Science as a Mystical Quest: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, s.j. (1881–1955), is known above all as a geologist and paleontologist. Beyond a strictly scientific realm, his thought worked toward the aim of reconciling Christian faith with modern conceptions of humanity and the world. To that end, he produced a significant body of work, of which the most important expression was his book *The Phenomenon of Man* (1937), which was published after his death and sparked a considerable reaction. It sketches out a vast fresco of cosmic evolution, from the beginning of the universe to its culmination in the “Omega point,” the gathering of all beings in God.

The grandiose character of this intellectual construct should not cause us to forget that Teilhard was also a mystic.¹ His vision of the world is undergirded by a profound and intense sense of the presence of God in his heart, and true comprehension is impossible if this fact is ignored. Teilhardian spirituality finds its greatest expression in another book, written ten years before *The Phenomenon of Man*, entitled *The Divine Milieu* (1929). It is less a theoretical treatise on spirituality so much as a book emerging from a full-fledged experience that Teilhard seeks to communicate as widely as possible. He wants “to show how Christianity can and must fill human life with God without dehumanizing it.”² He conceives of his writing, “living it and meditating on it like a prayer.”³ It was this work that, in the words of Henri de Lubac, s.j. (1896–1991), permits

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us to understand “the full significance and orientation of the whole of Père Teilhard’s work.”

General Characteristics

The word “mystical” comes frequently from Teilhard’s pen. According to his biographer Claude Cuénot (1911–92), it fundamentally expresses a quest for unity: a search for the One behind the multitude, a search for union with God in Christ. “The whole movement of his thought was a continuous search for unity, first in his own life, then in the lives of others.” His intellectual journey manifests “a compelling need for organic unity and coherence.” Teilhardian spirituality is a search for communion, a journey that will not be completed until the end of history. Note that this communion is not a fusion that would erase all difference. As we shall see, communion is never attained save as the product of a process in which differences reinforce the true unity. He himself defined “mysticism” as “the need, the science and the art of attaining simultaneously, and each through the other, the universal and the spiritual. To become at the same time, and by the same act, one with All, through release from all multiplicity or material gravity.”

His spirituality is fundamentally a spirituality of experience. It emerged from an irreducibly personal experience he attempts to describe and analyze in order to be able to communicate it to those around him. For him, it is a question of defining an interior affect. This entails “the most personal and most intimate aspect of life.” Accordingly, it is perhaps more valuable to turn – beyond his book on spirituality, *Divine Milieu* – to his journal, his notes from retreats, and his correspondence, rather than the more polished texts, which, especially toward the end of his life, tend to systematization.

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