

# More Being

The Emergence of Teilhard de Chardin

John F. Haught

**“In order to appreciate *Gaudium et spes*, it is essential to reflect on Teilhard’s path-breaking ideas. Although chronologically preconiliar, the French Jesuit has proved in most respects to be a decidedly postconciliar interpreter of the Christian faith. Nearly half a century after Vatican II, we have yet to catch up to his revolutionary, nuanced, and deeply Christian synthesis of science and faith... Once we realize that the universe is a work in progress, a genuinely Christian hope will orient our existence toward participation in the ongoing work of creation. Our hope for final fulfillment is not a reason for passivity here and now...” [Citation: © 2009 Commonweal Foundation, reprinted with permission. For subscriptions, [www.commonwealmagazine.org](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org)]**

**G***audium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (1965), is revolutionary for many reasons, not least for making the following two statements: “The human race has passed from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic, evolutionary one. In consequence there has arisen a new series of problems... calling for efforts of analysis and synthesis.” And: “A hope related to the end of time does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives.”

It is nearly impossible to read these words and not find in them some of the key ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). Early in the twentieth century, this controversial Jesuit geologist and innovative religious thinker expressed the same sentiments—although more powerfully and emphatically—in numerous unpublished essays and in his major books (both published posthumously), *The Human Phenomenon* (English translation, 1959) and *The Divine Milieu* (English translation, 1960). During his lifetime, the Vatican prevented the priest from publishing most of his reflections on evolution and Christian faith. In 1962, it even issued a *monitum* about his ideas, warning seminary professors and university presidents to “protect the minds, particularly of the youth, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin and his followers.”

However, by 1965 Teilhard’s bold integration of Christian-

ity and modern science had become known and was widely appreciated. *The Human Phenomenon*, for example, was rapidly becoming a bestseller for Harper & Row in the area of religious thought. There can now be little doubt that among the experts who drafted *Gaudium et spes*, some at least had been exposed to Teilhard’s “dangerous” ideas. Karl Rahner had clearly taken Teilhard’s thought into account in his Christology, and Henri de Lubac later remarked that *Gaudium et spes* expressed “precisely what Père Teilhard sought to do.” Robert Faricy, SJ, considers Teilhard’s influence on the document to be “a dominating one.”

Presumably, it was Teilhard’s alleged views on original sin that had alarmed some in the theological community. Adventuring beyond a literal reading of Genesis and the story of Adam and Eve was too much for many to handle (as it still is in much of the Christian world). But the Vatican’s censoring was motivated no less fundamentally by officials and theologians who remained skeptical about evolutionary science in general and the world-affirming religious ideas that Teilhard was building into his evolutionary vision of life. Until the council, most bishops and catechists would have found the two propositions noted above quite unsettling. By 1965, however, a mere decade after Teilhard’s death, the church had come to adopt some of his startling claims as officially its own.

In order to appreciate *Gaudium et spes*, it is essential to reflect on Teilhard’s path-breaking ideas. Although chrono-



**John F. Haught** is a senior fellow in science and religion at Woodstock Theological Center, Georgetown University. His most recent books are *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* and *Christianity and Science*. This article is adapted from a forthcoming book with the tentative title *Reclaiming the Riches of Pre-Vatican II Catholicism*, a collection edited by Michael Daley and Thomas Groome.

YUMA

## Surreptitious

I hear the clock nick  
its divots in time  
removing the earth from me, forcing me to take  
back increments of unused  
moments, seconds.  
Everything not afforded you, you in this room;  
beautiful, tiny,  
as an atom.

—Peter Layton

logically preconciliar, the French Jesuit has proved in most respects to be a decidedly postconciliar interpreter of the Christian faith. Nearly half a century after Vatican II, we have yet to catch up with his revolutionary, nuanced, and deeply Christian synthesis of science and faith. Hence contemporary Catholic thought, in order to understand the theological reflection that lies behind the two passages from *Gaudium et spes* quoted above, would do well to examine Teilhard's prescriptions for the renewal of Christianity in a scientific, post-Darwinian age.

By and large, it has failed to do so. And it does not help that Pope Benedict XVI (along with his former student, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna) has given the impression to many intellectuals that Catholicism is more tentative, and at times even grudging, in its embrace of evolutionary science than it was during the papacy of John Paul II. Nevertheless, Vatican II itself provides a firm theological sanction for undertaking a Teilhardian "analysis and synthesis" of what it means to be Catholic after Darwin and Einstein. Even now, Teilhard's thought remains a vital resource for a constructive theology of nature and human existence, one in keeping with the spirit of both scientific discovery and the council.

According to Vatican II, the relatively recent migration of enlightened human consciousness—from a static to a "dynamic" and "evolutionary" sense of reality—requires that fresh "efforts of analysis and synthesis" be made by Catholics: theologians, the teaching church, and the faithful. Here Teilhard's insights offer singular assistance. To begin with, he noted that our still evolving universe is an *unfinished* creation. This observation is theologically and ethically momentous. It means that the world is still coming into being and that the cosmos remains open to a future of ongoing creation "up ahead." The universe is perishable, of course, but it may still have a rich future. The very fact that it is still being created allows Christians to see not only that something of great importance is happening in the universe,

but also that it has been happening since long before human beings arrived on the scene. Further, the hope that creation may continue into the future has dramatic implications for both Christian ethics and eschatology.

What then is going on in the universe, and why should Catholic thought be concerned about it? Here, in a nutshell, is how Teilhard would respond.

Traditional Catholicism first came to expression at a time when the universe was understood to be essentially static and unchanging. As a result of modern science, however, Catholic thought needs to understand that the *whole* universe, not just terrestrial life and human history, is in the process of becoming. Teilhard was one of the first scientists in the twentieth century to observe that the entire cosmos, and not just the biological and human periods, is a momentous, still-unfolding story. Theology therefore needs to be fully awakened to the fact that the universe is not just a stage for the human drama. Human existence must now be reconnected to the larger narrative of creation, as St. Paul had proposed (Rom 8:18–21) in Christianity's foundational phase.

This Pauline intuition of a universe coming to a head in Christ (Col 1:13–20; Eph 1:9–10), Teilhard believed, must now be reconfigured in accord with our scientific understanding of the world. In 1933 he wrote: "If we assume Christ to be established by his incarnation at this remarkable point of all convergence, he then immediately becomes co-extensive with the vastness of space. There is no longer any danger that his personality or his sovereignty may vanish, submerged in too enormous a universe." Recognizing that for many sincere people the scientific universe had outgrown their images of deity, Teilhard was already arguing in the 1920s and '30s that evolution can give us a God, and a cosmic Christ, truly worthy of our worship. Such a theological reconstruction is what the council encouraged when it pointed to the need for new "efforts of analysis and synthesis" in light of the discovery that the universe is still in the process of becoming. In this project, Teilhard's thought, whatever its limits, still has an important role to play.

Concerning our own planet, Teilhard observed that the cosmic process long ago brought about the geosphere, the material substrate around which the complex web of life, which he called the biosphere, would eventually weave itself. But he saw something further happening beyond the emergence and flourishing of life. Not too long after the appearance of human beings we now find that the earth is gradually weaving onto itself something like a brain, a "thinking layer." Beginning almost imperceptibly, developments in oral tradition, writing, education and art, communication technology, commerce, engineering, global politics, and other cultural developments are now bringing about on earth a "noosphere," a new envelope of "thought." Although Teilhard did not live to see the Internet, his ideas clearly anticipate this and other such developments in planetary complexity. At Vatican II, Catholic thought formally acknowledged that people of faith must recognize their lives as part of the ongoing, adventurous

creation of the universe. The Christian exhortation to faith, hope, and love, as Teilhard noted in essays now available in *The Future of Man* and other collections, is a unifying and essential force for the future thriving of the earth and the universe that enfolds it.

Teilhard also argued, especially in *The Human Phenomenon*, that there is a discernible direction to this cosmic process. Although biological evolution may seem at times to resemble more a drunken stagger than a linear ascent, the net movement of the universe has been in the direction of more and more physical complexity. The process has passed from the relatively simpler preatomic, atomic, and molecular stages to unicellular, multicellular, vertebrate, primate, and human forms of life. Overall, this long cosmic journey has given evidence of a measurable intensification of organized complexity. One can only wonder where this mysterious tendency toward complexification will lead.

Wherever it goes from here, the process will be empty and doomed if it is not animated by love and what Teilhard called “a great hope held in common.” In this respect, he felt, one of the objectives of Catholic theology must be to elevate awareness of how the life of faith, hope, and love can contribute to the ongoing creation of “more being” in God’s universe.

What did Teilhard mean by “more being”? In *How I Believe* as well as in *The Human Phenomenon* and many other writings, he identifies an increase in being with an intensification of consciousness. During the course of the world’s evolution, as matter has become more complex in its organization, consciousness and spirit have intensified in a correspondingly impressive way. As visible matter has become more complex outwardly, the invisible “insiderness” of things has also become more real, centered, conscious, and free. Having now arrived at the level of human consciousness, there is no reason to assume that this movement will now be suspended. In fact, the universe is still being invited to become “more” by organizing itself inwardly and outwardly around an always new and higher center. This center is the very God who in Christ has become fully incarnate in the universe and who is still being clothed in the folds of an emergent creation.

For Teilhard, the incarnation of God in Christ continues to stir up the world. The entire cosmic story, in fact, is being called irreversibly and everlastingly into the embrace of God. This is the ultimate reason why evolution, understood in both a cosmological and biological sense, takes place at all. Evolution means that creation is still happening, that God is still creating the world, not *a retro*, from out of the past, but *ab ante*, from up ahead. All things are still being brought together in the Christ who is coming. As a fervent devotee of St. Paul, Teilhard suggested that what is really going on in cosmic process and biological evolution alike is that the “whole creation” is groaning for the renewal wrought by God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Teilhard sees life’s evolution and humanity’s religious quest

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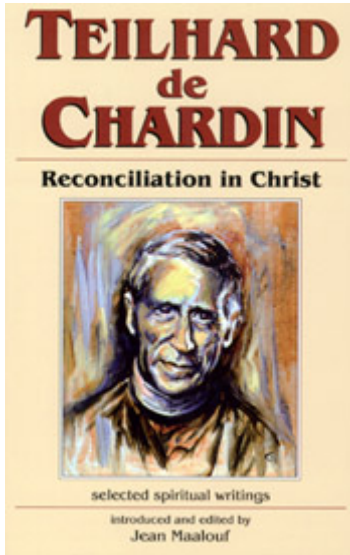
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*Theology Dept., Boston College*  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467. lawrence@bc.edu  
(H) 617.543.9853 (O) 617.552.8095

as successive chapters in the universe’s long journey into the mystery of God. Cosmologically speaking, our religious hope is the blossoming of a persistent, ageless cosmic anticipation, a conscious opening up of the world to the future of creation. Through our hope and our struggles, and especially in our religious quests, the universe that gave us birth reaches out further toward its unifying center and goal.

In view of these considerations, *Gaudium et spes* takes on a rich significance that would not have been anticipated in a previous era. “A hope related to the end of time,” the council declares, “does not diminish the importance of intervening duties but rather undergirds the acquittal of them with fresh incentives.” But what does this mean? A Teilhardian interpretation would recognize here a belated response by the church to the accusation that Christian hope is a kind of escapism that negates the value of action in the world. Marxists and other secular critics have long complained that Christianity fails to motivate people to participate fully in what Teilhard himself called the “building of the earth.” Once we realize that the universe is a work in progress, a genuinely Christian hope will orient our existence toward participation in the ongoing work of creation. Our hope for final fulfillment is not a reason for passivity here and now. On the contrary, it is, in the council’s terms, a “fresh incentive” to contribute our lives and labor to the great work of bringing the whole universe to fulfillment in Christ. ■

# Teilhard at Vespers

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The church seems forever to be embracing those she once held in suspicion. Galileo Galilei, the Italian astronomer, is the most famous among them. But there are others, too, like Thomas Aquinas, Joan of Arc and Ignatius Loyola. The most recent candidate for rehabilitation is the Jesuit paleontologist, evolutionary philosopher and spiritual writer Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Vatican watchers have taken note of Pope Benedict XVI's appeal to Teilhard during an evening prayer service he celebrated July 24 in Aosta, Italy, as a sign of re-appraisal of the priest and his thought. Citing Teilhard's "great vision," Pope Benedict urged that "we consecrate the world, so it may become a living host," a phrase reminiscent of the French Jesuit's eucharistic theology, in which all creation becomes an offering to God.

Teilhard articulated his vision during an expedition to the Ordos Desert of Inner Mongolia in 1923. Lacking the elements of unleavened bread and wine to celebrate Mass, he composed a poetic prayer, "Mass on the World" (published in [Hymn of the Universe](#); Harper, 1961), offering the whole of creation in its evolutionary history as a host to God. Pope Benedict has previously praised the sense of cosmic liturgy in the Eastern church. His appeal to Teilhard adds the distinctive resonances of the Frenchman's vision: a cosmos evolved over time and increasingly known by scientific investigation; a spiritual process that comes to consciousness in humanity, a humanity whose spirituality is found in activity as well as passivity; and a humanity called not only to live in the world but also to transform it.

The pope's prayer in fact puts emphasis on our obligation to "transform the world." In adopting this theme, his thinking seems to have developed along the same trajectory as that of Pope John Paul II. After the Second Vatican Council, both expressed dismay at the optimistic, Teilhardian tone of the "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World," with its focus on the cosmic Christ and its affirmation of the transformative power of the resurrection in history. Then-Bishop Karol Wojtyla complained that Christ the redeemer had been eclipsed by Christ in glory. As Pope John Paul II, he revised his opinion in his encyclical [On Social Concern](#) (1987). Likewise, Pope Benedict has come to write increasingly of the transformation of the earth as a Christian vocation. He writes in [Charity in Truth](#), for example, "Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity contributes to the building of the universal city of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family" (No. 7). The pope appears to acknowledge that the kind of sensibility Teilhard possessed belongs to the full flowering of our human nature. To an unexpected degree, he voices trust in the graced capacity of human beings to transform the world and in so doing make it a more fitting offering to God.

Like Teilhard, Pope Benedict reminds us that the world we transform by our labor, our learning and our ingenuity contributes to Christ's great offering of the world to God. The

pope has pointed to an array of problems awaiting solution and transformation: the protection of human life and the environment, the expansion of the “responsibility to protect” to include provision of food and water for needy populations, and the creation of international structures to regulate speculation in financial markets and govern a global economy. Will American Catholics rise to the occasion, leading our fellow citizens to meet these challenges by taking new initiatives on behalf of the human family? Or will we allow ourselves to fall back, enthralled by the idols of self-aggrandizement and self-amusement that so captivate our culture?

Decline is our civilization’s future if recovery from the global fiscal crisis returns to the consumerist pattern of the late 20th-century America. Consumption has its place in creating a floor of material well-being. But after a point it becomes debilitating to the soul and to society. The transformation of the world certainly involves the expansion of markets—not primarily among the affluent, however, but rather among the poor. Furthermore, human creativity needs to be directed by fuller aspirations than improvements in material welfare alone, because human beings are more and desire more: aesthetically, intellectually, athletically, ecologically, religiously. In whatever field we endeavor to transform the world—science, engineering, communications, business, the arts—we must aim at promoting sustainable, fully human development at rising levels of well-being for all and for everyone. At the end, when this transformation has reached its fullness, as Teilhard wrote, “the presence of Christ, which has been silently accruing in things, will suddenly be revealed—like a flash of light from pole to pole.”

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