

THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Another World is Possible: Violence, Resistance and Transformation  
Convener: Heidi Russell, Loyola University Chicago  
Moderator: Paul J. Schutz, Santa Clara University  
Presenter: Levi Checketts, Holy Names University  
Respondents: John Slattery, American Association for the Advancement of Science  
Shawnee Marie Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary University

In “The Christian Response to Entropy: Reading Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Against Himself on Violence,” Levi Checketts weighs the critique of Teilhard de Chardin in regard to writings that include racist beliefs, support for eugenics, and praise for the atomic bomb against the contribution that Teilhard has offered in theology and spirituality. Checketts suggests reading Teilhard against Teilhard, arguing that “his writings advocating for Christian responsibility in the universe and the seriousness of evil should take precedence over his writing supporting violent or morally problematic elements.” Checketts suggests that Teilhard’s “vision for Christian responsibility in a universe marked by natural evil requires us to see the moral failings as merely that—failings refuted by his larger moral and theological vision.”

Checketts maintains that the problematic elements in Teilhard’s writings should be noted and condemned, but argues they do not “irrevocably taint the corpus of his work.” Checketts highlights the two forces that Teilhard sees as primary in the universe: compression and attraction. He explains that while compression creates by violence, attraction “is non-compulsive and non-destructive.” Teilhard does not see violence as a necessary evil, but rather a condition for growth and a call to Christians for reflection and non-violent response in light of the cross. Teilhard’s understanding of cosmic movement calls us to “overcome the cycle of violence as we move outward and upward to the Omega point or, in other words, to convergence into Cosmic Christ.”

Checketts does not ignore Teilhard’s “dark side” but concludes that Teilhard’s “most critical contributions to religious thought and most foundational thought subvert his own morally flawed views.” Ultimately his vision of evolution through self-reflection calls us to overcome violence, sin, and suffering, including the sins that Teilhard himself is guilty of committing. Checketts suggests that we need to come to terms with the humanity of our theological heroes, and such flawed saints as Teilhard are instructive in reminding us that salvation is not earned but given.

In his response to Checketts, John Slattery explains the concept of eugenics in the early twentieth century was embedded in the cultural context of racism and xenophobia, and the philosophical context of a hierarchical anthropology and cultural progressivism. Slattery carefully lays out examples of these perspectives across the corpus of Teilhard’s work, arguing that “all of his work, even his mystical writings, must be understood in the context of the three destructive philosophies, and a general hermeneutic of suspicion must be cast on any elements that discuss elitism, control, evolution, humanity, primacy, and culture.” Slattery does not conclude that we should abandon our study of Teilhard’s work, but rather that we should read Teilhard through the lens of liberation theology and God’s preferential option for the poor, upending

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Teilhard's preference for the intelligent, strong, and fertile with a prioritization of the poor, weak, and outcast.

Shawnee Daniels-Sykes notes that while the corpus of Teilhard's work might stand against the dark side of his racism or support of eugenics, the latter cannot be seen as "a mere flaw or blemish," because the same moral evils exist today. These moral evils "must not be shelved, but named, claimed, and addressed." To claim that Teilhard's vision subverts his flawed views is the equivalent of saying, "I don't see color," or, "All lives matter." Daniels-Sykes also notes, however, that we must "reflect upon the social, theological, and political contexts Teilhard inherited." Daniels-Sykes recounts the racist history that led to the normalizing of Teilhard's views, without excusing those views, explaining that the laws and culture of the time supported eugenics as a method of improving the human race. She adds that even "W.E.B. Dubois trusted this approach for the purity and enhancement of the Black population." Daniels-Sykes concludes that these elements in Teilhard's work should be discussed further, as should the "over-arching ethos of Teilhard's time and how he was influenced."

The session was followed by a lively discussion that noted the value of Teilhard's contribution and the need to do the hermeneutical work to recognize his flaws and the limits of his historical and scientific context, given how much more we know today. The audience and presenters expressed varying opinions on the extent to which such a hermeneutical retrieval of his work is possible.

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