

# **The Relevance of Teilhard de Chardin for Modern Man**

**Sr. M. Liam Walsh, O.P.**

*What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!  
how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how  
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!  
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the  
world! the paragon of animals.* —Hamlet

Shakespeare's poetry is beautiful but, "What is a man?" Today man questions his existence as enigmatic. What does it mean to be a man and to be myself? How do we find the courage to be and the fortitude to face death? Why do men search for deeper love, a greater freedom and a fuller life? Why in an age of technological genius in communications does man find himself unable to communicate with the world, fellow men, and most of all with a God seemingly grown silent?

Probably man has been asking the questions "Who am I?" or "What am I?" from the beginning and perhaps the real problem of the answer to be received is in the actual asking of the question. By the use of "who" or "what" the type of answer sought is determined. How shall we look at man?—as subject "Who" or object "What"?

Until recently there were two distinct answers to the question of the nature of man, the humanistically philosophical and the scientifically technical. Man was recognized not just as a being, but a particular kind of being with his own proper nature and unique activities. It was enough to study the activities of man to discover his nature since a thing and its way of acting are proportional to each other. All this is possible because of the unity in being.

Some factors leading to the realization that man does not know man are the decline of religion, the rational ordering of society and the finitude of science.

As a result man has a problem of unification. He sees conflicting elements inside and outside himself. In an age of nuclear power and widespread automation he sees new challenges on the social, religious, international and cosmic fronts. Explorer and Echo have lengthened man's reach out into the universe but he has not reached the end. Anthropology extends his view back but he does not know about the beginning. Existentialist psychology has illuminated to some degree the depth of his subjectivity but he still stands as "stranger" to himself.

There are perhaps two ways that we can seek to answer the question of man. We can treat man as a mystery or as a problem. If we treat man as a mystery then we seek the simplicity of meaning in a complexity of individuals. If we treat man as a problem then we don't seek to understand as much as we seek to control.

Contemporary literature seeks to affirm the freedom of man by portraying the tragedy of our abandonment to this very freedom. All that was meaningful suddenly becomes absurdity and nausea as we multiply the distance between man and other men, between man and himself, between the world and man. On the one hand the novelist seems to be looking at man as a problem not as mystery. Teilhard de Chardin takes the other approach, he seeks man as mystery. He places man back into the universe and looks to the whole for the meaning of the part.

Several contemporary novelists, Camus, Sartre and Kafka, portray the figure of a faceless, nameless hero, who is at once everyman and nobody. These are the extreme cases, it is true, but nothingness has become one of the chief themes in modern art and literature.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the bleak tragedy of existence painted in these novels, Teilhard becomes the prophet of light and hope as he pictures man and his history as the prolongation of the history of the cosmos. Man is conditioned by the structure of the material universe in which he finds himself. The very outcome of the cosmos depends on man, as an individual and as a whole, and how he uses his freedom. Man is not "absurd," not "nausea" but man is at the forefront of nature giving meaning to the entire cosmos. Let us look briefly at these two approaches, the problematic (represented by the novelists) and the mysterious (represented by Teilhard de Chardin).

For Camus, man has goodness and value but he must affirm these in an absurd world by rebelling. We must fight against the absurd without any hope of overcoming it.<sup>2</sup> We are strangers to ourselves and to the world. To be human is to be incomplete because of death and to be human is a wasteful existence because of evil. *The Stranger* expresses this feeling of the absurd. Nothing matters to Meursault and no one really makes a difference. The opening lines set the tone of fragmentation. Incidents with no explanation, no thread of continuity are to set the mood of meaninglessness.

Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday.<sup>3</sup>

For Meursault all is indifference :

It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.<sup>4</sup>

None of the usual rational values of human life mean anything. Family, affection, love, friendship or ambition have no significance for the "stranger." If we must die then what does it matter what we do in life?

Marie came that evening and asked me if I loved her. I replied, much as before, that her question meant nothing or next to nothing—but I supposed I didn't . . . Then she said she wondered if she really loved me or not. I, of course, couldn't enlighten her as to that.<sup>5</sup>

He then asked if a "change of life" as he called it, didn't appeal to me, and I answered that one never changed his way of life; one life was as good as another, and my present one suited me quite well.<sup>6</sup>

I could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of Mother—but really that didn't mean much . . . I explained that my physical condition at any given moment often influenced my feelings. For instance, on the day I attended Mother's funeral, I was fagged out and only half awake. So really, I hardly took stock of what was happening. Anyhow I could assure him of one thing: that I'd rather Mother hadn't died.<sup>7</sup>

Without his having understood life, Meursault goes to a meaningless death. In passivity and indifference he is condemned to death not

really for the murder of an Arab so much as for not having wept at his mother's funeral.

The book ends on the note of the absurdity of man's world of justice,

For all to be accomplished, for me to feel less lonely, all that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of execration.<sup>8</sup>

Sartre portrays man as born into a world with no meaning. As man realizes the absurdity of his situation he feels nausea. Man can overcome some absurdity by choosing to be himself. He desires to be God but this is not possible. There is no structure of essences or values given prior to man's own existence. Actual existence has meaning only as the liberty to say "No" and by saying "No" to create a world. Man can only gain from life if he creates himself authentically.

In *Nausea* man encounters his own existence in disgust—nausea is existence itself and existence is contingent.

But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, a probability which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, consequently, the perfect free gift. All is free . . . here is Nausea.<sup>9</sup>

This moment was extraordinary . . . I understood the Nausea, I possessed it . . . The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessary. To exist is simply to be there; those who exist let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce anything from them.<sup>10</sup>

Roquentin is a rootless intellectual without allegiances to family, friends or nation. He is free and knows himself and is aware of the nothingness inside himself. He knows himself to be contingent, expendable and unwanted. The revelation of the ultimate nature of being is the climax of the novel. This knowledge comes through touch and color. Touch and the sight of an uncertain color bring on "nausea." Roquentin seems to think with things and not about them. All the objects surrounding him are made of the same matter.

Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance.<sup>11</sup>

But what of the individual and his experiences of interpersonal relationships? For Sartre these relationships present a threat since they only point out one's contingency and curtail liberty. To love another

is to make a grave mistake since love interferes with the other's freedom. The individuals cannot become themselves. Sartre shows the threat of the fellow man in the play *No Exit*. The play describes a situation in which three persons are thrust upon one another with no seemingly possible way of escaping one another. Each of the characters needs one of the others but evinces no giving of self. At the end of the play Garcin declares:

. . . So this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the "burning marl". Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is—other people!<sup>12</sup>

In the novels of Franz Kafka the hero is an initial. A Cipher with a burning desire to find his place as an individual but he dies without finding this out. Joseph K. in the *Trial* is the symbol of the dilemma that modern man faces. He is divided between disbelief and hope, between confusion and despair. K. has a limited freedom because he is under indictment and unable to understand what is happening to him.

Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.<sup>13</sup>

Man is in pursuit of innocence. Conscious that he is a criminal but unaware of the crime or a means of rescue, he seems to exist in an unredeemable situation.

For the Judges of the lowest grades, to whom my acquaintances belong, haven't the power to grant a final acquittal, that power is reserved for the highest Court of all, which is quite inaccessible to you, to me, and to all of us . . . but they do have the right to take the burden of the charge off your shoulders . . . for the time being, but it continues to hover above you and can, as soon as an order comes from on high, be laid upon you again.<sup>14</sup>

Although K. feels guilt, he will not declare it. This is due either to failure to accept responsibility for himself or to his realization that his guilt is only that of belonging to the human race. Therefore, he feels that he should not be accused.

But I am not guilty, said K.; it's a mistake. And if it comes to that, how can any man be called guilty? We are all simply men here, one as much as the other.<sup>15</sup>

Kafka's man is forever aware of his guilt and compelled to face the trial of his life in a universe whose pattern and meaning are uncertain and unknowable.

Where was the Judge whom he had never seen? Where was the High Court, to which he had never penetrated? He raised his hands and spread out all his fingers. But the hands of one of the partners were already at K.'s throat, while the other thrust the knife into his heart and turned it there twice.<sup>16</sup>

In the *Castle*, Kafka takes up the problem of the discrepancy between God and man, the incapacity of man to recognize good. Again we see the solitude and aloneness of man.

It was late in the evening when K. arrived. The village was deep in snow. The Castle hill was hidden, veiled in mist and darkness, nor was there even a glimmer of light to show that a Castle was there. On the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village, K. stood for a long time gazing into the illusory emptiness above him.<sup>17</sup>

The key word in the passage is "illusory." The Castle represents God and the villagers at the foot of the Castle represent life or the community. K. struggles to become a native of the village and to get to the Castle but all is illusion. As he approaches the Castle it fades away.

The Castle above them, which K. had hoped to reach that very day, was already beginning to grow dark and retreated again into the distance.<sup>18</sup>

Through the themes of these two novels, justice and salvation, Kafka affirms the existence of an absolute Being but he also declares it impossible for there to be any connection of man with God. God is remote, unloving and cruel.

This basic misunderstanding of man is a result of secularizing the world. We have made the cosmos a background for man. Instead of looking at the whole man in the universe, we see man set against the background of the universe. Modern man has learned to answer all important questions without reference to God. The world is an object and is subject to man as planner. Man establishes values and these are the controlling factors. But man finds that freedom from the world is at the same time responsibility for the world and all attempts to grasp the meaning of himself and the world are unsuccessful.



Against this sketchy background of modern thought let us examine the solution to this problem as proposed by Teilhard de Chardin. He does not assume that this is *the* answer but he does see the problem and the way in which he must attempt an answer that will be meaningful.

In this arrangement of values I may have gone astray at many points. It is up to others to try to do better. My one hope is that I have made the reader feel the reality, difficulty, and urgency of the problem and, at the same time, the scale and the form which the solution cannot escape. The only universe capable of containing the human person is an irreversibly "personalizing" universe<sup>19</sup>

Teilhard sees that space-time contingency is the very condition of the reality we know and here he sought the key to the phenomenon of man. He declares that "The Phenomenon of Man" is not theological or philosophical but purely scientific. However at times the three do seem to converge from different angles on the same whole. He sought on the scientific plane to find a common ground of discussion between materialistic and spiritualistic speculators, between the finalists and determinists.

I am convinced that the two points of view require to be brought into union, and that they soon will unite in a kind of phenomenology or generalized physics in which the internal aspect of things as well as the external aspect of the world will be taken into account. Otherwise, so it seems to me, it is impossible to cover the totality of the cosmic phenomenon by one coherent explanation such as science must try to construct.<sup>20</sup>

For Teilhard the present structure of the science of the universe is a paradox. It is a science which leaves man on the fringe of the universe but seeks to include man. It makes no place for thought which means that the most remarkable phenomenon provided by nature for our observation has been excluded. Man looks out to the cosmos and does not find meaning. He must turn and look back to himself to find this meaning. If he does then he will see

. . . the momentary summit of an Anthropogenesis which is itself the crown of a cosmogenesis. No longer will man be able to see himself entirely unrelated to mankind, neither will he be able to see mankind unrelated to life, nor life unrelated to the universe. . . . When studied narrowly in himself by anthropologists or jurists man is a tiny, even a shrinking creature . . . and it is this that leads scientists to refuse to

consider man as an object of scientific scrutiny except through his body. . . .

The time has come to realize that an interpretation of the universe—even a positivist one—remains unsatisfying unless it covers the interior as well as the exterior of things: mind as well as matter.<sup>21</sup>

Teilhard believed that nothing in our changing world is really understandable except insofar as it has reached a terminus. Being a paleontologist he saw process in the history of the universe. From the smallest individual object to the most vast aggregations, the universe has structure, all nature is organically integrated into a single growth of historical process. All are sharing in the upward progress toward an era of fulfillment. Teilhard develops the evolution of the cosmos from non-life to life, to thought. Cosmogogenesis passes over into psychogenesis or hominization. For Teilhard there are two aspects to matter, the “within” or “consciousness” and the “without.” For man, who stands at the summit of creation, the “within” or “consciousness” is immediately obvious. This is not so as we move down the scale of being. However we can think of the “within” as a thing in itself and the “without” as the object as it appears to us. Then there is no great difficulty in not being able to discern the “within” of an object far down the scale of being since matter is the principle of indeterminacy. The intrinsic part of the “within” of cosmic matter is the force that drives the universe toward an ever more complex and centralized state. The cosmos is rising in a spiral constantly moving forward as an enlarging cone toward an ever denser inwardness. In such a system:

Man is not the center of the universe as once we thought in our simplicity, but something much more wonderful—the arrow pointing the way to the final unification of the world in terms of life. Man alone constitutes the last-born, the freshest, the most complicated, the most subtle of all successive layers of life.<sup>22</sup>

For Teilhard the power of reflection must logically follow biogenesis as its culmination. If life is an ascent in consciousness then it cannot continue indefinitely along a diverging line without increasing in depth. This new leap is noogenesis.

Outwardly, almost nothing in the organs had changed. But in depth, a great revolution had taken place; consciousness was now leaping and boiling in a space of super-sensory relationships and representations . . .



a critical transformation, a mutation from zero to everything, it is impossible for us to imagine an intermediary individual at this precise level. Either this being has not yet reached, or it has already got beyond, this change of state.<sup>23</sup>

Psychogenesis has led to man. When for the first time in a living creature instinct perceived itself in its own mirror, the whole world took a pace forward. Once we have reached the noosphere we have reached the apex of what Teilhard considers his scientific thinking.<sup>24</sup> If man has any meaning then the universe has meaning. Man, to be given his true place, must be considered in his totality as constituting the noosphere, the sphere of the mind, the thinking layer of the earth. Man is the spearhead of evolution. It is his privilege to take evolution deliberately into his own control. He will either choose the good and work for a happier world or he will refuse. He has the power to cause a further increase in evil. Man could even cause evolution to fail, although Teilhard thinks this improbable. Man's power tends rather to inhibit and disorganize.

Teilhard called himself "a Pilgrim of the Future" and it is here that he seeks to find the ultimate meaning of an evolving man. Evolving no longer in the biosphere but in the noosphere.

After the long series of transformations leading to man, has the world stopped? Or if we are still moving, is it not merely in a circle? The answer to that uneasiness of the modern world springs up by itself when we formulate the dilemma in which the analysis of our action has imprisoned us. Either nature is closed to us to our demands for futurity, in which case thought, the fruit of millions of years of effort is stifled, stillborn in a self-abortive and absurd universe. Or else an opening exists—that of a super-soul above our souls; but in that case the way out, if we are to agree to embark on it, must open out freely onto limitless psychic spaces in a universe to which we can unhesitatingly trust ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

There are only two alternatives, optimism and pessimism. Progress is all or nothing. There can be no in between. There is no tangible evidence to support either argument but based on hope there is an invitation to make an act of faith.

Even on stacks of material energy, even under the spur of immediate fear or desire, without the taste for life, mankind would soon stop inventing and constructing for a work it knew to be doomed in advance. And stricken at the very source of the impetus which sustains it, it

would disintegrate from nausea or revolt and crumble into dust. Having once known the taste of a universal and durable progress, we can never banish it from our minds any more than our intelligence can escape from the space-time perspective it once has glimpsed.<sup>26</sup>

For Teilhard the future belongs to man but man must rethink his position. The universe tends to personalize. One cannot confuse individuality with personality. To be fully ourselves is not to be alone but to go out to others. The goal of ourselves, our uniqueness is not in our individuality but in our person. If we follow the evolutionary structure of the world then finding our person will be done by uniting together. This is not to be a synthesis which will result in loss of identity, but rather in a process which leads to love.

To love all and everyone is a contradictory and false gesture which only leads in the end to loving no one. To that I answer if, as you claim a universal love is impossible, how can we account for that irresistible instinct in our hearts which leads us toward unity whenever and in whatever direction our passions are stirred? A sense of the universe, a sense of the all, the nostalgia which seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, music—there seems to be an expectation and awareness of a Great Presence.<sup>27</sup>

What Teilhard was searching for always was an approach to the mystery of man which was unified in contrast with the mosaic view obtained by alternately looking from the scientific, philosophic and theological point of view. He sought to infuse a new life into traditional Christian thought. Teilhard felt that the Christian cannot afford to overlook or neglect the tremendous diversity of minds and the difficulties they raise, if they are to be brought to a single faith. His intuitions are germinal and in need of some clarification. As Teilhard said :

The World must have a God; but our concept of God must be extended as the dimensions of our world are extended.<sup>28</sup>

Here is the challenge! Will philosophy and theology meet it?

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter Three, "The Testimony of Modern Art," *Irrational Man* by William Barrett, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1962.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus explains this position.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, translated by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Albert Knopf, 1958), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Lloyd Alexander (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1938), p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper and Row Inc., 1961), p. 290.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 169-71.

<sup>24</sup> Beyond scientific considerations Teilhard considers the end of man's evolution. Man's future is obviously a higher centralization of his spiritual substance. Teilhard calls this Point Omega. Omega is the axis of development and the goal. The nearer mankind approaches Point Omega, the nearer they will approach each other. The more fully man realizes his place in the universe, the greater will be his intensity of worship for the Creator. The Christian sees Creation as coming from God. Creation reaches a culmination in man; it is perfected in man returning to God. Thus Christ, the God-man, is the last phase of return or Omega.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231-32.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveler* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 168.