

## TOWARD A CHRISTIAN NEO-HUMANISM

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Teilhard de Chardin had wondered "Seeing how [...] we can reconcile, and provide mutual nourishment for, the love of God and the healthy love of the world, a striving towards detachment and a striving towards the enrichment of our human lives"<sup>1</sup> Currently, a solution to this problem is beginning to take shape for us. Through the convergence of the scientific perspective and the Christian perspective, a field of action is emerging, as it were, spontaneously, where human activity can flourish fully and attain its greatest potential for expansion.

In past centuries, human activity often seemed torn between two different directions: the call of the earth and the call of God seemed to be mutually exclusive.

Admittedly, in the Christian mind there was, strictly speaking, no contradiction between these two calls. The first call, addressed by God to humankind in the Bible, was precisely an invitation to carry out one's earthly duties with devotion: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the<sup>2</sup> earth, and subdue it." Nevertheless, in the daily life of the Christian, a certain tension persisted between earthly and secular occupations—which took up most of the day—and those rare and sublime moments when a person truly turned to God in adoration and love. The masters of the spiritual life taught us that we could somewhat alleviate this tension by performing our secular work for the love of God and in obedience to His will, using it as a means of self-forgetfulness and consecrating it through right intention. All of this was entirely accurate. And yet one point remained unclear: how work could be dedicated from within, for the dedication one wished to bestow upon it remained entirely external. Any aspiration toward knowledge, beauty, and justice, toward the edification and enrichment of earthly life, continued to belong to the secular realm, and this term carried a certain pejorative connotation.

Yet this tension is definitively resolved in the eyes of those who recognize Christ as the ultimate goal and the crowning achievement, not only of the supernatural order but also of the natural order (a thesis that holds up very well from a theological standpoint), or, as Teilhard de Chardin did, in the eyes of those who give this conception an even more concrete expression by attributing to Christ the place indicated in our world plan by the Omega Point. Indeed, from this perspective, the Christian can, more than before, devote his full attention and dedicate his efforts to earthly missions—whether economic and social tasks or those of a scientific and artistic nature—in the conviction that they ultimately possess an internal orientation toward Christ and toward God, and that they thus have, within the Christian world order as a whole, a value of consecration.

Viewed from this perspective, the Christian life takes on a magnificent and awe-inspiring unity, in which both earthly concerns and supernatural aspirations are given their proper place, and their internal coherence attains its full meaning. Since, in the eyes of the Christian, the true final end of history consists in the realization of the full Christ, and since the building up of the community in a higher collective consciousness represents an indispensable (though insufficient) condition for this, it follows that every human effort that contributes in any way to humanity's ascent toward this goal is ultimately also directed toward the coming of the Kingdom, toward which Scripture leads us. The aspiration for union with God and faith in our divine destiny no longer distract us from our earthly task, nor do they distance us from the work we must accomplish in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> The Divine Milieu, Vol. 4, p.53.

<sup>2</sup> Gen. 1,28.

On the contrary, Christ's love becomes the great source of inspiration for our work; this work is necessary and inwardly oriented toward Christ. "Hence whatever our role as men may be, whether we are artists, working-men or scholars, we can, if we are Christians, speed towards the object of our work as though towards an opening on to the supreme fulfilment of our beings."<sup>3</sup> Far from diverting our attention from our earthly duties or fostering indifference toward human labor, Christianity, properly understood, would, on the contrary, serve as an unparalleled and unsurpassed stimulus to fulfill our earthly duties properly and would bestow upon every human effort its highest consecration. This series of ideas contains a comprehensive and profound theology of human labor.

Teilhard is fully aware that in all this he is in complete harmony with the Church's most authentic teaching: "All I am doing [...] is to transpose into terms of physical reality the juridical expressions in which the Church has clothed her faith."<sup>4</sup> It has sometimes been claimed that, in this way of presenting things, the distinction between the natural order and the supernatural order is not expressed clearly enough—as if the realization of the supernatural union of all Christians in the Mystical Body were the result of humanity's natural fulfillment in a higher form of unity. Such a presentation, however, would be in complete contradiction with the most explicit statements of Teilhard de Chardin. "I do not attribute any definitive or absolute value to the varied constructions of nature. What I like about them is not their particular form, but their function, which is to build up mysteriously, first what can be divinised, and then, through the grace of Christ coming down upon our endeavour, what is divine..."<sup>5</sup> For him, the natural fulfillment of humanity has only a preparatory role, though an indispensable one; "... Christ needs to find a world-peak for his consummation, just as he needed to find a woman for his conception."<sup>6</sup> The gratuity of salvation, as well as of the Incarnation, is fully upheld in his thought.

From this perspective, then, the Christian life acquires a profound and organic unity, both in its earthly and its heavenly dimensions. It becomes possible to orient oneself entirely toward God while at the same time devoting all one's energies to the progress of the Earth. From this point of view, it becomes possible to love the Earth without betraying our heavenly vocation. "It used to appear that there were only two attitudes mathematically possible for man: to love heaven or to love earth. With a new view of space, a third road is opening up: to make our way to heaven *through* earth. There is a communion (the true communion) with God through the world." "Without any tendency to deviate into any naturalism or Pelagianism, he finds that he, as much as and even more than the unbeliever, can and must have a passionate concern for a terrestrial progress which is essential to the consummation of the kingdom of God."<sup>8</sup>

Far from alienating man from himself, as Marxism claims, religion—understood in this way—becomes the supreme source of spiritual energy, from which we can draw the strength to carry out our earthly task as perfectly as possible. "It is only the Christian (and he *only in so far* as he absorbs into himself the humano-divine properties of the Universal Christ) who is in a position today to answer the complex demands of nature and grace by an incredibly rich and simple act, by a *completely synthetic act* in which the spirit of detachment and the spirit of conquest combine, correct and elevate one another - the spirit of tradition and the spirit of adventurous enquiry, the spirit of the earth and the spirit of God."<sup>9</sup>

Thus the Christian is better equipped than anyone else to take up with enthusiasm and confidence the task we have to accomplish in this world. More than anyone, he can respond with love to the call of

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<sup>3</sup> The Divine Milieu, Vol. 4, p.63.

<sup>4</sup> Christianity and Evolution, Vol. 10, p.128.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Fr. Aug. Valensin, quoted in The Divine Milieu, Vol. 4, p.93.

<sup>6</sup> Christianity and Evolution, Vol. 10, p.128.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.93.

<sup>8</sup> Toward the Future, Vol. 11, p.104.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.100.

the Earth, which invites us to bring to completion the work begun within it. For him, the threat of *taedium vitae*, of discouragement and despair, is definitively overcome. Far from signifying any weakening or limitation of our effort, faith in Christ constitutes the most powerful incentive to work with confidence toward the building of the future. As love for God and for Christ grows stronger within him, he will also be able to devote himself with greater dedication and selflessness to our earthly hopes, convinced that in doing so he is helping to bring the Kingdom of God closer in this world. For him, work and effort have become a communion with God through the world: "In a universe in which everything makes for the gradual formation of the spirit which God raises to final union, every undertaking acquires, in its tangible reality, the sacred value of a communion."<sup>10</sup>

From the preceding considerations, it is clear what sanctification and consecration can be attributed to human labor. This does not apply solely to our individual activities. Indeed, even the simplest and most humble work we perform each day represents a valuable contribution to humanity's ultimate progress. There is the work of the laborer, the engineer, and the business leader; there is the work of the mother, the nurse, and the social worker; there is the work of the teacher, the doctor, and the civil servant: ultimately, everything is placed at the service of the spirit and the future. All these missions and so many others find their meaning within the greater whole and are inwardly oriented toward the building of the Kingdom of God.

But it is not only individual tasks and missions; there are also the great collective undertakings facing humanity today. It seems that humanity today is seized by a passion, unknown until now, for creative work in all areas, as if it had suddenly become aware not only of its strength and possibilities, but even more so of its responsibility toward the future and the cosmos. It has suddenly been presented a new horizon of tasks and missions. A great hope, a great expectation, and an unparalleled passion for work have taken hold of us and animate the most dynamic and noble part of humanity.

In the scientific and social spheres, research and work are being carried out with unparalleled zeal and passion by thousands and tens of thousands of the best and most gifted among us. And this zeal and passion are inspired not so much by the desire for self-preservation or personal gain, but rather by a high ethical concern that drives us to strive with all our might for ever more truth, beauty, and justice. "The moral support sought in the consciousness of forwarding the growth of the world by forwarding that of mankind *is tending to become a normal and habitual driving force* behind every human activity."<sup>11</sup> As human beings and Christians, we can feel nothing but respect and admiration for the great collective aspiration that has taken hold of humanity today. Moreover: if we are aware of the demands that Christianity places upon us, we will strive to participate fully in this aspiration and to feel, as deeply as anyone else, the passion to collaborate in the grand tasks that people today have set for themselves. As Christians, indeed, we should precisely take the lead in the noblest aspirations currently found among humanity.

The opposition between *the party of Men and the party of God* is artificial, and for Teilhard de Chardin it was completely inconceivable. No one more than he felt, deep within himself, a passion for the progress of humanity through science and social action—and in him, that passion was precisely inspired and elevated by his love of Christ. To be sure, this has not always been the case among Christians. He openly acknowledged this: "Let us be frank about this. Fundamentally, the Church has never understood, as we understand it, the fine pride of man, nor the sacred passion for enquiry, which are the two basic elements of modern thought."<sup>12</sup> His greatest message to his brothers in the faith was precisely this: that they must devote all their strength to the tasks of this world and, through that path, aim at their eternal salvation. We must decisively overcome past errors and demonstrate through our

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<sup>10</sup> Human Energy, Vol. 6, p.179.

<sup>11</sup> Toward the Future, Vol. 11, p.22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.29.

attitude just how much religion can be a driving force for the true progress of humanity. It is not enough to remain passive; less than anyone else, the Christian has the right to become a victim of the "demon of immobilism."<sup>13</sup> With enthusiasm and dedication, he must cooperate in progress in every field.

The attitude toward life that Teilhard de Chardin thus advocates is, above all, characterized by its dynamic nature: "To try everything and force everything in the direction of the greatest consciousness; this, in a universe recognized to be in a state of spiritual transformation, is the general and highest law of morality: *to limit force* (unless for the purpose of obtaining even more force) *is sin*."<sup>14</sup> In this direction, he also sees a flowering of the evangelical virtues, oriented toward an ever greater spiritual renewal: "*Love one another*. Is that essentially Christian disposition limited to easing, individually, the sufferings of our fellowmen? Or does it not, rather, need to be developed in active sympathy with the great human body, in such a way as not merely to bind up its wounds but to embrace its anxieties, its hopes, all the structural growth that creation still looks for in it?"<sup>15</sup> Christian charity represents more than a drop of balm on the sufferings of others. It is the great universal force that supports and drives us in our aspiration to fully realize our human existence. It is the true source of energy that humanity needs to carry out its mission to the very end.

In this area of ethics, we can clearly see how Teilhard de Chardin employs the same method, namely that of placing each problem within a broader framework, that of the whole. He always strives to consider humanity and all aspects of human life in their cosmic dimensions, in their relationships and coherence with the great historical process in which we are involved and of which we have become conscious and active collaborators—and, even more so, responsible agents.

Viewed in this light, ethics represents more than a set of rules governing human relationships. It is, above all, an awareness of the place we occupy in the cosmos and the task we are called to fulfill there. Christian ethics, too, can be transposed onto the cosmic plane and can feel completely at home there without abandoning any aspect of its own essence. Moreover, in the Christo-cosmic vision developed by Teilhard de Chardin, it takes on a new radiance and a new beauty. "To worship was formerly to prefer God to things, relating them to him and sacrificing them for him. To worship is now becoming to devote oneself body and soul to the creative act, associating oneself with that act in order to fulfil the world by hard work and intellectual exploration.

"To love one's neighbour was formerly to do him no injury and to bind up his wounds. Henceforth charity, without losing any of its compassion, will attain its full meaning in life given for common progress.

"To be pure was formerly to hold oneself aloof from, to guard against, contamination. The name of chastity will be given tomorrow primarily to sublimation of the powers of the flesh and of all passion.

"To be detached was formerly to attach no value to things, and to abstain from them, as far as possible. To be detached will become more and more to leave behind every truth and every beauty in turn, precisely in virtue of the love one has for them.

"To be resigned could formerly mean passive acceptance of present conditions in the universe. Resignation will now be confined to the wrestler capitulating in the grip of the angel."<sup>16</sup>

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In the final months of his life, Teilhard de Chardin planned to write an essay that would have been titled *Humanism and Humanism*. He outlined the central idea he intended to develop in the essay in a

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<sup>13</sup> *The Future of Man*, Vol. 5, p.148.

<sup>14</sup> *Human Energy*, Vol. 6, p.108.

<sup>15</sup> *Toward the Future*, Vol. 11, p.96.

<sup>16</sup> *Christianity and Evolution*, Vol. 10, p.92,93.

letter dated March 30, 1955, to Jeanne Mortier. According to him, two forms of humanism needed to be distinguished. First, there was the *classical Greek humanism*, which aimed above all to enable human beings to achieve the greatest possible fulfillment (Plato, the Renaissance). In contrast to this outdated form of humanism, to which many of our contemporaries remain attached, a new humanism is now emerging: "An evolutionary neo-humanism, driven by the conviction that there is an *Ultra-Human*." The Greeks dreamed of the harmoniously developed human being; we now envision the fully evolved human being, the human being who rises above himself to attain his true purpose in this superhuman being. "Cosmos-based humanism—outdated, obsolete—and on the verge of being replaced by a Cosmo-genesis-based humanism."<sup>17</sup>

Teilhard de Chardin was no longer able to write the essay he had intended, but in a certain sense one could say that, ultimately, his entire body of work is nothing other than a sustained attempt to examine this new humanism from every angle. Aided by his extraordinary knowledge of contemporary natural sciences and by his rich receptivity and sensitivity to the spiritual trends of our time, he sought to describe the spiritual physiognomy of the new ideal of humanity, whose premonitory signs are already clearly manifesting themselves around us. This new ideal of humanity, though deeply rooted in knowledge of the past, is entirely oriented toward the future and toward the attainment of a higher stage in the great historical process in which we are involved. "A new humanism is blossoming in almost every quarter – as an irresistible effect of co-reflection. It is a humanism not of balance, but of movement, in which no value can still hold good - *even, and particularly, ill the area of religion* - unless it allows room for the existence of some ultra-human cosmic future."<sup>18</sup>

The clash between this new humanism and the Christian conception of life is what makes Teilhard de Chardin unique. Although in the eyes of laypeople he was first and foremost a man of science, concerned with the progress of his field, deep down he was first and foremost a religious thinker irresistibly drawn to the challenges that this new humanism poses to Christianity. We have seen the ways in which he strove to integrate this new humanism into Christianity. It was not without a grain of truth, then, that Dr. Chauchard was able to write: "What is new about Teilhard is neither the scientific facts nor the religious concepts; it is the fact that these two worlds—science and faith—which appear to most of our contemporaries to be, if not hostile, at least separate, were for him a single whole, united in a remarkable harmony of thought and life."<sup>19</sup> With this aspiration toward the union and synthesis of religion and culture, he is fully in line with Catholic tradition.

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A Christian neo-humanism: this was Teilhard de Chardin's aspiration and hope, an aspiration and hope that defined his life.

As a young priest, he had already resolved to devote his life to this cause, and in the trenches at the front during World War I, he wrote these words: "And I, Lord, for my (very lowly) part, would wish to be the apostle—and, if I dare be so bold—the evangelist— of *your Christ in the universe*. Through my thinking, through the message I bring, through the practical activity of my whole life, I would wish to disclose and make known to men the bonds of continuity that make the cosmos of our restless ferment into an ambience that is divinized by the Incarnation, that divinizes by communion, and that is divinizable by our co-operation. [...]

"To those who are dazzled by the nobility of human endeavour, I would say, in the name of Christ, that man's work is sacred, sacred both in the submission of the will to God, and in the great task it

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<sup>17</sup> Lettres à Jeanne Mortier, p.179.

<sup>18</sup> Christianity and Evolution, Vol. 10, p.215,216.

<sup>19</sup> Dr Paul Chauchard, *Teilhard de Chardin, l'humaniste socialiste et la réconciliation des Humanismes*, in "Synthèses", n°169-170, juin-juillet 1960, p.331.

accomplishes in the course of endless tentative efforts—and that task is the liberation, natural and supernatural, of the spirit.

"To those who are indolent, unenterprising, infantile, or narrowminded in their religious attitude, I would point out that man's development is essential to Christ for the formation of his Body, and that a constant spirit of Research directed towards the World and Truth is an absolute duty."<sup>20</sup>

It is clear to everyone that he remained faithful until the very last day of his life to the path he had set for himself in his youth. Rarely has a human life been so defined by a single guiding principle, and the way in which he fulfilled his mission makes his work and his legacy one of the most significant spiritual events of our century.

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<sup>20</sup> The Priest, in Writings in Time of War, Vol 12, pp.219,220.