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# The FURROW

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To integrate the  
world views  
of science and  
religion:  
– *today's urgent  
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# To integrate the world views of science and religion: – *today's urgent theological challenge*

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Some of you may have seen Brian Cox's magnificent recent series *Universe*, broadcast on BBC 4. The programme on black holes was mind-bending, as Cox explained how all the workings of space-time cease completely at the event horizon of these "monsters," which swallow up all neighbouring stars and even smaller black holes. Located at the heart of galaxies, they are the super-controlling, sculpting forces in the universe, like weird holes in its fabric. Then near the end of all the overpowering imagery, the camera unexpectedly came to focus on a beautiful, roofless ruin of a Gothic cathedral, set in green fields, as Cox walked through it. It then zoomed in to a vault under the old nave where Cox was sitting, and from where he proceeded to sum up all that had been presented about black holes. No reference was made to the ruined cathedral. The image was simply allowed to speak for itself, which it did, eloquently: you can't hold together in your mind both the awesome power of a super massive black hole and the notion of a Personal Creator of it all. These monsters even swallow up God! The findings of science are completely discrediting faith and its interpretation of reality. Christianity with its worldview is no more than a beautiful ruin from the past.

It was so pointed that, after the programme ended and the symbolic meaning of the ruined church dawned on me, I felt challenged. It also made me feel greatly impatient with the Church, which doesn't seem to be taking important questions seriously, namely:

Where is the place of Christ in the universe story, – its past, present and future?

Where is the place of Christ in the evolution story, its past, present and future?

That is, *does Christ have a place at all?*

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If faith is to remain credible for much longer, these answers must be found and widely proclaimed, and if the Church doesn't address them soon it could indeed follow the fate of the ruined church above, at least in the lives of the younger generations. Many a child will have found a dinosaur among their presents on Christmas morning, but can Jesus and dinosaurs coexist in a child's head? Or in an adult Christian head, for that matter? What world view can accommodate *both* and make sense?

The Church has for too long evaded the challenge to its worldview from science. Just as it was resistant to a sun-centred world view, condemning Copernicus and Galileo, it is quietly uncomfortable with the new cosmology and anthropology. However, as Alfred North Whitehead said in 1925, "Religion will not regain its power until it can face change in the same spirit as does science."

For too long science and faith have inhabited different worlds, that is, different mind-sets. It is *not* enough to claim that there is no theoretical conflict between the two. Theology must show it is capable of living in today's culture of science and of relating its transcendent faith truths to that world. That is to say, theologians as human beings must show they can live passionately in both worlds and can unite them in a new, meaningful and inspiring synthesis. Too few theologians have wrestled with *matter* as scientists do.

Even far back, as a young nineteen-year-old in UCD studying Arts in the late 1960s, I had an uneasy feeling that my beautiful faith was somehow not part of the modern world. Perhaps the late-night debates between my dad and older brother, as to how to reconcile the theory of evolution with the Genesis account of creation, made me feel less secure about faith at an intellectual level.

## TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

And then, providentially, I attended a talk at the French society one evening about someone called Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I listened, spell-bound, and found myself filling up with hope and joy! Here was someone who was tackling the science-faith issue head on. His vision of reality, woven into a single physical-spiritual whole, was amazing and utterly inspiring. I suddenly stopped feeling old-fashioned because of my faith. Teilhard instead was making me feel like a space-age Christian! I went on to read two of his major works, *The Divine Milieu* and *The Human Phenomenon*, which underpinned my faith for the rest of my life. He saved me from a dualistic, debilitating world view.

## TO INTEGRATE THE WORLD VIEWS

His ideas? In the broadest of brush strokes: it's all about the significance of *consciousness*.

The power of the original atoms created in the big bang to associate positively with each other formed the matter of the universe. This positive energy, the ability to relate, to combine, is the basis of everything at every level. At the highest level it may be described as love-energy.

Eventually, the dawn of life brought about ever greater complexity in matter. The growth of consciousness through ever more complex organisms has been the goal of the universe all along.

*Evolution* is the rise of consciousness, and humans are the universe now grown conscious of itself. Evolution is continuing, with a long way to go, and as humans, we are now responsible for where it is going.

*Christ* is organically related to the universe, was always going to incarnate from the very beginning, and is more than a Saviour of souls (although he is that too). He is the present and future path which evolution needs to take.

"Everything that rises, converges." The risen Christ provides the omega point, the necessary point of a converging evolution, in whom all become one through the positive energy of love, divinised, while still retaining individual personhood. It is a unified vision of the whole of reality.

Science and faith reinforce each other. The Triune God's work is *one*.

Teilhard writes:

"For many, evolution still means only transformism [...] They truly are blind who do not see the scope of a movement whose orbit, infinitely transcending that of the natural sciences, has successively overtaken and invaded the surrounding fields of chemistry, physics, sociology, and even mathematics and history of religions. Drawn along together by a single fundamental current, one after the other all the domains of human knowledge have set off toward the study of some kind of *development* .... Evolution is a general condition, which all theories, all hypotheses, all systems must submit to and satisfy from now on in order to be conceivable and true. [...] Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow."<sup>1</sup>

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, French Jesuit priest and scientist, lived from 1881 to 1955, and spent a great deal of his life working as

1 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, (ed. and trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber). New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999, p 152.

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a palaeontologist in China. Living mostly in an expat scientific community, he was keenly aware that Christianity did not appeal to many of his colleagues and friends. Pragmatic by nature, they found it too other-worldly, demotivating of their human passion to discover, understand and shape this existing material world. Teilhard devoted a great deal of his thinking to finding a way to overcome their distaste for Christianity, producing a great body of writing. However, in the Vatican, rigid-minded theologians were resistant to the idea of evolution, and throughout his entire life he was forbidden to publish his writings. Publicly known only after his death, the writings were published by friends. This silencing he bore with saintly patience and humility, free of resentment.

### TODAY: CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENTS

Teilhard has provided a whole scaffolding of thought which he hoped others would develop further. He has shown where the answers to the questions above are to be found. His insights are critically important, but over the fifty plus years since I heard that inspiring talk I have yet to hear the word *evolution* breathed in a church setting. The Genesis accounts of how the world and human beings came to exist are read out periodically as the liturgy requires, with no attempt at commentary, explanation or contextualisation. Maybe a great many people still take them literally? This is disheartening and disappointing on the part of the Church. Answers have and are being worked out, but the Church doesn't seem to get the urgency of finding and developing them for general consumption, despite our emptying churches, devoid of young people. It is presenting "*too small a Christ*", to use Teilhard's expression, a Christ that no longer catches the imagination, no longer occupies centre stage as he once did in a smaller, Greek version of the universe.

However, I was overjoyed recently to discover that there is a Teilhard Project underway in the United States, led by Frank and Mary Frost, to produce a two-hour TV documentary on Teilhard and his thinking, and which will hopefully air next autumn. That, in turn, led me to discover the *Center for Christogenesis*, again in America, founded by Ilia Delio, a Franciscan theologian, dedicated to promoting and developing Teilhard's ideas. They organise monthly zoom talks and discussions on aspects of Teilhard's thinking by eminent speakers, and will shortly begin a bi-annual publication. Delio's many books, built around Teilhard's insights and developing them in the light of today's sciences and spiritualities, are inspiring, and paint an exciting vision of how Christianity might reinvent itself in the next millennium. Speaking on a podcast, Delio explains:

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“Why a Centre for Christogenesis? Because it brings a conscious awareness that Christ is still in formation. And that Christ does not belong to Christians, by the way. As Raimon Panikkar reminds us, there is a Christophany, a Christic dimension to every part of life, every person, which means there’s a divine depth dimension to every living creature, and Christogenesis is awakening to that divine depth dimension of all life, and of our lives, towards the renewal of life on earth.

The Centre for Christogenesis is an endeavour to integrate science and religion, towards an integral wholeness in which we ourselves are spiritually transformed, so that we can participate creatively in the unfolding of a new world via new structures and relationships, grounded in love. Christogenesis is the birthing of Christ in evolution. Evolution is an unfinished process, and Christ is an unfinished person, and therefore that divine love incarnating our lives, and the livingness of things in the universe, is the building up of Christ, or the ‘birthing’ of Christ.

We who are conscious beings in this evolutionary process are called to a conscious birthing of this power of divine love within us, that the world itself may move more fully towards a fullness of life within the embrace of divine love. We have the power to create a new world.

Do we have the desire and the will to do it? I think only if we work together is this vision really possible.”

Delio, and others with this new holistic, relational and unifying approach, renew my conviction that it *is* possible to be a space-age Christian, that is, to feel comfortable as a Christian in a science based culture. They fill me with hope! - a very welcome gift in these grey times for the Church.

My only wish is that a great many more people would discover how Christianity would explode with renewed meaning and relevance if it embraced evolution and today’s vast cosmic vision. In the words of Hopkins,

“...AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!”<sup>2</sup>

We Christians can evolve and learn to give Christ his true, whole, organic place as the ultimate goal of *consciousness*, precious pearl of this amazing, black-holed universe. Teilhard has led the way. Some are following ...

2 G.M. Hopkins *The Windhover. To Christ our Lord.*

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“His purpose He set forth in Christ,  
As a plan for the fullness of time,  
To unite all things in Him,  
Things in heaven and things on earth.”  
(Eph 1:9-10)

**Hope.** Sometimes, hope, the second of those virtues that we call ‘theological’, tends to be overlooked, submerged, hidden as it were between faith and love. Yet St. Paul, who calls love ‘the greatest of the three’, and whose hymn to love is universally admired and often quoted by Christians and non-Christians alike, has no intention of ignoring hope. He gives it his full attention, naming it 35 times in his letters, and underlining its central importance for the journey of faith. By faith, we become friends of God, believing in his promises, sustained by his word. In a sense, faith, when it looks to the future, becomes hope, which is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And faith and hope always lead to love, the culmination and crown of the Christian life, for love never comes to an end. Hope, for Paul, is a clear sign of God’s nearness, it is ‘a fragrance of the divinity’ (2 Corinthians 2. 14). It is not deceptive, not a mirage, not merely a comforting illusion; nor is it a kind of opium that simply deadens the pain of present miseries. Instead, like the word of God, it is alive and active. It gives us the inner strength to face the trials and ordeals of life, and, if we cannot change them, to endure them with peace of soul, because we believe that our lives are in God’s hands. Hope, for Paul, brings peace and joy: ‘Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer’ he says in the letter to the Romans (12. 12). God is the source of our hope, and ‘in hope we were saved’ (8. 24).

– TERESA WHITE, *Hope and the Nearness of God*, (Bloomsbury, 2021,) pp. 80-1.