

Teilhard de Chardin's planetary vision of humanity: The Noosphere.

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A pilgrim of the future.

A “Pilgrim of the Future” (*Pèlerin de l'Avenir*), appellative which Pierre Teilhard de Chardin applied to himself, may be the best description of what he wanted to be. In 1923, he wrote: “A Pilgrim of the Future, I return from a journey made entirely in the Past”. His dedication to geology and paleontology could rather indicate the contrary, an interest for the past: the past of the Earth's formation, the past of life, the past of man. However, for him the past was only a means to understanding the future. The future was always the principal object of his enquiries. But he was very aware that we cannot look into the future if we don't know the past and its evolution in time. Thus, cosmic evolution is at the center of his vision which he projected to the future. Late in his life in 1952 he wrote: “Geology is at present displaced for me by the human and the ultra-human...the neo-anthropology takes the first place now in my reflections and conversations”. He meant by this that the future, understood as the future of man (neo-anthropology), occupies now the center of his interest instead of the past (geology). For him with the appearance of man (the noosphere), the line of evolution has passed from the biological evolution to the social evolution. It is in the latter that evolution will continue to the final achievement of the whole universe. The Pilgrim of the Future will have to follow the steps of the evolution of humanity looking always toward what is ahead.¹

The emergence and evolution of the noosphere

In the process of evolution there are two moments of what Teilhard calls discontinuity in continuity, the appearance of life and of consciousness or thought. The first gives origin to a new layer or envelope of living matter over the Earth, the “biosphere” (term introduced by the geologist Eduard Suess, 1831-1914). The second corresponds to the appearance of the human with his reflexive knowledge or consciousness. Man not only knows, but he is aware of his own knowledge, he knows that he knows. Teilhard used the term “noosphere” for the first time in 1925, for this new envelope of conscious matter on Earth, the sphere of reflection or thought. Once conscious thought has appeared on Earth, a new dynamic and irresistible process at planetary and cosmic levels begins which Teilhard calls human “socialization” or “planetization”.² By planetization Teilhard understands the establishment of all cultural and social processes at the planetary level overcoming individual and group interests. Planetary motion is conditioned by the limited spherical form of the Earth's surface that forces the humans

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Œuvres*, Volumes I to XIII, Paris, Editions du Seuil.

² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *La planétisation humaine* (1945), in *L'Avenir de l'Homme*, *Œuvres* V, 157-175.

to organize more and more among themselves, creating units of greater social complexity filling the whole planet. This process of human organization is actually a continuation of the cosmic tendency of increasing complexity present in the whole history of the universe. Teilhard's planetization can be compared with the modern term of globalization, that is, social processes affecting the whole world. The influence of man on all aspects of the Earth has raised the proposal of a new geological epoch, the "anthropocene", dominated by humanity, which is considered to follow the holocene. There are several proposals for the beginning of this epoch, which varies from about 8000 years ago with the beginning of the farming revolution to the end of the 18th century with the industrial revolution. One can see the anthropocene as the consequence of the impact on the physical Earth of the development and progress of the noosphere.

Teilhard finds two movements or stages in the formation of the noosphere which he calls two types of "socialization": a socialization of expansion and a socialization of compression. The socialization of expansion implies that individuation and civilization were present in the first human groups as they moved from hunter-gatherer tribes to the first civilizations. This stage stresses the needs and values of the individuals and foster the increasing possibilities of separated persons. Emphasis is put at the individual person, his needs, rights, welfare and happiness and also at groups, be them families, tribes or nations. We are still today in many aspects at this stage. Teilhard also calls this stage the pluralistic solution, which is present as humanity expands to occupy the complete surface of the Earth. The socialization of compression implies "totalization" and "personalization" at a higher level. This process takes place as world population keeps increasing and human organization becomes more tightly united in order to form just one social body. Social, cultural, religious, political, economic, and technical organizations contribute to this process. The emphasis on the individual is, at this stage, superseded by the emphasis on the social. Unity is now placed at the planetary level, that is, it must be formed by the whole humanity. Teilhard sees this process not as a merely additive one made up of human units, but as the emergence of a new social unity at planetary level. Although he uses the word "social", the new unity of the noosphere is achieved through, what he calls, a "physical irresistible process". From the "cerebralization" of the individual, that is, the evolution of animal forms along the line of more complex brains, in the first stages of the noosphere, we pass now to what can be called a "collective cerebralization" at planetary level in search for a final unity.

Immediately after the experience of the Second World War, which Teilhard saw as the most terrible shock suffered by the living layers of the Earth, he insisted in the inevitable human unifying process of planetization. Though the war was a confrontation that moved in a direction opposite to what he had hoped for, he realized that after the war the world started to become more connected through a process of increasing socialization. In his analysis, he presents three elements of the socialization: collective memory which results in an accumulation of common experiences; a network of communications covering the whole Earth and the emergence of a new faculty of common vision. We can see that these elements are present and keep growing in the world today. For example, global communication, very limited still in Teilhard's times, has

greatly increased with the new instruments of communication media, such as, mobile phones, internet, social-networks, etc. As Teilhard expresses it, the noosphere, the thinking envelope of the Earth keeps increasing its “temperature”, raising its “psyquisme” in an external and internal human planetization. Humanity becomes totally reflected over itself in what can be called a “second hominization”. In this process, contrary to what we may think, the collectivization leads also to an increase in personalization. Individuals don’t lose their personalities, but increase them at a higher level.

The result of these processes in the development of the noosphere is, in Teilhard’s view, the creation of a new unity or “superorganism” based on knowledge.³ Another term he uses is that of a “superbody” (*super-corps*). He considers that we must pass from a juridical interpretation of the links between men to an organic or biological one. A powerful instrument in this process is the progress in the communication media. Although Teilhard knew only the very limited media of his times (telephone, radio, television), he foresaw their increasing progress in power, so that they could truly become what he calls a “liberating machine” (*machine libératrice*) of the noosphere. He understood this as a liberation from the constraints to communication imposed by space-time limits. Teilhard saw the media as contributing to the formation of what he called an “ethereal co-conscience” (*co-conscience éthérée*). He doesn’t elaborate what he means by this, but we can see here a premonition of the “virtual-world” and the “cyber-space” of the internet and the social networks. In this process a predominant role is played by science and technology which form the arrowhead of human evolution. Thus, for Teilhard, scientific research is not just a part of human effort, important as it may be, but the “great affaire of the world” (*la Grand Affaire du Monde*), the vital human function, as vital as nutrition and reproduction. He insists that it is through science that man can create a mystique that will form a true human unanimity.

The spirit of the Earth

Once thinking conscious elements have appeared on the Earth, the noosphere, and the currents toward their greater unification have been established, two possibilities are still open for humanity because of its free nature: each person might choose either to seek his own good, the individual achievement or to build in solidarity the good of the world. In this form humanity would continue at the conscious level the line of evolution toward a greater unity present in the whole universe. Teilhard links this problem with the foundation of morality. The free elements of the noosphere are faced in their action with the problem of choosing what ought to be done: the basic question of ethics. The two possibilities we have mentioned result in two ethical or morals systems: one based on a static individualism and the second on an evolutionary collectivization. The first which give priority of individual and personal interest is the result of a pluralistic conception of humanity. This contradicts the general movement of evolution, which cannot be

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *La formation de la noosphère* (1947), in *L’Avenir de l’Homme*, Œuvres V, 199-231.

stopped with the emergence of man. The second is a consequence of evolution at the level of the noosphere which must continue in the direction of greater unity at social level through an increase in personalization and spiritualization. This must rule human actions taking into account the free nature of its elements.

As Teilhard wrote: “There are not only spirits on the Earth. The world must continue: it will be one Spirit of the Earth” (*Esprit de la Terre*).⁴ The “Spirit of the Earth” is what makes possible the convergent motion of the free elements of the noosphere toward their final achievement in the Omega Point. He places the Spirit of the Earth in the future, as something to be achieved by the unanimous work of humanity and at the same time as something already present which impulses the noosphere in that direction. He rules out first the possibility of a total death (*la mort totale*) of humanity, excluded by the presence of the spirit from the very origins of the cosmic evolution. Such death would indicate the world to be what he calls “a monster of the spirit”. For Teilhard the spirit constitutes precisely the indestructible part of the universe and therefore something necessarily permanent. Once this obstacle is saved, two motions opposed to this unifying process are still present: repulsion and materialization. The first springs up from the instinctive repulsion of the human molecules for each other, a tendency which is present in every individualistic interaction. The second corresponds to a reversal in the cosmic evolution which must tend always toward a greater spiritualization.

Teilhard is aware that in the social organization there are many roads along which humanity can make its way. He reduced them to two: “evolution of plurality” and “evolution of unity”. The first leads to divergence, where the elements tend to oppose each other, moved by what he called a “mystique of separation”. This tendency can be seen in the growth of particularisms and nationalisms, which seek satisfaction in a progress of individuals or groups against each other. This, for Teilhard, would be to introduce, in the evolution at the conscious level, an element of desegregation and death. Beginning with the individual and extended to any group, tribe or nation, this tendency is opposed to a true unification at planetary level. Behind this motion one can always find the “spirit of egoism” opposed to the Spirit of the Earth, which is really the spirit of evolution. No matter how strong these particularizing tendencies present themselves, they will be overcome by the unifying process which is driven by Spirit of the Earth. Another expression Teilhard uses in this context is the “Sense of the Earth” (*Sens de la Terre*) which he defines as a passionate sense of the common destiny of humanity. This Sense of the Earth opens our hearts to the call of the world to a true unanimity. Unanimity is a word often used by Teilhard to indicate the unity at conscious level. For him the only unanimity or human unity which is really natural and real is that achieved by the Spirit of the Earth and fostered by the Sense of the Earth.

We still need to know which force will drive men toward this unity overcoming all the obstacles. Teilhard’s answer is very clear, stating that the force behind this process, which must be realized in freedom, cannot be other than that of love. For him “love is the most universal, the

⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *L’Esprit de la Terre* (1931), in *L’Énergie humaine*, Œuvres VI, 22-57.

most formidable and the most mysterious of the cosmic energies”.⁵ This may seem strange, but Teilhard uses this word in the very general sense of a mutual internal affinity (*affinité mutuelle interne*). Thus, at the human level love is a continuation of what he has called the “radial energy”, that is, the energy that has been the driving force of evolution from the very beginnings of the synthesis of elementary particles of inanimate matter. At the human level, that is, for persons, this force takes the form of love, for love is the only force that can achieve unity without negating individuality. In his own words: “Only a union realized for love and in love has physically the property not only to differentiate, but to personalize the elements that it organizes”. His conception of human evolution is, then, a dynamic one, tending toward unity through the impetus of love, without losing the individuality and personality of those who are united. The insight Teilhard has induced from the natural sciences does not allow for other approaches, since they show a dynamic universe in a converging evolution through the line of ever-increasing complexity, from the elementary particles to the human. The continuation of this tendency at the conscious level of the noosphere implies a motion toward its unity through the force of love. Social sciences show us also a progressing motion of humanity along its history, which tends always to some kind of unity.

The great option

As we have seen, Teilhard sees the world at the noosphere level driven by the force of love toward an ever greater unification. However, the elements of the noosphere, that is, individual persons, are free to choose their future. How can we fit this with the inevitable union implied in the Spirit of the Earth? Here we find the most difficult problem Teilhard has to solve: the necessary convergence of the noosphere and the free nature of its elements. Can the elements of the noosphere freely choose not to converge? The noosphere’s freedom of choice and its necessary convergence toward unity seem to be opposed to each other. Teilhard considers this problem in his essay titled “The great option” (*La Grande Option*).⁶ Faced with his future, humanity is presented with a variety of possible roads to follow: pessimism or optimism, optimism of evasion or of evolution, evolutionism of plurality or evolutionism of unity. One by one Teilhard rules out the negative choices to remain with the evolution of unity as the only possible choice. Nevertheless, the experience of human tendencies toward dispersion can still make us doubt of the inevitability of the convergence toward unity that Teilhard presents as a necessity. To solve this problem, he distinguishes two types of unifications: forced and free. The forced one results as a consequence of what he calls the geometric or geographic and the mental or psychic curvatures of the noosphere. The first is conditioned by the finite spherical surface of the Earth which brings people more and more physically together. The second by the conditions of the conscious reflexed nature of the noosphere, which tend to create a forced coalescence. However, experience shows us the scandalous and chaotic dispersion of humanity. How can we

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *L'Énergie humaine* (1937) in *L'Énergie humaine*, Œuvres VI, 180-192.

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *La Grande Option* (1939), in *L'Avenir de l'Homme*, Œuvres V, 55-81.

be sure that in spite of all difficulties the noosphere will arrive to the desired union? Is not experience showing us just the opposite?

Teilhard has to bring here a new and final attraction that will control the movements of the noosphere. Like the first two (the geometric and psychic curvatures), this third power is also of planetary dimensions, but it will not act in a forced form but as a free one. Its operation is in the way of “seduction” by a “superpersonal” Center, the Omega Point, which operates through a free consent. Since at the noosphere level the unifying motion is made through the force of love, the influence of the Omega Point can only be through a truly “super-love”.⁷ The unifying convergence of the noosphere is, thus, guaranteed and ends in the final focus of the cosmic evolution, the Omega Point, precisely by the presence and attraction through love of the same Omega Point. This presence and action prevent the possibility of a definitive negative option that would doom the world to the abyss of diverging multiplicity and at the same time respect the freedom of choice of the noosphere.

We have mentioned that the modern phenomenon of globalization may be interpreted as a sign, weak as it may be, of the human convergence postulated by Teilhard. This sign can be seen also in various other phenomena present today in society, for example, in the increase in world communications, rapid global transportation, concern for international affairs and strengthening of the role of the international organizations (United Nations, International Criminal Court, etc.). However, modern times are also witness to many divergent motions, such as, nationalisms, violence, wars and terrorism. Technology which has created many conditions for human unity is also responsible of ways of life which foster individualistic tendencies, such as consumerism and growing inequalities. In view of this, one may ask if there is a reasonable ground for Teilhard’s optimistic view. It is a matter of weighting the evidences at hand, though we are still too far away to see clear signs of a true human convergence. We must not forget that Teilhard developed his vision during the time of two world wars and the tragic divisions present during the cold war. Today we need some of his optimism to be able to see, through the many dark signs, the light at the end of the tunnel which shines as a hope for the future of mankind.

The Christological dimension

In this context, Teilhard introduces the role of the Christian faith as a force which works in the same direction as that of the human convergence. For him Christianity has to become the “religion of the future” (*religion de l’avenir*) by discovering what he calls the “Human Sense” (*Le Sens Humain*), which is really already implicit in it, as he recognizes. The human sense is the drive of all men toward a unified achievement, and, for a Christian, this achievement is fulfilled by the union of all men in Christ. Thus, he adds that “the light of Christ is not eclipsed by the shining of the ideas of future, research and progress, but it occupies the center which sustains its fire” and concludes that Christ is the only one who can save the human aspirations of our time.

⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Sens Humain* (1929), in *Les Directions de l’Avenir*, Œuvres XI, 21-44.

In the epilogue of his fundamental work, *The human Phenomenon*, entitled “The Christian Phenomenon” (*Le Phénomène chrétien*), Teilhard ventures a Christian interpretation of the whole cosmic evolution in which the Omega Point is identified with the figure of Christ.⁸ The postulated attraction of the Omega Point which drives the noosphere through love to its convergence is realized in the historical presence of Jesus of Nazareth. The universe, then, through the convergence of humanity tends really to an ultimate unity which can only be achieved in union with Christ. Christ is, then, the Presence of the Omega point in the human history, attracting human progress toward himself, and thus helping its achievement. In this way Teilhard finally solves the tension between the free nature of the noosphere and its convergence into unity. In this interpretation the cosmogenesis of evolution becomes truly a “Christogenesis”, since the pole of evolution is identified with incarnated Christ. The unity of humanity and the universe with Christ is what Teilhard calls the “total” or “universal” Christ.

Conclusion

Teilhard de Chardin conceives humanity as the thinking envelope of the Earth or the noosphere. As the biosphere was the transition from the non-living to the living, the noosphere is the transition from the unconscious to the fully conscious and thinking. As he has followed the line of cosmic evolution in the direction of an ever-greater complexity, with elements uniting to form new more complex unities, he proposes that this process must also be present in the noosphere. The unifying process in which the human groups become more and more united is now called socialization and planetization. The unifying force present in cosmic evolution and responsible for its direction through the mutual attraction of its elements toward greater complex centers takes at the conscious level the form of the force of love. Through the force of love the noosphere will eventually achieve in freedom its final unity in the Omega Point who is attracting it toward himself. From the Christian point of view, the Omega Point is identified with Christ in whom all men and the whole universe will finally unite.

⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Phénomène humain* (1938-1940), Œuvres I, 324-332.