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# The FURROW

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Hilda Geraghty

The Great  
Soul Brothers? –  
*St. Paul, Apostle  
to the Gentiles &  
Pierre Teilhard  
de Chardin SJ,  
Apostle to the  
'Gentiles' of  
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# Soul Brothers? – *St. Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles & Pierre Teilhard de Chardin SJ, Apostle to the ‘Gentiles’ of Modernity*

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Why would one dare to put a name beside that of St. Paul? – Other than that of St. Peter, of course. But that is what I am daring to do, if only to make people think about what is at stake for the Church in the modern world if it doesn't have a St. Paul figure to do for it what he once did for a fledgling Christianity. The magnitude of the cultural challenge facing Paul in the Roman Empire of the first century is comparable to that facing the Church in the modern world, which is why the comparison springs to mind.

## CULTURAL CHALLENGE

How was Paul to make Christ's message understandable and liveable to people of a seriously different culture from that in which the message originated? – persuading Gentiles, i.e. non-Jews, to accept a faith born within Judaism, whose central figure was the Jewish Jesus? He had to be radical in order to be successful, and Paul was nothing if not radical. “In Christ we are a new creation!” he proclaimed.

With divinely inspired freedom, he bravely stripped away whatever in Judaism was not necessary to that new creation, even and above all *circumcision*, that supreme badge of Jewish identity, and along with it the rituals, feasts, customs and many regulations that had accumulated in Judaism during its long history. This provoked the first crisis in the Church, as to whether circumcision should be abandoned or retained. Under Paul, Christianity became a brand-new faith, developing its thinking as it went along. He

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made it a breath of fresh air in the stale atmosphere of the Roman empire, that was gratefully received by the oppressed. It was *new*. Paul's ability to see things from a Gentile viewpoint led him to strip away the husk, the outdated garments of Judaism. What he left of it was the biblical revelation, on which Christianity rested as on a foundation. It then proceeded to develop itself in its own right.

Driven by passionate zeal for the cause of Christ, Paul had opened his mind way beyond all the prejudices and horizons of his time. However, and this is what leads me to find parallels in the two men of my title, the challenge of Modernity, which has steadily risen over the past three centuries, is arguably as great a cultural challenge for the Church as that faced by the infant Jewish-Christian Church in the first century. In terms of facing up to that challenge, with a passion similar to that of St Paul, both intellectual and spiritual, the figure that comes to mind is that of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), French Jesuit priest and palaeontologist.

## THE DANGER OF EVADING CULTURAL CHALLENGE

Almost each day of his life as a scientist among his colleagues in the field, Teilhard (1881-1955) was acutely aware of the huge danger facing the Church if it could not present Christ in a way that spoke to the science-based culture of Modernity. We can see in sad signs that the Church has evaded this challenge for too long, and that Teilhard was right when he saw how Christianity in the western world was about to fall off a cliff. Again and again the adult children of believing and practising parents are simply walking away from the Church as soon as they can. *We are no longer able to hand on the faith from one generation to the next*, to the heartbreak of many a parent. Celebrations of First Communion and Confirmations have a hollow feel to them, the children never again seen in Church. They may grow up to become 'spiritual but not religious'. Even Christmas in church seems a little fragile, for many a nostalgic once-a-year drop-in, with carols from yesteryear. "Say what we will," writes Teilhard, "*our century is religious - perhaps more so than any other ... only it has not yet found the God whom it can worship.*" i.e. a picture of God that makes sense to them.

## A DAZED CHURCH?

This state of things still leaves the Church somewhat dazed, I think, because for most of its history it was in the vanguard of culture. Everywhere Christianity went it was a vehicle of literacy,

education and progress, and in many places still is. Many great scientists were full-blooded Christians. These included no less than Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian priest, who first discovered in 1929 what later became known as the ‘Big Bang’. The Church was on the cusp of the wave of western civilisation. How was it passed out by Modernity? Teilhard, however, saw the teaching Church of his day as clinging to a static, outmoded cosmology and anthropology, rooted in ancient Greece, and that it had become too narrowly focused on salvation in terms of an after-life, and an individualistic piety, rather than on improving *the world itself in its own right* so as to form the Kingdom of God on earth. In Teilhard’s eyes the Church needed to look outwards to the fields white for harvest, and learn *how to interpret Christ* for today’s culture.

*“If we want to achieve the so much needed synthesis between faith in God and faith in the world, then the best possible thing for us to do is to bring to the fore on a dogmatic basis, in the person of Christ, the cosmic aspect and the cosmic function which make him organically the principle and controlling force, the very soul of evolution.”*<sup>1</sup>

#### NEW CLOTHING FOR CHRIST?

Teilhard strove with all his mind and heart to lead the Church into giving Christ a new set of clothes, that is, new credibility. Because clothing matters, and sends out a message the wearer may or may not be aware of. Older clothing is worn out, a little pathetic, down at heel and reflects poorly on the wearer. This is largely the state of the Church in western society today. Image, how others see us, does matter, especially if you want to be an apostle. Interestingly, we learn from the Passion narrative that Jesus’ robe was “*woven in one piece from neck to hem.*” He looked dignified, even elegant. If the Church is to hold on to its own cradle Catholics, as well as fulfilling its mission – “*Go out to the whole world; proclaim the Good News to all creation,*” – it needs to improve its image. It needs to show it is integrating the landscape of Modernity into its deepest level, theology. Modernity can be a friend to the Church, not a foe, Teilhard is saying. It is hard to live one’s today in yesterday’s mind-set. However, the Church in Teilhard’s words, is presenting ‘*too small a Christ*’, an out of date understanding of Christ, to have an impact on people who are more or less aware of

1 From *Christianisme et Évolution*, 1945, p3, as quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p.133.

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the cosmic dimensions of the universe and the evolution of life on earth. *People have not been taught the place and role of Christ in this story*, - and Teilhard burned to teach them.

## THE COSMIC CHALLENGE

What does the Church say to a well-educated post-Christian, who writes,

“Slowly, like a dimmer switch being turned down, I found my belief in God fading. The reaches of time seemed too icily immense for the life and death of a single human being two thousand years ago possibly to have had the cosmic significance claimed for it by Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

That is Tom Holland, writing in the final chapter of his magnificent book *Dominion*, subtitled *The Making of the Western Mind*, recounting the story of Christianity’s role in western civilisation. Teilhard would point out that when the single human being in question is an incarnation, an historical embodiment of God, no less, it does make a difference. Jesus the Christ, the human being risen out of death, *through his organic extension in the Eucharist*, – “*Take and eat. This is my body*”- reaches out to gradually incorporate and unite more and more of humanity in a new matter-spirit-unity *par excellence*. Potentially that includes all of the human race, drawing it into one great whole in himself through the power of love. This ever-evolving, emerging Christ is the ultra-human, converging over the ages towards an Omega point, centre of the whole. That single historical person is the Human God, the point on which all of history turns, at once both way-to and centre-of Omega, exerting its drawing power on all of reality. The Church didn’t see the danger in failing to work on re-interpreting its teachings in the light of the awesome perspectives revealed by science. Of critical importance was its fear and resistance to the notion of evolution, that seemed to pose such a threat to God as Creator. Yet evolution became the new key, first to interpreting the biological mysteries of life, and later to interpreting the reality of everything generally. Too conditioned by a dualism of spirit and matter, the Church was failing, in Teilhard’s view, to see and love the world in the right way, as the very stuff of the Kingdom. For what other ‘stuff’ is there? “*What is Christian and what is human no longer appear to coincide. Hence the great schism that threatens the Church*,” he writes, – schism in the sense that Christianity was in danger of splitting off

2 Tom Holland, *Dominion :The Making of the Western Mind*, Little, Brown. 2019.

from mainstream culture, to become a dwindling minority faith. Teilhard was not afraid *of* the perspectives of science, but afraid, rather, *for* a Church that was not facing up to them. That is the root of the crisis of faith in the Church and the world today.

*“The resistance to her expansion which the Church meets at the present time is not... because her dogmas are too sublime, and her system of morality too hard. It is because people no longer recognise in us their religious and moral ideal, and so turn away in the hope of finding something better.”*<sup>3</sup>

#### THE TENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

It is the problem of Christian humanism, of how to balance the interests of God and those of human beings. *When correctly interpreted*, Teilhard would say, their interests are one and the same. Because for Christian faith, God is now and forever a human being, and the human being, Christ, is God. *Poorly interpreted, however, people may turn away from ‘God’ to seek what seems humanly better.* Teilhard wrote *The Divine Milieu* as an attempt to teach Christians how to see and love the world in the right way, to find and celebrate God in *the daily material reality and sheer effort* of their lives. In this way their whole living could be motivated and energised, as a joyful act of contributing to the evolution of the Kingdom of Love. In a word, “life to the full,” *here, now*, as well as over the horizon.

*“Humanity was sleeping – it is still sleeping – imprisoned in the narrow joys of its little closed loves. A tremendous spiritual power is slumbering in the depths of our multitude, which will manifest itself only when we have learnt to break down the barriers of our egoisms and, by a fundamental recasting of our outlook, raise ourselves up to the habitual and practical vision of universal realities.*

*Jesus, Saviour of human activity to which you have given meaning, Saviour of human suffering to which you have given living value, be also the Saviour of human unity; compel us to discard our pettinesses, and to venture forth, resting upon you, into the uncharted ocean of charity.”*<sup>4</sup>

3 Teilhard de Chardin, *L’Incroyance Moderne*, p.2, quoted by N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p.118.

4 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, Harper Torchbooks, The Cathedral Library, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1965, p.146.

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### BREADTH OF VISION

To return to comparing the two figures: one of Paul's personal gifts was the sheer breadth and intellectual cast of his mind. Quite independently of the prologue to the fourth Gospel, written later by St. John the Evangelist, though clearly inspired by the same Holy Spirit, Paul exclaimed of Jesus,

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together ... And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*<sup>5</sup>

With divinely inspired daring, Paul placed the totality of the world, of reality as then known, at the feet of Jesus the Christ, – a man whose lifetime was partly contemporary with his own! There is a providence, perhaps, in the fact that Paul had not known Jesus during his earthly life, but only through a profound mystical experience. This it was that gave him the *perspective and the depth of faith* to make such cosmic claims for Jesus the Christ.

It was precisely this passage, and others of similar depth both in Paul and St. John the Evangelist, that gave Teilhard both inspiration and scriptural support for the cosmic dimensions of his Christ. What he did was to work out step by step, throughout his whole life, nothing less than *a theory of everything*, holy grail of scientists. Except that Teilhard's *everything* included both evolving consciousness – '*the within of things*' – and the Human God, incarnated in Jesus the Christ. And he went on to fearlessly interpret the entire cosmic story and the evolutionary story in that light. Christ, the Human God, is nothing less than the *Alpha and Omega* of the whole of reality, from the atoms of the big bang to the complexities of a whole human race of nearly eight billion individuals. For "In him all things hold together." Christ must be clothed in the glorious cosmic robes of *the whole*, as we now know it.

### FAITHFUL TO THE ESSENTIALS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

From a spiritual viewpoint in *The Divine Milieu*, and a scientific view point in *The Human Phenomenon*, and in numerous other works (all forbidden by the Church to be published during his

<sup>5</sup> Col.1:14-20.

lifetime), Teilhard sets out his unified view of the evolution of the cosmos and of life on earth. He suggests how the major doctrines of the Church might be re-interpreted for people today in a whole new light, radiantly meaningful.

Dutch theologian and general editor of the official French text of the works of Teilhard de Chardin, N. M. Wildiers writes:

“His faithfulness to Church teachings is not to be doubted for a moment. His passionate love for Christ and the Church are beyond all question. The renewal he aimed at in theology never affected the kernel of Catholic teaching in matters of faith, but only its outer aspect, the way in which it was presented. He believed that the solution and renewal, so badly needed, were to be found, not in departing from traditional theology, but in exploring it more deeply.”<sup>6</sup>

Teilhard wanted Catholic dogmas, first developed within a static, older, smaller Greek cosmos, to be reset in a world now seen as dynamic. It becomes a question of transposing them.

*“The transposition into cosmogenic dimensions of the traditional view expressed in cosmic terms: creation, spirit, evil, God (and, more specifically, original sin, the cross, the resurrection, the Parousia,<sup>7</sup> charity ...) – all these notions, once they are transposed to a ‘genesis’ dimension, become amazingly clear and coherent.”* He is convinced that *“the most traditional Christianity can be interpreted so as to embrace all that is best in the aspirations of our times.”* To make this evident is the job of the theologian who has understood what the spiritual predicament of our time is... The central problem ... is undoubtedly that of the relation between God and the world ... *“In every branch of sacred science, the time has come to investigate, by study and by prayer, the area in which God and the cosmos come together.”*<sup>8</sup>

#### ALWAYS POINTED TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Teilhard, the palaeontologist, never ceased to be fascinated by the future, and where evolution might lead us. *“Studying the very ancient past has revealed to me how the future is built,”* he wrote. With amazing prescience, he intuited that the evolution

6 N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968, p.138

7 The return of Christ in glory at the end of time.

8 N.M. Wildiers, *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*, Collins Sons & Co. Ltd, London and Harper and Row, New York, 1968, pp 123-4.



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of consciousness would bring about a living pooling of minds, a *noosphere* (from the Greek *nous* for 'mind') around the planet, something which has happened in our times through the internet, that is bringing about a growing unification of humanity. This however is not without its dark side. "*Whatever has yet to be completed is of necessity imperfect, defective, unfinished. Evil is thus structurally part of an evolving world. An evolving world and a perfect world would be mutually contradictory.*"

According to Teilhard, there is no reason for evolution to stop. As conscious beings we are the universe grown conscious of itself. We are now responsible for where evolution is going and the arrow of time points only one way. The future beckons us on, but without the Human God to guide it and lead it, evolution will miss its mark. The ultimate destiny of the cosmos and the human story is to reach a central Omega point of convergence, as a united humanity, which through the power of love, will be divinised through union with God. "*Love is the most powerful and still least known energy in the world,*" he writes. "*Love is the affinity which links and draws together the elements of the world ... Love, in fact, is the agent of universal synthesis.*"

The visions of science and theology blend in Teilhard's totally unified vision, which is why he can come under fire separately from both camps, for different reasons. Others, however, welcome his unified vision of reality as a deliverance from the dualism that would pit matter against spirit, body against soul, earth against heaven. "*There is neither spirit nor matter in the world; the stuff of the universe is spirit-matter.*"

God's work is *one*, and we are called to build up God's Kingdom *through* building up the earth in the right way. It is dangerous to keep the spiritual and material separate or even opposed in our minds, because the material approach, as things stand, is seriously gaining hearts and minds, and the process is perhaps accelerating in developed countries. Meanwhile the Church in the west is withering in apparent old age. More and more people are becoming 'spiritual but not religious.' "*The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.*" Will the future belong to the Church? Only if its voice can be heard using the concepts and language of Modernity.

However, one happy fruit of Teilhard's growing influence after his death is how his vision of *the whole* became the inspiration of the American Thomas Berry, who went on to become the father of the ecological movement. This has powerfully gripped the world today, increasing its sense of unity and responsibility for *the whole*. Because everything is related to everything else, an insight grounded on Teilhard's vision.

## URGENCY OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Giving a new voice to Church teachings expressed in the concepts of Modernity is an urgent task. Like St Paul, Teilhard had the all too rare ability, and the life experience, to see things from the 'Gentile' viewpoint. With his burning missionary heart, he makes an impassioned plea to the Church to look, not beyond the world, but *at it*, and exclaims,

*"Jerusalem, lift up your head. Look at the immense crowds of those who build and those who seek. All over the world, men are toiling- in laboratories, in studios, in deserts, in factories, in the vast social crucible. The ferment that is taking place by their instrumentality in art and science and thought is happening for your sake. Open, then, your arms and your heart, like Christ your Lord, and welcome the waters, the flood and the sap of humanity. Accept it, this sap – for, without its baptism, you will wither, without desire, like a flower out of water; and tend it, since, without your sun, it will disperse itself wildly in sterile shoots."*<sup>9</sup>

"WHO ARE YOU TO TEACH US?"

Paul, of verifiable mystical experience and a conversion from persecutor to advocate, needed no qualification for his moral authority. What about Teilhard?

Though of quite a different order, some see a form of divine accreditation, a seal of approval, in the fact that Teilhard died of a sudden heart attack *on an Easter Sunday*, the 10<sup>th</sup> April 1955, as he had long wished to do. It was the feast nearest his heart, the day of the risen Christ, Omega centre and destiny of the evolving cosmos, to whom he had passionately dedicated his life's work.

Unlike Paul, who freely preached and taught, Teilhard was a gagged prophet right to the end. Frustration was his cross, and his sufferings on that score were as great as his burning desire to teach and rescue the Church he loved, for the sake of the world. Yet he bore this unending trial patiently, humbly, without bitterness, heroically obedient. When some wondered why he would not leave his Jesuit order or the Church, he would smile and quote St. Exupéry, 'In order to have an effect upon the house, you have got to live in it.'<sup>10</sup> Fortunately, he had his full-time career as a

9 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*. Harper Torchbooks p 154, Harper and Row, Publishers New York 1965.

10 Robert Speaight, *Teilhard de Chardin, a Biography*, by, Collins, London, 1967, p. 323.

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palaeontologist working in the field, mostly in China, to occupy him.

The French philosopher, Étienne Gilson (1884-1978) writes:

There is nothing shady about the origins of Père Teilhard de Chardin's celebrity; everything in him was pure. Under the continual flow of scientific or other alluvions he kept intact and miraculously preserved the nugget of pure gold which was the piety and faith of his childhood.<sup>11</sup>

In the fervour of his prayer we see the intensity of his love for Christ, the mark of a saint.

*“Disperse, O Jesus, the clouds with your lightning! Show yourself to us as the Mighty, the radiant, the Risen! Come to us once again as the Pantocrator who filled the solitude of the cupolas in the ancient basilicas! Nothing less than this Parousia is needed to counter-balance and dominate in our hearts the glory of the world that is coming into view. And so that we should triumph over the world with you, come to us clothed in the glory of the world.”<sup>12</sup>*

To conclude, if Paul in the first century gained the title ‘missionary to the Gentiles’, Teilhard in the twentieth and beyond can be seen as a parallel figure, a soul brother, missionary to the sophisticated ‘Gentiles’ of Modernity, and teacher of teachers.

Each of them claimed nothing less than *the whole of reality* for the Human God.

[Quick easy presentation of Teilhard de Chardin's thinking available in three PowerPoints on this link in a Google browser (only): <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QAUyWUA2wHFPJsgcQQKE7tRNV6719rV?usp=sharing>]

11 Seminarium no. 4. *ibid.*, p 326.

12 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*. Harper Torchbooks, Harper and Row, Publishers New York 1965, p.128