonal and the anonymous. (*The Human Phenomenon*, p. 192).

Love is by definition the word we use for attractions of a personal nature. Since once the Universe has become a thinking one everything in the last resort moves in and towards personality, it is necessarily love, a kind of love, which forms and will increasingly form, in its pure state, the material of human energy. ... Love is the most universal, the most tremendous and the most mysterious of the cosmic forces. (*Human Energy*, pp. 145-6, 32).

Teilhard's spiritual vision is one that brings us an expanded sense of perspective and a new sense of purpose. Its effect, however, is eminently practical and personalized for it implies nothing less than the dynamizing of human energies with a new hope in the thrust of evolution. At the same time when we are experiencing a crisis of physical energy sources and diminished ecosystems we are also passing through a great change in the activation of human energies. Just as our physical capacity to live on the earth is undergoing a radical transformation due to the ecological crisis, so is our groping for new sources of spiritual energy.

I will conclude with a passage from Teilhard where he writes of the possibilities of the new vision that he offers for an ecological spirituality for our times:

...if each of us can believe that he is working so that the Universe may be raised, in him and through him, to a higher level — then a new spring of energy will well forth in the heart of Earth's workers. ...

Indeed, the idea, the hope of the planetization of life is very much more than a mere matter of biological speculation. It is more of a necessity for our age than the discovery, which we so ardently pursue, of new sources of [physical] energy. It is this idea which can and must bring us the spiritual fire without which all material fires, so laboriously lighted, will presently die

down on the surface of the thinking earth: the fire inspiring us with the joy of action and the zest for life (*The Future of Man*, p. 122).

Here is Teilhard's spiritual testimony, one that challenges us with its optimism, inspires us with its perspective, and renews us with its powerful sense of purpose. His vision may well be a source of inspiration amidst the formidable challenges facing us at present. As the 21st century unfolds we are seeking such grounding to endure the transformations that will be needed to create a sustainable future for the earth.

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## An Invitation

Membership in The American Teilhard Association is open to all who wish to join in our work of shaping a future worthy of the planet Earth, of ourselves and of our children.

A brochure describing our purpose and programs will be sent in response to requests mailed to the Association at Iona Spirituality Institute, Iona College, 715 North Avenue, New Rochelle, NY 10801.

We depend entirely on our membership for support in undertaking this work of “building the earth.” We look forward to increased membership so that our publications may be circulated more widely to those looking for guidance in directing the future course of the human venture.

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All members will receive annually two issues of *Teilhard Studies*; the Association’s newsletter, *Teilhard Perspective*; and notice of the Annual Meeting and the Teilhard Lecture Series.

## An Invitation to Authors

The editors of the *Teilhard Studies* invite and welcome papers that explore, develop or put into practice Teilhard’s vision. A preferred length is twenty-five double-spaced pages. Please send manuscripts to Donald St. John, Department of Religion, Moravian College, Bethlehem, PA 18018.



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## American Teilhard Association

THE AMERICAN TEILHARD ASSOCIATION is dedicated to these objectives:

1. A future worthy of the planet Earth in the full splendor of its evolutionary emergence.
2. A future worthy of the human community as the high expression and fulfillment of the earth's evolutionary process.
3. A future worthy of the generations that will succeed us.

Guided by the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Association seeks to bring an encompassing perspective to this great task of shaping the well-being of the entire earth community at a time when so many crises threaten it. Teilhard's vision of the sequential evolution of the universe from its origin to the human phenomenon, can provide a firm and inspiring basis upon which to proceed. Now for the first time, humanity is converging to a new unity in diversity that needs to be understood and facilitated. To help in this work, the Association, since its foundation in 1967, has sponsored annual conferences, a monthly lecture series, study groups, and a variety of publications.

•

"I bless you matter and you I acclaim;  
not as the pontiffs of science or the moralizing preachers depict you,  
debased, disfigured – a mass of brute forces and base appetites –  
but as you reveal yourself to me today, *in your totality and your true nature...*  
I acclaim you as the divine *milieu*, charged with creative power,  
as the ocean stirred by the Spirit,  
as the clay molded and infused with life by the incarnate Word."

—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe*