

*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Writings*. Selected with an Introduction by Ursula King. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999. (Modern Spiritual Masters Series.) 173 pp. Paper \$13.00.

It took 300 years to pardon Galileo, but only 30 years for the Vatican to lift the ban on Teilhard's philosophical writings. This French Jesuit priest-paleontologist was threatened with neither trial nor torture, but until his death obediently published only scholarly papers. Only then were these musings on science and religion, written in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, finally released. In 1965 some of his characteristic terminology appeared in the Second Vatican Council's reconciliation of church dogma with evolutionary theory.

For Teilhard (1881-1955) evolution was not just a physical fact but also a spiritual truth. Reversing Descartes's division of matter and mind, Teilhard spiritualizes Darwin, proposing that "noogenesis" (evolution of thought) follows "geogenesis" and "biogenesis." "[W]hat we call inorganic matter is certainly animate," he states in *Science and Christ* (63), one of many monographs excerpted, introduced and annotated in this compact and thematically organized anthology. Echoing nineteenth-century natural theology, Teilhard argues that science reveals "the heart of a God" (9). Like Newton he looks for unifying principles, though his laws are metaphysical rather than mathematical: "Science . . . sees only the outer crust of things. . . . Its inner factors are not mechanistic but psychological and moral . . ." (64). He anticipates E.O. Wilson's *Consilience* by at least 50 years with the claim that "physics, biology and moral science [will] all be combined" (68).

He has been credited (and blamed) for inspiring the Gaia hypothesis and other emerging holistic concepts of the 1960s. The first of Teilhard's books to be published in

the U.S., *The Phenomenon of Man* (1959) fell on fertile ground – I remember it on a reading list at Penn in 1970 – and still sells over 5000 copies a year.

King elucidates *Phenomenon* and its companion work *The Divine Milieu* (1960), relying mostly on excerpts from lesser-known essays and letters. She neglects to mention Stephen Jay Gould’s charge that Teilhard was an accomplice, or at best a dupe, of the Piltdown Man perpetrators, or critics like Stephen Toulmin, who asks whether his ideas outweigh his engaging style, and whether he writes theology, pragmatic philosophy, or popular science (a category Teilhard himself preferred).

As a deep ecologist, Teilhard presents one principal difficulty. For him, humanity forms an axis leading toward “Omega point,” the final apotheosis of matter in Christ incarnate. Here he collides with modern materialism, and E.O. Wilson rejects Teilhard’s early version of consilience precisely because of its divine eschatology. But if a secular reader, or one from a differing religious tradition, can substitute an alternative metaphor for the mystical core of this intellectual synthesis, then the way is open to appreciate his powerful and wide-ranging imagination, overwhelming compassion and Emersonian eloquence. After all, environmentalism is rooted, if usually at a distance, in religious ethics. As basic science searches for a unified theory of everything, Teilhard’s radical revisioning of faith as a higher manifestation of reason may indeed, as this collection claims, address “many of the material and spiritual issues of the twenty-first century” (10).

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