The Divine Milieu: Teilhard de Chardin

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Course Overview

“At the heart of our universe, each soul exists for God, in our Lord.”

– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (The Divine Milieu)

Take an unforgettable retreat with Teilhard de Chardin’s masterpiece: The Divine Milieu.

A Jesuit priest and scientist, Teilhard’s powerful vision of the universe has influenced countless spiritual seekers. Written in the 1920’s but published posthumously, The Divine Milieu is a spiritual work at once cosmic and personal. Mapping the horizons of transcendence and intimacy, it illuminates the boundless contours of our true nature and home in God.

Now, this retreat invites you to reflect upon Teilhard’s timeless thought. Presented by gifted professor, leading Teilhard expert, and heralded author, Sr. Kathleen Deignan, C.N.D., this 6-conference series will transform your spiritual imagination and cosmic consciousness. An accomplished musician, Sr. Deignan weaves her beautiful, acclaimed music in with her profound exploration of The Divine Milieu. You are invited to nurture the “cosmic contemplative,” deepen your Christic life, and serve the world with greater enlightenment and soul.

What are the features and challenges of a spirituality for those who seek to inhabit the divine? In this retreat, you will explore the profound paradoxes of Teilhard’s evolutionary spirituality. Orienting you through the landscape and inscape of the Sacred, Teilhard will challenge you to visit the mystical terrain of your cosmic neighborhood. Illumined by his wisdom, you will venture on an itinerary he walked before us.

As spiritual men and women of the twenty-first century, we are tasked with comprehending the mysterious milieu in which we exist, and evolving to meet it. This is the invitation of Teilhard de Chardin, who not only mapped the sacred dimensions of the evolving cosmos, but also charted the interior terrain of the evolving human soul. For this reason, we honor Teilhard as both a spiritual master and a religious and scientific visionary.

Inhabit the divine milieu today.
Conference 1. Teilhard de Chardin: Mentor and Model for the Spiritual Journey

Overview

In this session, we meet Père Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as if for the first time, as neither scientist nor theologian, but as your own personal spiritual master. He actually lived with you and me in mind as he struggled to faithfully realize his evangelical vocation in the Church and in the world—both on the brink of unparalleled change. Like us, he wrestled with the challenging divide between the scientific and religious worldviews of his day and had special concern “for those who love the world,” the waverers and seekers, like himself. With a beginner’s mind, let us come to know him as soul friend and guide, as mentor and model for our twenty-first-century Christian journey.

I. Meeting Teilhard

- Not long ago, I made pilgrimage through the Hudson River Valley to the grave of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit scientist and one of Christianity’s most daring and creative visionaries. There on a cold and rainy spring afternoon, my friend John Philip Newell and I prayed to have Teilhard’s vision and virtues so we could open to the divine milieu as he did.

- Fifty years earlier, I had been introduced to Teilhard by the Congregation Sisters in my religion classes at Saint Jean Baptiste High School in Manhattan, and was startled into an understanding of the world and God that utterly changed my own. That vision, decades before I came to hear of it, had been suppressed by the Vatican which, in collaboration with his own Society of Jesus, exiled Teilhard to China for most of his priestly and professional life. He was never to return to his native France for which he longed; that was forbidden him. But toward the end of his life, New York City proved to be hospitable to the elder Teilhard and it was there he died on Easter Sunday, April 10, 1955.

- The works suppressed all during his life were published after his death and had the sudden dramatic impact of an astonishing planetary mind and soul coming to light at last like a meteor encircling the planet. The most lasting impact was on his own Roman Catholic Church whose theological development—in light of the revelation of evolution—he had sought to serve his whole life.

- How poignantly ironic that a few years after his death, his mind prints could be found all over the deliberations and final documents of the Second Vatican Council, which sought to bring the Church into the modern world as its illumination and guide. This was indeed a fulfilment of Teilhard’s own dream to evangelize both his own contemporary Church with the sacred revelation of an evolutionary cosmos, and likewise evangelize his contemporary scientific community with a mature Christian gospel of the cosmic Christ in an ever evolving universe.
II. Meeting the Spiritual Master

- Let us try to meet this amazing luminary Teilhard as if for the first time, as neither scientist nor theologian, but as our own personal spiritual master who lived his life with us in mind. We were at the center of his concern all those years he was in exile, as he labored to put language on the ineffable mystery which pervaded his awareness and encompassed him on every side. We were with him in the urgency of his apostolic and evangelical zeal as the beneficiaries of his cosmic gospel.

- Indeed, by his own declaration, he desired to be chaplain to those who loved the world, the waverers and seekers of meaning who found no meaning in the growing divide between the scientific and religious paradigms of his day.

- With a beginner’s mind, let us come to know him anew as soul friend and guide, as mentor and model concerning how we might evolve to our spiritual understanding and our human nature to reach our mature Christic potential, and thereby fulfill our destiny for the world, and for the mysterious God at its source and summit, its every breath and heartbeat.

III. Summoning Intention

- Let us become aware of our deepest intention for this retreat, since, as Teilhard will teach, intention and the purification of intention is a subtle driving force of human spiritual maturation. So as we begin this retreat let us take time to awaken and evoke a sacred intention to discover what Teilhard holds out for us to see: the encompassing presence of *The Divine Milieu* awaiting our presence in kind.

- With the characteristic Teilhardian virtues of zest and enthusiasm, let us pray to establish ourselves, as he did, in the divine milieu:

  1. “Let us establish ourselves in the divine milieu. There we shall find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense. There we shall discover, where all its beauties flow together, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive, the ultra-active point of the universe and, at the same time, we shall feel the plenitude of our powers of action and adoration effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves.” (*The Divine Milieu*, 108-109)

- This is the promise of the retreat we now begin; this is the blessing for this retreat we now invoke.

IV. Learning to See

- The spiritual master Teilhard de Chardin is a catalyst of mystical sight—by which I mean the receptivity to see not *beyond* the real, but *into* the real. For him, “seeing” was everything. Listen to him describe a new mode of seeing:

  1. “Throughout my whole life, during every moment I have lived, the world has gradually been taking on light and fire for me, until it has come to envelop me in one mass of luminosity, glowing from within. . . The purple flush of matter fading imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, to be lost finally in the incandescence of a personal universe. . . This is what I have
learnt from my contact with the Earth – the diaphany of the divine at the heart of a glowing universe, the divine radiating from the depths of matter.” (The Divine Milieu)

- He would awaken us to an actual “experience” of the divine milieu, and for such exquisite seeing, we need to be trained. We need to engage in the contemplative practice of deep beholding that would allow our inner eye to begin to perceive and receive the glowing radiance of the Universe around us, not simply as matter but as living spirit. It was on the radiant horizon of spirit that Teilhard stood beckoning us to our own spiritual evolution.

- As dramatic and revolutionary as his wisdom may have been in the early twentieth century, his wisdom is even more salvific for us now as we make our way forward in this disorienting twenty-first century, toward a crisis which he might never have imagined.

- Our human spirit is an extraordinary event in the universe. As E. O. Wilson has said, our organic brains alone are the most complex structures in the cosmos. We can be saints and geniuses, and we can be destructive and monstrous; it all depends on our deep intention and on the clarity of our understanding of the reality in which we stand.

- Without a deeper vision of our truer nature and that of the cosmos itself, we get lost in our own primeval darkness from which we immerged; we get fearful and disoriented by regression toward the darkness of the cosmic void from which we emerged. We lose sight; we lose insight.

- So we need spiritual guides to walk a path through the unknown, to go before us by way of the dark intuition of unknowing. We need them to guide and inspire us in the process of our own intentional evolution, who are now caught in the disorienting flux of a purportedly meaningless evolutionary drift.

- Teilhard’s inspiring vision of “hominization”—the radical project of intentional human transformation toward “the ultra-human”—is threatened by eclipse from the gospel of natural science and evolutionary materialism which can see no direction or ultimacy in the cosmic project. The consequence of such an absolute denial and intentional obscuration of any dimension but the phenomenal, observable features of the universe actually puts in jeopardy the human project, because in such a realm we are unable to perceive the divine milieu.
v. Needing a Why; Needing a Way

- Science can only explain *how* and not *why* a universe; but humans need a why. The mind seeks to know and the soul seeks to understand.

- Teilhard applied his whole life to building a philosophy that would relate the wisdom of religious wisdom to the facts of science, and thereby bridge the two magisterial schools.

- The work to discern our place in the universe is a deeply spiritual endeavor. As Teilhard would say: “Faith has need of all the truth.” Faith and reason cannot be in conflict because the Christian temperament is constantly working to harmonize the variety of strains of knowing.

- But the exponential speed and amount of scientific discovery has overwhelmed religious discourse, and as Teilhard said, our traditional notion of God is too small to comprehend the unimaginable and unintelligible cosmic mysteries confronting us now.

VI. “Who Will Give Evolution Its God?”

- Teilhard voices the question many believers have been asking for two centuries or more:
  1. “Is the Christ of the Gospels, imagined and loved within the dimensions of a Mediterranean world, capable of still embracing and still forming the centre of our prodigiously expanded universe?” (*The Divine Milieu*, 46)

- Teilhard encountered in his own journey of faith an ever greater Christ; he found the God of evolution and found words to express this intuition within an expanded vocabulary of Christian theopoiesis. He found the ever great Christ—the cosmic Christ—and he willed to proclaim the gospel of this greater God of an evolutive universe. Such a gospel could illuminate our sense of human purpose and destiny.

- Teilhard would say that his century was in fact *more religious* than any other. How could this fail to be, he asked, with so many problems to be solved?

- Might we wonder, if, beneath the atheism and agnosticism that seems to prevail in our own century there is not a deeper desire to imagine the God of evolution? Is there not a fierce yearning to discover the divine milieu?
Reflection Questions

1. By way of beginning, take a moment to compose your intention for this retreat. What desire do you bring to it for Teilhard’s insight? What draws you to a deeper contemplative inquiry concerning your Christian faith in a radically evolutionary and scientifically considered world? Take some quiet time, perhaps with pen in hand, perhaps under sunlight or moonlight, to summon the stirrings of “intention.”

2. How familiar are you with the life and work of Teilhard de Chardin? When did you first encounter him, and what were the circumstances, the first or lasting impressions? Has he had any influence on your intellectual life, your spiritual life, or your Christian life?

3. Whom do you look to as your spiritual master who aids your deeper seeing in the life of faith, in discipleship of Jesus, and in “putting on the mind and heart of Christ”? How might Teilhard be such a spiritual master for you?

4. Does any of the “new science” of cosmology, evolution, natural selection, and genetics trouble your faith? How does your knowledge of science and practice of faith harmonize?

5. What resonates with you in this first session with Teilhard?

6. What do you sense “springing up” in your soul and inner awareness?

Overview

In this session, we meet Teilhard the child of earth, and of the church; but also, the man of the world and of science. During his early life his mother cradled him in the arms of a devotional and pious Catholicism, even as his father set him free to explore the wild and natural wonders of the volcanic mountain realms of his native France. During his childhood he would experience a profound existential wound that would set him on a life-long quest for what was most real and enduring. Drawn at once toward a religious and scientific life, he came to maturity when these two paths were most divergent. Nevertheless, he found a pathway toward The Divine Milieu.

1. A Child of Earth and of the Church

- “I am a child of earth before being a man of god,” wrote Teilhard de Chardin, “I only can scratch the divine for the cosmic. If you do not see that, you will never understand me.” (Letter to Jean Mortier, April 1950)

- Teilhard de Chardin was a child of France, a child of the Auvergne. It was there that he was born on May 1, 1881, in Sarcenat, near the city of Clermont-Ferrand.

- He was born into that wild mountainous region of France, a volcanic region. It was in this amazing landscape that he conceived his fascination with the Earth, his love of the natural world, and his quest to comprehend it and learn its secrets. This Earth formed him as a child into a budding scientist. He reports that even as early as five years old he had a pervasive cosmic sense, and this sense would be his deepest identity even in his maturity.

- This one particular feature of Teilhard’s life begs the question for all of us who are on a pathway toward the divine milieu: how may this Earth awakening and allurement happen for me? This is our investigation of our own cosmological awakening.

- Pierre’s father was a naturalist by avocation, and he took his children on wondrous expeditions of their homestead, the lovely estate on which Pierre was raised with his ten siblings. On each of these outings, the young Teilhard would become more and more fascinated with the geology of his neighborhood, and this fascination began to awaken something very adventurous in him.

- Teilhard would research the fields, mountains, and woods for what he called his idols, his childhood “gods.” His favorite was his god iron. Enraptured by the durability and perceived permanence of iron, he collected an array of these little idols, which he kept in his hidden sanctuaries and which gave him tremendous comfort and security.
II. A Child of the Modern World

- While young Teilhard was researching this glorious world of his and all its richness, the world and culture all around him was moving into a very dramatic period at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. It was coming into a new moment.

- Teilhard was born right at the cusp of a new cultural phase that came to be known as “modernism.” So much was changing, so much was being heralded by the artists who were often the advance guard of the new paradigms, and it introduced new schools of artists who became the exponents of its ethos.

- Modernism appeared all over the arts:
  1. In literature: Flaubert, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and many symbolists
  2. In painting: Seurat, Manet, Picasso
  3. In dancing and music: Stravinsky
  4. Even architecture was proclaiming a new moment as the Eiffel Tower was being constructed.

- In some sense, all these artists were announcing both the triumph and peril of the human spirit. The beginning of the twentieth century marks the new movement called the avant-garde. In the technological sphere, steam powered engines and railroads made the world more accessible than ever, and made human beings more mobile than ever.

III. A Man of Science

- In the field of biology and social science, Teilhard inherited the radical paradigm shift occasioned by Darwin’s On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection. Darwin’s theory of evolution began to undermine religious certainty and the idea of human uniqueness. In particular, the notion that humans were driven by the same impulses as lower animals proved to be difficult to reconcile with an ennobling spirituality such as Christianity’s.

- Political scientist Karl Marx argued that there were fundamental contradictions within the capitalist system. Much like Darwin saw the struggle with life in the living world in his research, Marx saw the same forces in the economic and social spheres.

- Philosophers like Nietzsche began to explore the contours of thought that touched on nihilism as he announced the death of God.

- All around Teilhard, human progress and advancement were occurring with great speed but also with great doubt about the human and cosmic project. He would eventually enter into this great discourse: to announce that the scientific could lead to the divine.
IV. Religious Awakening

- One experience of Teilhard’s spiritual development would be foundational for his life. Teilhard was born into a very devout Christian family, richly Catholic in its sensibilities, and his mother ignited his deep spirituality. She was a product of the French School, marked by its intense devotion and affectivity; it was a spirituality lived from the heart, with a very intimate sense of communion with Christ Jesus and the Sacred Heart.

- Teilhard would remember all through his life and writings this early awakening to the person and presence of Jesus, which will mark his later Christology. His encounter with Christ Jesus was in the mystery and iconography of the Sacred Heart.

- Teilhard grows as a very pious child, yet he reveals to us that he was at the same time a passionate child of the earth.

V. Existential Wounding

- Something happens to Teilhard at five years old that also influences his spiritual journey as it unfolded. He writes about it so often that we can only understand it as a deep and early existential wounding. One might say that Teilhard’s first encounter with divine mystery, as Spirit, was in the natural world in its durable materiality. Yet it was in an intimate and ordinary moment with his mother that shifted his confidence in the durability of this world of reality. As she was trimming his hair, his mother gave him a lock of curls to hold, which he playfully tossed into the fireplace. As he watched it being extinguished, he became paralyzed with anxiety and dread, and a fear shot through him that is almost hard to comprehend. He recollects:

  1. “A memory? My very first! I was five or six. My mother had snipped a few of my curls. I picked one up and held it close to the fire. The hair was burnt up in a fraction of a second. A terrible grief assailed me; I had learnt that I was perishable. . . . What used to grieve me when I was a child? This insecurity of things.” (The Heart of Matter, trans. Cuenot, 3)

- Hysterical on his mother’s breast, he seemed traumatized and anguished. Right at that moment, he began his quest for personal security—for what would endure:

  1. “And what used I to love? My genie of iron! With a plow hitch I believed myself, at seven years, rich with a treasure incorruptible, everlasting. And then it turned out that what I possessed was just a bit of iron that rusted. At this discovery I threw myself on the lawn and shed the bitterest tears of my existence!” (The Heart of Matter, trans. Cuenot, 3)

- This moment of a child’s anguish became the orienting experience of his life: to find something that endures. This first existential encounter with impermanence gave him enormous cause for anxiety with which he would have to deal his whole life.

- This impermanence became something with which Teilhard had to wrestle with throughout his whole life and make meaning of, because he felt that if all were so evanescent, fugitive, ephemeral, temporary, and transient, then there was no meaning in life. This was the great challenge, the great suffering.
VI. Researching a Pathway to *The Divine Milieu*

- How could the Christian Gospel have any reality or relevance? How could the mystery of a numinous, living, vital universe and Presence come together and be held creatively in a human person? This became the dialectic of Teilhard’s spiritual life and evolution.

- We can say that even as Teilhard never stopped questing for what would last, in time, he would come to realize that there was no static reality that was lasting. What lasts is the dynamic itself of the evolutive world in which we find ourselves.

- His quest for this profound and perduring reality led him to be a geologist. His other passion, meanwhile, was to discover the divine mystery that encompassed him in this numinous universe. Because of these two desires, he became a Jesuit scientist.

- In the novitiate, he experienced a crisis of faith—the challenge to bring together his love of God and his fierce unbounded love of the world:

  1. “The Christian is caught by forces that seem to be pulling him in two directions. His religion, with its stress on renunciation of the world and the vanity and the transiency of things here below, and with its emphasis on the transcendence of God and the primacy of laying up a treasure in heaven, pulls him up. The modern spirit, the spirit of involvement in the world, of science and technology, of social progress, of building the earth, pulls him forward. The Christian is torn in two directions. . . . The great majority . . . spend their lives not wholly Christian and not wholly human, divided in their loyalties and wavering in their inner direction, half given to the things of God and half given to the things of the world.”

- So Teilhard labors for this reconciliation in his own life. The Book of Life in its scientific lexicon became a scripture that allowed him to see the mystery suffusing the whole, as well as humanity’s purpose and destiny within it.

- We follow him in this deep inner work of reconciling and unifying our own conscience before the radiant incarnational presence of divinity, suffusing the universe in its own magnitude and our own inner landscape. Like him, we seek to become natives of the divine milieu.
Reflection Questions

1. What is your first memory of awakening to the splendor and mystery of the universe?

2. What is your first memory of a “religious” sense or experience? How did you play out your earliest religious feelings or thoughts?

3. Is there anything in your life analogous to Teilhard’s early wounding or existential shock?

4. From what Earth elements have you been formed—what landscape, what experiences of the natural world? Where do you find your most vibrant connection with Earth?

5. How has Earth molded you? Do you have a sense of sacred place? Where? Why? Do you feel as if you live in communion with the natural world enough?

6. What historical or cultural realities have most formed your personal story?

7. How has your Christ consciousness evolved over the decades of your life?

8. Does any of the “new science” of cosmology, evolution, and natural selection trouble your faith?
Teilhard de Chardin is a Christian in the Pauline Tradition. His faith is deeply rooted in an expansive and cosmic understanding of the mystery of Christ. That awareness was fostered by the mystical theology of Orthodox Christianity, and found its intellectual support in the philosophical work of Henri Bergson. But it was on the Front during World War I when Teilhard volunteered to be a stretcher bearer that he ironically came to see the passion and resurrection of “the Christic.” It was here that he began his mystical writings which would come to be *The Divine Milieu*. At the end of the war, his deep thought was beginning to take shape, and he came to see himself maturing as a planetary citizen, a child of the universe.

I. Discovering a Cosmic Christ

- Teilhard de Chardin is our guide to the divine milieu, and so we reflect on how he came to this profound and transformative experience. In a sense, he was the actual “emergence” of a mode of Christian consciousness that was highly alive and aware for this time. We left him in his studies in the Jesuit novitiate, where he was undergoing a dramatic conversion experience.

- His retrievals in his theological studies of Orthodox Christian studies aided him tremendously in finding a Christ of cosmic proportions. Even before the Christ of the Synoptic traditions, Paul was proclaiming a vision of a cosmic Christ, one who was comprehensive with the universe itself, who was working throughout the expanse of the universe as its beginning and orientation—its Alpha and Omega—to bring all things into a profound unity. In a sense, the invitation of Christian life is to awaken as a new creature who has a powerful awareness of living within this Cosmic Christ.

- We are always speaking in some sense of divine materiality, of God taking on matter—not just human matter but the very cosmic stuff.

II. Discovering Christ on the Battlefield

- During his Jesuit formation, Teilhard would be summoned to the front of World War I—a traumatic event of great rupture and violent breakage within the human form.

- Teilhard volunteered to be a stretcher bearer, and this experience radicalized his sense of being human and what it meant to struggle alongside one another in the face of rupture, disruption, and disorganization. Yet he was also able to begin his spiritual writing, his contemplative reflection on what the human life was about.
• Teilhard perceived, even in this most horrific expression of human chaos, that the divine element was at work. In this wartime work, God was up ahead. The dynamism of divinity was unifying, leading, and unfolding its own divine body: the Christic.

• Where other people came home fractured and traumatized, Teilhard came back from the war with an even greater mystical sense of the divine livingsness at the heart of matter. This universe was moving somewhere. It was not a random, chaotic, meaningless phenomenon as his scientific contemporaries began to hold.

• Even in the throes of what appeared to be chaos and regression, Teilhard saw the possibility of a new advancement.

Morning coffee on arrival at trenches, Verdun, 1916 (Teilhard on the far right).
Photo courtesy of the Foundation of Teilhard de Chardin.

III. Making Meaning of Evolution

• One of the things that influenced and aided Teilhard’s intellectual growth was his discovery of the book Creative Evolution by philosopher Henri Bergson. This book transformed his intellectual understanding and gave him a new paradigm with which to understand everything. Life was not static but dynamic, moving forward at every level.

• Unlike other scientists in his time, and ours, Teilhard saw the universe as moving toward a greater and higher unity. The more complex the unfolding of this universe, the more it reflects back upon itself in a kind of curvature that creates more and more complexity, and out of this complexity springs consciousness.
What is truly sacred to Teilhard is the spiritual reality he sees unfolding not just in the world of matter, but in the world which is psychically and spiritually alive always, both seminally and potentially.

IV. Beginning His Mystical Teaching

And so Teilhard begins his mystical teaching. Young people come to him because he was so approachable and remarkable in his thinking. They came to him to explore more deeply how to make this integration, this synthesis between new cosmology and Christian faith, and so he began to respond.

He had begun this earlier; he had sent his letters from the Front back to his superiors in the Jesuit community, who became concerned with his foray into theology, since this was not his intensive training. He was a scientist, and the Jesuits wanted him to speak and write on issues of science, where his voice had authority. But Teilhard could not stop his mystical explorations, and he yearned to invite his contemporaries in his faith and scientific communities to engage with him in this work of investigation and integration of faith and science.

After Teilhard came to Paris to teach, controversy began to stir up because of his new understanding of the Book of Genesis. He wanted to speak with new language, a new dynamic understanding of creation not simply as a “genesis” but as an ongoing creation—a cosmogenesis.

In Teilhard’s cosmogenesis, spirit and matter are not two realities, but one mysterious reality in which each serves the other in the great movement toward some future that Teilhard perceived and intuited above everything. The universe was hardly a meaningless reality, and he felt that the Christian’s mandate was to make meaning of this new moment and this evolutionary worldview.

Teilhard decided to dedicate his life to this mandate, but his superiors determined that this was not a good idea. They sent him to China and left him there year after year after year, without any final decision in his professional and missionary regard. During these years he did great work and became an esteemed scientist, yet his superiors denied him the right to speak of the meaning of what his science was disclosing.

V. Composing The Divine Milieu

This is where Teilhard becomes very valuable helpful and important to us. His sequestration or exile in China gave him an opportunity to do the kind of deep thinking that it was his nature to do. The very first book that Teilhard would write there is The Divine Milieu, our lectio in this retreat.

He writes The Divine Milieu for several reasons:

1. To satisfy the anxieties of his superiors and assure them that he is a faithful member of the Society of Jesus and a baptized Christian who embraces the Catholic tradition.

2. To explain that he was trying to express a new language of faith so that this contemporary generation could be evangelized and brought to Christ. This was a great missionary endeavor, and he often appeals to Saint Francis Xavier, who likewise had been in mission in China.
VI. Spiritual Exercises for a New Generation

- Teilhard would say his own missionary campaigns were not about liturgy and rites, but rather about ideas. Teilhard felt that he had been particularly called to this mission of evangelization, the denial of which would be betraying his God. And so he writes this beautiful spiritual classic in true Jesuit form.

- He engaged the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola, working their effectiveness more and more deeply into a formation process in which the *Exercises* invited the contemplative, missionary Jesuit to clarify his deepest intention in this world and make a radical option for the mystery and person of Christ.

- In Ignatius’s time (the sixteenth century), this had a more historical, human, and biblically rooted sensibility focused on the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospel tradition. But Teilhard will move more with the Pauline and Orthodox Christian lineage, which perceives that in these past millennia, Christ has been evolving. If the great event of the Incarnation has brought the Divine Mystery into the stuff of matter in the human form, this is not a static, local event. This is a universal event.

- Therefore, Teilhard wants to remind us that our original Christology is a cosmic Christology. He undertakes to teach that cosmological Christology in his writings and teachings, particularly in *The Divine Milieu*.

VII. Toward Planetary Citizenship

- This magnificent spiritual text, *The Divine Milieu*, is an invitation to move as a Cosmic Christian, in the way of Teilhard, who will say that he is no longer a Frenchman, but a planetary citizen, a child of the Universe.

- How do we become Christians of such mature faith, with such mature self-understanding? Even more importantly, how do we come to understand that we are part of the human phylum that is moving forward under the pressure and allurement of the Creator, the Christic? This Christic is coming to form in the spiritual evolutionary work of human awakening.

- For Teilhard this was the great adventure, and it becomes the great work for us as well:

  1. “For me, my God, all joy and all achievements, the very purpose of my being and all my love of life, all depend on this one basic vision of the union between yourself and the universe. . . . I have no ability to proclaim anything except the innumerable prolongations of your incarnate being in the world of matter; I can preach only the mystery of your flesh, you the soul shining forth through all that surrounds us.” *(The Heart of the Matter)*
Reflection Questions

1. How has your Christ consciousness evolved over the decades of your life? Do you sense the mystery of the Cosmic Christ?

2. How has misunderstanding or exile shown up in your story? How did you work with the accompanying frustration, powerlessness, and bitterness?

3. How has the experience of rupture and breakage opened you to a deeper sense of the Divine Element?

4. Can you recall a time when your religious understanding took a great leap into maturity?

5. What works of literature, science, philosophy, and psychology have influenced your faith formation? What works of theology?

6. What are your most formative images of Christ that guide and inspire your Christian practice?
Conference 4. The Journey of Human Transformation

Overview

Teilhard is a spiritual master because he actually has a teaching for human transformation, and a method of practice that will help realize it. His classic, *The Divine Milieu*, offers such a program. By grounding us in the realism of this postmodern world, Teilhard notes the new situation of Christianity in history. But rather than construing this new moment negatively, Teilhard offers a way of understanding that this is a moment of grace when the world and God are summoning the human person to accelerate our spiritual maturation. More exactly, Teilhard will share us a new way of understanding the mystery of Incarnation, entrusted to Christians, and offer us a therapy for healing our spiritual senses so that we may begin to see the presence of God incarnate everywhere.

1. Faithing in the Postmodern World

- As we begin to move on that pathway toward the divine milieu, let us remember a few things that we have been touching on in this retreat.

- It is important to really feel the dissonance of which we spoke earlier between our Christian faith and the scientific worldview prevailing in our time which has identified our universe as meaningless, mindless, a randomly evolving phenomenon which by fluke has spawned life on a tiny insignificant orb of one solar system among billions within the galactic worlds.

- This worldview, an extreme form of the natural evolutionary science of our time, poses a great challenge to the faithing person. This is not just a problem of the intellect, but of the soul. For what does it mean for faithing that this universe and our life in it may have no direction, no destiny? How do we engage with “the new atheism,” which seems corollary to natural evolutionary science and challenges our Christian faith?

- If our scientists have proclaimed that there is no God because science mapped the origin and unfolding of the universe through the lens of science, how does the Christian offer the vision that comes through the lens of the mystery of Christ and the Incarnation? This is Teilhard’s great question.

- This moment which on the surface seems to annul the Christian vision of existence, may paradoxically have opened up a new horizon against which Christian faith may come to realize itself more profoundly and maturely than ever before. The evolutionary paradigm of an emergent cosmogenesis may have done the Christian tradition the great service of providing at last the grand context within which we might come to an awareness of the true dimensions of the faith we hold, of the Christ event, and the mystery of the Incarnation.
II. A New Season for Christian Maturity

- Rather than a disorientation, the multifaceted understanding of an evolutionary cosmos may be the new field for Christianity’s self-understanding. Even more, it may be the new field of understand our own human destiny. Everything leads back to the mystery of Incarnation. To be probing it ever more profoundly and deeply is the work that Teilhard calls us to do.

- Teilhard is calling those who love this world and fear that the Gospel Christ, the historical Jesus, is too narrow and truncated a symbol to take us beyond. We need to awaken to the risen Christ, the Christ of the cosmos.

- In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard offers us a spiritual itinerary of ascent, a pathway for life. As he will describe later in his masterwork, *The Human Phenomenon*, we do not merely move laterally, but we move radially (forward and upward) in an ascension toward some magnetic center alluring us. It is an itinerary for the scientific mind, the modern soul, the secular person who lives deeply embedded in the world.

- The mysticism of *The Divine Milieu* is for those who would be “swept away in the divine ocean;” it is for those of us who yearn to become citizens of the universe.

- Let us recall the secret Teilhard told us regarding his own spiritual autobiography. In his earliest openings to the existential experience of being human, he had a tremendous anxiety about the impermanence of life, and always sought something durable, permanent, and worthy of one’s life.

- The psychological crux of time is agitation and attraction. We live between these fluctuating dynamics of anxiety and awe. In one way, we feel ourselves too small within this vast and mysterious universe. Such anxiety causes us to withdraw. But in good Jesuit style, Teilhard points to another inner movement, one on the other side of anxiety—this is awe and attraction before a world sensed to be so beautiful that it must be adored with our greatest effort and energy.

- This book is not for rigid, unaffected Christians, but for those who have yet to see that there is a deeper birthing to be done of our Christ life. This is a book, then, for those at the crux of their faith. It is for those who search for, and within, the encompassing mystery of God.

III. Learning to See

- “Groping” is one of Teilhard’s most characteristic notions, because he witnesses an inherent, intuitive movement within life toward life. Life itself is ever groping toward greater and more expansive life, and in doing so becomes more complex until it breaks forth into greater consciousness.

- Teilhard makes clear that he is not writing a book of metaphysics, physics, cosmology, or theology. He is writing a book of epistemology. It is a book to understand how we understand what we understand, to try to comprehend the life of the mind and intuition. *The Divine Milieu* is a mystagogy. It is a treatise of instruction about how to birth the mystic within the human person. This book, as we shall see, also speaks most congenially to the Buddhist path.
• This is a book about perception: it is a book about how to see. Teilhard said that this was his one and only mission on this Earth: to facilitate, enable, and teach his fellow Christians how to see the living Christ unfolding all around. And he wanted help us understand what we see. To do this, we need to employ not only the physical senses but also the inner senses. So he would instruct us about how the mind and sensorium might receive and then perceive the world.

• This is sacred seeing in the Johannine sense, which is what our spiritual ancestors were laboring towards. Teilhard’s diagnosis of the contemporary condition of the human person is that our physical and spiritual senses are dulled and cannot perceive divinity manifesting on every side.

• Many of you are familiar with the ancient Celtic chant which comes to us under the name of Saint Patrick’s Breastplate or Lorica. It echoes the vitality of our spiritual ancestors who had a more vibrant kind of spiritual sensorium. Perhaps it is because we live in an incredibly mechanized and highly industrialized world, it is hard for some of us to even see the vastness of the universe. Then the vitality and vibration of the natural world is lost to us, because we are so buffered that their energies bounce off of us.

• Therefore, Teilhard wants to aid us in recovering these spiritual senses. He is the spiritual master who wants to teach us to see the God hidden and manifesting everywhere. This is the great adventure of the Christian mystical life, the great bliss and delight: to keep encountering and recognizing divinity everywhere until it becomes a palpable living experience of being immersed in a sea of God.

• Teilhard will teach us how to see and where to look. He will also teach us what aids and what obscures this kind of seeing.

IV. A New Spiritual Therapy

• This is a spiritual therapy, a deep inner work and outer work, a spiritual and sensate work that will aid us in opening our inner, third eye.

• Teilhard begins by inviting us to understand that we live in something far more than “the Incarnational tradition.” We are actually living within a Christic phylum or pathway that is enlivening the evolutionary process. We are not heirs of a belief system, but participants in a divine unfolding. This is the great mystery of our Christian faith—the mysterion. Unfortunately, this awareness is enormously weak in our Christian formation and practice. Nevertheless, it is what our liturgical and sacramental life is constantly reaffirming.
• So Teilhard wants to bring “two stars,” which disorganize our faith when they are divergent, into convergence, thereby rectifying our capacity to deeply “see.”

• We are with a Jesuit under his guidance moving toward a profound, transformational experience, just as he was under the guidance of his master, Ignatius Loyola. It was Ignatius’s genius that looked deeply into the ways the psyche gets split, and had insight about how to bring our vision into a conjunctive unity.

V. Awakening to a Divine Cosmos

• We must learn to see God becoming perceptible, visible, available, and active in the great layers of creation. Therefore, we have to rectify our vision so that we have far sight and near sight and so be able to say with the mystic Lalla, “Wherever I go I see your face, O God.”
  1. “Greater still (and greater still) Lord, may your universe be greater still” (The Divine Milieu, 77).
  2. “By virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see” (The Divine Milieu, 45)

• Teilhard is teaching us is a mode of cosmic contemplation. The first instruction in our tradition of contemplation is what the ancient masters called “natural contemplation”: to be able to perceive the traces of divinity all around. This is what it means to be an incarnational person.

• Teilhard wants to take this onto a broader horizon so that we may begin the work of becoming cosmic contemplatives. He wants us to unify the vision of the body and the soul’s eye so that we can see the significance of the mounting signs of divine life in the body of the Earth.

• As the spiritual master Father Thomas Berry once told Brian Swimme, to see as Teilhard saw is a challenge, but in the next millennium Teilhard will be generally regarded as the fourth major thinker of the Western spiritual tradition, along with Saint Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas.
Reflection Questions

1. How do you engage with “the new atheism,” which seems sibling or corollary to natural evolutionary science? Are you aware of its influence?

2. Does the dominant scientific paradigm regarding the beginning and nature of the universe influence your faith? How has it enhanced or disturbed your Christian vision of the cosmos?

3. There are some who say that religion entraps us in “myths” and illusions that pose an obstacle to human growth and development. In what ways do you think that is true? In what ways do you think that is a distorted understanding of religion in our time?

4. Is there a viable Christian vision of this cosmos that can be in creative dialogue with evolutionary scientists and atheists?
5. Has Teilhard’s question ever arisen in you: “Is the Christ of the Gospels, imagined and loved within the dimensions of a Mediterranean world, capable of still embracing and still forming the centre of our prodigiously expanded universe?”

6. Has this question of Teilhard’s ever stirred in you: “Who will give evolution its God?”

7. How keen are your spiritual senses? Do you see or sense the greater dimensions of what the bodily eye beholds? How so?
Conference 5. The Divinization of Our Activities

Overview

If Teilhard has a “lineage” within the rich Christian tradition, it certainly originates with Saints Paul and John, the earliest masters of Christocentric mysticism, especially as these were elaborated in Eastern Orthodox spirituality. From these influences, he invites us to consider how the Christian will mature into a Christic person, alive and aware of the divine Spirit in which they live, while learning to “divinize” a life of action in the world by the practice of moment by moment intention. In answer to the question of “what of our life’s labors will endure,” Teilhard reminds us that we live in a world of mystery and unknowing. Yet he offers a teaching of sensibly turning toward a unique milieu experienced as unchanging beneath the diversities of our tasks. This is a steady state and deep fundament, where we can center and cultivate our desire to serve the divinization of our endeavors.

I. Dialectic of Transformation

- *The Divine Milieu* bears the influence of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, especially in the Orthodox understanding of the energies of God pervading the universe and manifesting in and through the spiritualized human being, the spiritually mature human person. This, in a very real sense, is their most insightful understanding of Incarnation.

- Therefore, in Part One of *The Divine Milieu*, the cosmic-contemplative-in-training is invited to consider the process of divinizing our activities. As we’ve said, the language of divinization is not something Western Christianity is very familiar or even comfortable with. We are much more comfortable with moral formation, moral development—which is a good thing also. But our Eastern brothers and sisters take this dimension further. I’d like to suggest that this part of Teilhard’s work really offers us a kind of dynamic or dialectical way to understand how to mature the Christic self, which is our vocation.

II. Teilhard’s Tao: An Oscillation of Activity and Passivity

- In this perspective we might see a kind of Taoist understanding of the way energies oscillate within the universe and also within the human person. It is, in one sense, almost like Teilhard’s *Tao*.

- Teilhard wants to remind us first of all, before we proceed further, that what is most divine about God is that we cannot exist apart from God. In the field of divine energy, we cultivate the expansion of our human energy. Teilhard says that the incarnational person, the Christic person, must be involved in the development, fruition, and flourishing of their own human energy manifested in action.

- The first oscillation of this Taoist process animates action—the human subject acting rather than being acted upon. This orientation is about our creative action within the divine process. It is
about coming to understand that our every action unfolds within the field, the flow, of divine activity itself. Teilhard wants to aid us in beginning to perceive this. This is about the capacity to feel and sense the Creator acting in the divine process though us and seeking to enter our lives. Teilhard wants us to begin to feel the divine pressing in on us.

- Teilhard wants to reiterate our ancient instruction from Saint Paul, whom we might call Christianity’s first spiritual master: “Whatever you do, do in the name of Christ Jesus” (Colossians 3:17). This is a way for the Christian to activate cells of the body of Jesus Christ, cells in the body of cosmic Christ. We need, as humankind, to keep this mystical knowing at a certain kind of temperature with every single intentional action. One can see how the earliest tradition of the Jesus Prayer arose, our ancestors’ earliest formula for trying to birth Christ-consciousness. Now, centuries later, Teilhard is giving us another pathway of instruction.

III. A Teaching on Intention

- As Paul would say, “Whether you eat or drink, do it in the name of Christ Jesus.” Now, Teilhard wants to say that all psychic and soul development is funded by such intention: the conscious presence to the emergent Christ within and about us in the moment. Soul development is funded by our clear and purposeful will to align ourselves with Christ, who continues to unfold in the Incarnation in the phenomenal and pneumenal world. Teilhard directs us to this act of intention that would transfigure our consciousness into a Christic consciousness.

- Again we can hear the resonance of Zen teaching. The Buddha offers in the Noble Eightfold Path “right intention,” actualized in every single movement of one’s life. This kind of right intention is really trying to address a subtext that we discussed earlier. As Teilhard begins The Divine Milieu, he wants to speak of the crux, the psychological dilemma of the modern person, which is anxiety.

- Teilhard’s own mystical opening as a child was an experience of anxiety in response to the possible meaninglessness of existence, at the possible ephemeralness of all the beauty that he loved so much. He loved the Earth: could it all be so transient? And fugitive? Does the human person have meaning?

- Teilhard railed against a framework of meaninglessness because it wasn’t his lived, felt, and tested experience in life. He is enormously concerned about whether human action has value. Does it mean anything? Does all of this effort, strain and labor of evolution, which can cause so much grief and sorrow, have meaning? This is the great question and is the subtext of all of Teilhard’s spiritual teaching.

IV. Choosing a Star to Illumine You

- To deal with this great question, Teilhard will move us into the waxing and waning again of those two rival stars, as he calls them: God and the world. Deeply spiritual questions arise in his teaching: which shall we adore? Shall we banish the impression of the world from us, or shall we abandon evangelical counsels and wisdom? Shall we live the gospel of the world, or shall we live the gospel of a dualistic spirituality?
• Again, one can see these as ways that Buddhists approach the human dilemma. They are deeply sensitive to the impulse to attach ourselves to what attracts us. Or, there is the impulse to avoid that which we are averse to, and in that way hide from the reality of life. Then, of course, there is the option to live a double life—but that always divides, distorts, and, Teilhard wants to say, disgusts us.

• Teilhard proposes another way. He sees a way to electrify the complex circuitry within the human psyche. Complexity activates the psyche so that it breaks forth into insight or consciousness. Teilhard will ask: how about this as a way of being in the world—a way of radical commitment to the enrichment of life, yet with the dialectic of detachment? That is to say, love with open hands, an open heart, and an open mind.

• Teilhard wants to help us comprehend how this double helix of enrichment and detachment can bring an enormous amount of energy to the process of our personal divinization. He wants to offer us something to think about in all of this, what he calls “the incomplete solution.” He will say perhaps human action has no value other than the value we invest in it by our intention, no value except that with which we direct it.

V. Desiring Resurrection

• Speaking as a spiritual director, he reminds us that intention is the golden key that unlocks our inward personal world to God’s presence. It is almost as if we can summon divinity to our sensible awareness simply by turning toward it, by our intention. This turning toward by means of intention reveals a unique milieu unchanging beneath the diversity of task. It reveals a kind of steady state and deep fundament where we can center and cultivate foundational ground. He will teach us that intention aids the divinization of our endeavor.

• But here is that question again from Teilhard: does intention alone bring us—our bodies—to resurrection? Is it simply a practice in time and the flow of time that is ultimately ephemeral? Will anything of what hard to articulate what he views as potent wisdom. So Teilhard is asking if what we bring into being by our life and effort will be “eternalized.”

• This is a critical question for us to ponder as contemplatives. What is it of our own personal life and work that we wish to endure? That inquiring practice alone could clarify our life and our activity so much. Are our activities worthy of our lives? Will they lead us to a deeper, richer and higher level of human capacity?

• Teilhard teaches that God brings each day to reality by our yes, by our desire. He wants to tell us that everything lasts, everything counts.
Reflection Questions

1. In what lineage of spiritual ancestors do you journey in this universe? Who are your true guides, spiritual masters, and teachers?

2. Have you ever thought about the divinization of your activities? Is there something greater unfolding in human effort and great work? Whose work are we doing anyway?

3. Do you sense an anxiety about the meaning of your human life—its effort and value? How much are you influenced in your faith by the postmodern/scientific challenge to the very meaning of our existence?

4. Can you tell yourself the story of your own deep sense of the perduring value of your daily efforts?

5. How do you work with the practice of conscious intention? Do you resonate with Teilhard’s stress on our responsibility to make meaning of our own lives through our mindfulness and desire?

Overview

In this final reflection, Teilhard will bring us to understand the other movement toward the maturation of our Christic self: the experience of diminishment. Just as his spirituality calls for the complete development of all the potentials of the human person for the life of the world, so too it calls for the development of our capacity to not do, but be done-undo: to undergo and submit to being undone. As the divinization of our activities requires profound intention to leave no trace of ego on the world of our work, so the divinization of our passivities likewise requires profound intention to be acted upon, and thereby enter into the darker forces of the universe. In either case, we are held in the two hands of God—we are cultivating and vitalizing the divine milieu.

I. Discipline for Sacred Action

- As we continue to follow the itinerary of Teilhard’s footsteps into the divine milieu, he will help us to understand that the divinization of our activities is a way for the knitting and oneing (as Julian of Norwich might say) of our life in God and in the world, which occurs in the domain of action. It is our labor to be constantly evoking the divine presence through our work, and our intentional presencing ourselves to the life before us. He will say God is never far from us and reminds us that we must develop the process of divinizing our activities.

- In a typical Teilhardian paradox, he will say that the discipline of our human force must unfold for what he calls “prodigious delicacy.” This is Teilhard’s way of speaking about the beatitude of meekness. But it also has to do with a power that we are aware of—that we render in the world through our action, through this great delicacy.

- So the tremendous power of divine attraction, likewise, is focused on our frail desires and our microscopic intentions without breaking us in any way. We are to mirror the nonviolence of divinity: the gentleness, tenderness, and courtesy of divinity, who allures but does not compel us. The human center is always free to respond and move under the suasion of that allurement.

- This is where Teilhard introduces some of his own special language as he speaks of spiritual animation. This is his great principle of the way the soul is unified—the whole making process you could say of what we traditionally call grace, of divine presence and action within us.

II. Adoration in the Work Fields of the World

- This is where the Christic life begins to emerge in our humanity. Christic life is the life that springs up in us after the labor of healing our splits, the thinning out of the dense thickness of our senses so that we can actually collaborate in this Christification of the universe.
Essentially, Teilhard says that all of our actions are adoration. In a sense, it’s an enormously liturgical spirituality because he invites us to come to everything as an act of adoration, praise, offering suscipe, and consecration. He urges us to go to the temple of the fields, the office, or the factory to adore and pray in this way of energetic work exertion.

Never again, then, can we ask if our contemplative life is diminished by our activity, work, or material cares. This world of action is the field of our encounter with divinity; it is the field of our contemplative presencing. And so we do have moments of cherished prayer, but we know that the real activation of our Christic nature is in the world, and he would say heaven smiles on our works because we are building the realm of God.

III. Building the Earth; Cultivating the Divine Milieu

We are in a sense cultivating this divine milieu where the divine mystery is more and more present because we are witnessing it and reflecting it. Even in all the stress and creative tension of life, there is a sense of becoming that accompanies this kind of intention, this kind of fierce engagement with detachment. Teilhard wants us to go to God with gusto.

In some sense, he is proposing a new vow: the sanctification of human endeavor. We might ask ourselves at this stage of our gestation as a Christic being: what is this labor? How do we see this illuminating our own life in the cares, concerns, and great work of our life as we bring this worldly commitment to every occupation?

IV. The Vow of Sacred Work

This is the sanctification of our world. And so we can see that in this process we are continuing the incarnation of the Christ. It is the Christ working and living and unfolding in us in every moment, and so we make greater the realm of incarnation, the divine milieu.

We then find ourselves unified in a new center, rather than our own self-center. And Teilhard also reminds us that this kind of engaged divinized action is not really activism; engagement is not busyness. This is a kind of disciplined activity in which we keep our focus on what Teilhard would call the chief Christian virtue of humanism. This is all in the service of deepening and refining the human to its Christic potential.

This is where detachment comes in. Teilhard wants to teach us that there is a deeper renunciation concealed in this kind of great willingness of intention to work for the advancement of the realm of the divine milieu.

V. Learning the Way of Detachment

There’s a great detachment of the egoic self because right intention leads to that other Buddhist virtue: right effort, about which Teilhard speaks. It is an effort over inertia. He’s talking about the willingness to undergo the birth pangs of bringing forth a truer Christic self. Creativity requires anxiety, and so there is this discipline or asceticism that comes with our action. We have to be able to bear the inner torment of radical contingency of everything, being for the moment and in the moment.
Yet there is an irony that comes with this, and this is when we know we’re in the realm of the divine milieu. Such surrender brings on tremendous calm. It brings on a kind of peace that will invite us to an ever greater outreach toward whatever is ahead. Teilhard’s is a spirituality of the future, of willing to be in some sense the avant-garde—the advance of evolution and the future.

We do not possess results, but we are willing to constantly go beyond the self. This is the detachment of sacred action. Buddhists will chant at the end of their meditation practice: “Gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā!” It means go beyond, go way, way beyond into your Buddha nature. We too must be willing to do that in the way Teilhard is teaching us: the willingness to undergo this discipline of detachment from the self.

This is another way to echo the great testimony of Paul: “I live, no longer I but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Each and every little thing works toward advancement—this is Teilhard’s Little Way. The Christian tradition is full of beautiful paths of the Little Way. Little by little, the great breath of the universe insinuates itself into us through the fissures of our humility, and our faithful action broadens us and raises us up and bears us on.

VI. The Divinization of Our Passivities and the Two Hands of God

We said earlier on that there is a Taoist kind of movement, a yin and a yang, working within our psyche, which on the one hand propels us into the world to act with great power. Then we are the doers. But then there is another movement that we must really understand if we are to be Christified, and that is the process of diminishment: not what we do, but what we undergo. The other movement is not our powerful action in the world but this experience of undergoing, of undoing, of being undone.

In this process, joy in action melts into the desire for submission—not for power or agency—to say: not my will, but thine, the great prayer of Jesus.

This is the other oscillation. The first was the exaltation to live for something, and the other is the great desire to lose the self in God as a servant of the universe. This is the divinization of our passivities.

Teilhard wants us to survey the scope of our passivities: not what is done by us, but what we are invited to undergo, that yin kind of motion. Teilhard really surprises us by saying that our passivities are wider and deeper than our activities, because we are in a certain kind of undertow of the universe in this other dimension. We might sense that we are in eclipse, that we are being dislocated, disoriented, and depressed. But if this realm of passivity is experienced as a dark night, it is a night full of presence. And we have no idea how the energy of our passivities are funding the birthing of God into the universe.

Let us think of what our scientists have acknowledged—that the vast expanses of the universe are dark matter and dark energy about which we know very little. Teilhard tells us that our experience of passivity is a darkness heavy with promise, which is our passive labor to illuminate and animate by our openness and surrender to divine presence.
Here is the work of intending to be in this undertow of mystery. It can be a confused and restless night within two other polarities. On the one hand, there can be actual passivities of growth when, in some sense, something is creatively, constructively done unto us. We are not laboring for growth, but we experience growth. Even this submissive state is one of being open—in such seasons, the greatest growth and fruition is brought to term in us.

Teilhard will say there is another polarity: these are the passivities of our diminishment. These sometimes can feel hostile or threatening, but he says both modalities of undergoing are of God. Look deeply into them: we shall see the face of God. Teilhard concludes this particular phase of the itinerary by helping us to see these two hands of God.

VII. Living in the Divine Milieu

In this introduction to Teilhard’s itinerary for abiding in the divine milieu, we come to deliver ourselves into what Teilhard will call “the two hands of God.”

In this phase of our prayer and intention, let us live within this oscillation of our activity and our passivity, vowing, as Teilhard did, never to waste this power to love and to do—to see everything that we do as a way of bringing forth this divine milieu into history and the universe. We do this for the joy of all beings and the greater mystery whom we serve and whose dimensions we cannot fathom—but to which we give ourselves. One again, we read:

1. “Let us establish ourselves in the divine milieu. There we shall find ourselves where the soul is most deep and where matter is most dense. There we shall discover, where all its beauties flow together, the ultra-vital, the ultra-sensitive, the ultra-active point of the universe and, at the same time, we shall feel the plenitude of our powers of action and adoration effortlessly ordered within our deepest selves.” (The Divine Milieu, 108-109)
Reflection Questions

1. Do you understand your work as cultivating the divine milieu?

2. Do you experience your daily work as a mode of divine action?

3. What would have to change for your active life to be divinized?

4. Have you ever experienced the other movement: the undertow of passivity?

5. Have you ever felt that your passivities were a conduit of God’s life and presence in the world? What qualities would you have to cultivate to make that so?

6. In what ways would your spirituality need to grow to meet this vision of life in the divine milieu?
The Life of Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955)

May 1, 1881: Born at Sarcenat in the Auvergne in central France

March 20, 1899: Entered Jesuit novitiate at Aix-en-Provence

March 25, 1901: Took first vows in the Jesuit Province of Lyons

1901–1905: Years of philosophy on the island of Jersey (England)

September, 1905: Assigned to teach physics and chemistry in Cairo

1908–1912: Four years of theology at Ore Place, Hastings, South England

August 24, 1911: Ordained to the priesthood

1912–1914: Studied paleontology at the Museum of Natural History, Paris

December, 1914: Called into the French army and attached to the medical corps

January 22, 1915: Appeared on the front lines as stretcher-bearer during World War I

May 26, 1918: Made solemn vows

March 10, 1919: Demobilized

July 5, 1921: Handed in doctoral thesis on mammals of the Lower Eocene Period

1920–1923: Taught geology and paleontology at Institut Catholique in Paris

1923–1924: First period in Tientsin, China; the discovery of traces of Paleolithic Man

1924–1926: Paris interlude, but the license to teach at Institut Catholique revoked

1926–1927: Second Tientsin period

March, 1927: Finished The Divine Milieu

Oct. 1927–Nov. 1928: Another interlude in France

1929–1938: China, the discovery of Sinanthropus/Peking Man at Chou-Kou-Tien;
His father’s death, Feb 11, 1932; Three American trips;
Mother’s death, February 7, 1936.
1938–1939: Interlude in France and America.

1939–1946: Second period in Peking, the time of the World War II

June, 1938–June, 1940: *The Human Phenomenon* substantially written while in Peking.

August 6, 1944: Permission to publish *The Human Phenomenon* refused.

1946–1951: Paris

1951–1955: In America, with visits to South Africa

March, 1955: “Le Christique,” his last great essay

April 10, 1955: Dies on Easter Sunday in New York City
Suggested Readings


Selected Writings by Teilhard:

- Writings in Time of War
- The Heart of Matter
- Human Energy
- Science and Christ
- Hymn of the Universe
- The Divine Milieu
- Activation of Energy
- Toward the Future
- The Human Phenomenon
- Man’s Place in Nature
- The Vision of the Past