

The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin ¹

by Gervase Mathew, O.P.

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La Pensée religieuse du Père Teilhard de Chardin was first published at Paris in 1962. It has been admirably translated by René Hague and forms an authoritative commentary. It is authoritative because Père Lubac had been a close friend of Père Teilhard de Chardin for over thirty years and had discussed his thought with him and because it is by Père Lubac with his clarity and his gift for understanding other viewpoints than his own.

In his first chapter 'The Essential Core', Père Lubac distinguishes between two groups of Père Teilhard's writings 'the first in which the line of thought is still scientific or, one might prefer to say philosophical, is developed from the data of experimental science; the second, more strictly mystical and religious, is often explicitly based on the data of Christian revelation. Central to the first is *The Phenomenon of Man*, to the second *Le Milieu Divin*.' Inevitably Père Lubac places his emphasis on the group that centres on *Le Milieu Divin* and attempts to penetrate 'to the heart of Teilhard's mystical teaching'. In what sense was Père Teilhard a mystic?

Père Lubac's eighth chapter is entitled 'Scientist, Prophet and Mystic'. In it he describes Père Teilhard as a scientist of the first order. This is perhaps a simplification. From the time of his scholasticate and his first unfortunate association with Mr Dawson and the Piltdown Skull, Père Teilhard's primary subject of study was prehistoric archaeology and it was this that finally made his name in China. The closest parallel to his career is that of his friend and contemporary the Abbé Breuil. A pre-historic archaeologist is not necessarily a scientist. But he has to work in a scientific environment and be familiar with scientific language. Père Teilhard was therefore a bilingualist. He wrote in a letter, 'I couldn't help thinking of the abyss that divides the intellectual world I was in and whose language I knew from the theological world of Rome with whose idiom I am also familiar'. It is too often ignored that he was a trained theologian who had been fortunate in his teachers and had Pierre Rousselot as his fellow student. He reacted against current Catholic theology not from ignorance but from familiarity. As he wrote in another letter, 'Professors of Theology would do well to have a spell of what I am doing now. I am beginning to think that there is a certain

¹*The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin* by Henri de Lubac, S. J., translated by René Hague. Collins, 42s. pp. 368.

aspect of the real world as closed to some believers as the world of faith is to unbelievers.'

He was a bilingualist who could have translated into either language but who often preferred to use a third private language of his own creation. Partly perhaps because he was half apprehending truths for which neither science nor theology had yet formed a vocabulary. The conception of a Cosmos was being transformed in his lifetime and was bringing with it novel concepts of organism, of space and of duration. Teilhard wrote in 1942, 'to understand the spiritual events which are so convulsing the age we live in we need to be constantly looking back (I shall repeat this) to their common origin—the discovery of time'. He believed that he was living through a revolution 'much greater than the revolution in astronomy at the time of Galileo'. Yet so much that he apprehended he seems to have grasped intuitively; his own key words are vision and seeing.

This may help to explain his recurrent use of the term mystic. As early as 1918 he wrote in *Mon Univers* that his 'view of the world was initially an experience more of the mystical order'. In 1934 he stated that 'Mysticism was the great science and the great art' and he held that it was the peak and synthesis of all mental activities. He wrote: 'One does not draw near to the Absolute by travelling but by ecstasy.' Mysticism to Père Teilhard has a position as queen of the Sciences rather similar to that accorded to Theology by medieval Scholastics.

Almost certainly inadvertently, there was a great deal that was early medieval in Père Teilhard's recurrent use of the term mystical. In the early Middle Ages the term 'Mystica' was familiar but it was at once wider in its scope and more defined in its connotations than with post-Tridentine Catholicism. A double use was recognized, mystical meaning, mystical knowledge; the meaning that could be learnt by an initiate, the knowledge that was possessed by him alone. Mystic was not yet identified with 'Mystis', the sharer in the sacred mysteries, it was applied more often to the mysteries that he might come to share in. Aquinas wrote in the prologue to his Commentary on the Divine Names '*Mystica id est occulta*'. The Dionysian *Mystica Theologia* was first translated into English as the 'Hid Divinity'. In the medieval use of the word 'Mysticare' it is the object that 'mysticates', not the man. It was in this sense that the world of phenomena 'mysticated' to Père Teilhard.

Yet since the mystic meaning was considered precisely in relation to the mode in which it was made manifest and mystic knowledge was considered precisely in relation to the mode in which it was acquired, it was inevitable that at times the senses fused and natural that the common term should come gradually to be primarily applied to a sudden intuitive union of the knower and the known.

A parallel process may be traced in Teilhard's usage. It is all very far from the controversies of the Abbé Poulain and the Abbé

Saudreau among which he had presumably been bred. But it is curious that when he uses mysticism in its widest sense he comes close to the definition by Dean Inge: 'Mysticism is an attempt to realize in thought and feeling the immanence of the temporal in the eternal and of the eternal in the temporal.' It seems clear that from his boyhood Teilhard had had what he describes as 'vibrating experiences'. It is likely that they were sudden and transient. He never suggested, and there is no reason to suggest, that they were associated with habitual supernatural contemplation.

It is impossible to come to know Père Teilhard without being impressed both by the depth of his spiritual life and by the fact that it was poured into the traditional Ignatian mould. Even as an old man he meditated during his retreats, using the Ignatian Composition of Place; a favourite subject of his meditations was Christ walking on the water. His repeated meditation on his own death seems clearly to be an echo from the Exercises. He had his private Mass and his private Office and a religious vocation which in the best post-Tridentine tradition triumphantly surmounted recurrent calumny and delation. He was the heir to the great Jesuit missionaries, De Nobilis who had lived as a Brahman among Brahmans, Ricci who had lived as a Mandarin among Mandarins, and like them he was dynamized by a Christ-centred apostolate.

But the completeness with which he filled the Ignatian mould brought with it inevitable limitations. A familiarity with earlier Christian traditions of spirituality might have diminished his sense of isolation. A close study of patristic theology might have enabled him to find some precedents for some of the most apparently novel of his speculations. This is possibly true of Augustine's theory of time and of his doctrine of the Mystical Body, certainly true of Gregory of Nyssa's emphasis on the cosmic significance of the Incarnation and Gregory of Nazianzen's vision of the coming of Man as a Bridge-Being. But as Père Lubac writes (p. 186), like many theologians Père Teilhard's 'knowledge of Christian thought throughout the centuries was never more than elementary'.

In an earlier study on Teilhard de Chardin, Canon Raven cited me as his authority for some similarities in thought forms between Teilhard and the Cappadocian school. And it is true that at times *Le Milieu Divin* seems to move on a Cappadocian plane. But I now think that it was precisely the Origenist element in Cappadocian thought with which Teilhard was akin.

Origen wrote in chapter eleven of the second book of the *Periarchon*: 'Christ is everywhere. He permeates the universe. We should no longer think of Him as in that constricted state He accepted for love of us, nor imprisoned in the limits in which a body like ours enclosed Him. He was willing to assume that body during His sojourn among us on earth and was therefore in a fashion a prisoner in that place.' Of course this is not Teilhard's doctrine but it is very Teilhardist.

Origen may yet prove to be in some ways more 'modern' than Teilhard since he was so much less geocentric. But they will always have much in common. Both lived through the first half of a crisis in human perception and, since each of them had the gift of contemporaneity, this led to a sudden widening of their horizons. The realization of new horizons gave them the passion to explore, the zest for novelty and, at times, an exasperating self-assurance in private speculation. When Teilhard writes that Man is still an embryo and that ahead lies a new 'hominization', his teaching is quite different from that of Origen but his approach is fundamentally Origenist.

Yet perhaps precisely because I am so aware of the parallels between Teilhardism and Origenism I would agree with Père Henri de Lubac's sober summary of the significance of Père Teilhard de Chardin (p. 203). 'The least then that we can do is to recognize that he will have done more than any other man of our time to open up a vast field of enquiry for theologians and that they must make it their business to apply themselves to it. It is hardly to be wondered at that we can find some indecision in his writings or things that are awkwardly expressed or some verbal inconsistencies. He raised problems of great importance that urgently needed to be attacked but that he could not by himself solve completely. He opened up some wide avenues of research. He brought out a capital idea, the analysis of which he could not by himself carry further.'

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