

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN: TOWARD A DEVELOPMENTAL AND ORGANIC THEOLOGY

There is a new consciousness developing in our society and there are different efforts to describe it. I will mention three factors in this new world view which Catholic theology has to consider seriously.¹

Development: I am happy Jaroslav Pelican included this word in his opening address by choosing to talk about the "development of doctrine." He defined development as continuity with change. The word combines continuity and discontinuity. Both aspects are important in developmental thinking. Wherever we look, whether to the biological sciences (their interpretations of evolution), to contemporary philosophical movements (process, becoming, time), or to psychology, we find that we think in developmental terms. Psychology today is developmental psychology and this was not always true. Whether we are conscious of it or not, whether we tend to be Freudian, neo-Freudian, or humanistic, we approach our understanding of the human person developmentally. It is something we take for granted. The emphasis we place upon history, the historicity of the person and of society, and the development of historical-critical method all show that we are conscious of development. The question I raise is how can we more and more incorporate this into our theological understandings of God, Christological issues, sacraments, morality? For example, in moral theology, the question is extremely crucial because it is in moral theology where we struggle with the notion of absolutes that are not easy to reconcile with the notion of development.

Accompanying the notion of development is the notion of "unfinishedness" or "incompleteness." To say that we are developing or that development is a fact about our universe and about us implies an incompleteness and an unfinishedness. Previously we thought of reality as more or less finished or complete. Development, however, implies an ongoingness and an openness. If we take the notion of development seriously, we must seriously consider the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and Alfred North Whitehead.

Organicity: I speak of a developmental and organic theology. What does organicity imply? There are different words that one could use, unicity being one. We struggle to integrate the reality of disorder in the universe into our theologies and philosophies. Yet we are beginning to recognize the character of reality as a whole in which we participate. "Solidarity" is another expression related to unicity and organicity. The word "relationality" also shows the interconnectedness of things.

To think organismically or organically goes against the tendency that has existed in some traditions to think dualistically. Dualistic thinking defines things in opposition to each other rather than seeing a unity at

¹This is by no means an effort to be thorough in my description. I choose three significant factors as illustrative.

the basis of the dualities (polarities). Hence the word "plurality" is also significant in describing the consciousness in which we find ourselves.

Organismic thinking not only tends to be less dualistic but also less individualistic. Individualism was one of the enemies of Teilhard and he often distinguished individuality and personality on that basis. The person is more than an individual, the person is an individual in relationship. Thinking organismically means thinking less juridically and Teilhard points this out in several of his essays. In a developmental and organic conceptionalization of the world, interdependence, the principle that everything is related to everything else and the relatedness of person to environment, comes through very strongly.

In *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* Jacob Bronowski writes, "I believe that the world is totally connected: that is to say, that there are no events anywhere in the universe which are not tied to every other event in the universe."² This metaphysical presupposition is central to organic thinking. Organicity points to the interconnectedness of reality. When we think of organicity, again Teilhard and Whitehead come to mind. Teilhard uses the word and Whitehead refers to his philosophy as the philosophy of organism.³ My suggestion is that we more consciously think developmentally and organically as we theologize today.

Complementarity: By complementarity I mean that nothing can be understood in terms of itself alone. This flows from the above statement: everything is interrelated. To understand an individual is not to understand only that which occupies a particular portion of space-time. Nothing can be understood in terms of itself alone because every reality, every event, every being is intrinsically related to others and thus can only be understood in terms of others. This leads to going beyond an either/or method of thinking.

As a result of dualistic views, we often tend to think in terms of defining something over against another reality rather than in terms of the complement to it. As we move away from an either/or understanding of opposition, we need a new logic for developmental consciousness. As we look at categories like masculinity and femininity, rational and mystical, interiority and exteriority, or psychic and material, we must see their interdependence.

Teilhard says there is no such thing as spirit and matter; there is only spirit-matter.⁴ The same is true of subject and object as well as personal and universal. For Teilhard, to be a person is to be a universe and to be a universe is to be a person. It is not a question of either/or.

To come to an understanding of any reality means to think in terms of complementarity. This means going beyond some of the rational modes of thinking that have been emphasized in the past. Bergson, with

²J. Bronowski, *The Origins of Knowledge and Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 58.

³See A. N. Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, chap. 1. Also Teilhard, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 120, 193.

⁴See "Sketch of a Personalistic Universe," *Human Energy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), pp. 57-58.

his emphasis on intuition, had his influence on Teilhard. Words like insight, wisdom, understanding, all emphasize this need to go beyond rationalism. The world in which we find ourselves, conscious of it or not, is affected by development, organicity and complementariness.

A point which I would like to make is that theology needs to continue to incorporate this consciousness. There is a world view here which is open to metaphysics. Catholic theology, which has been metaphysically founded, can integrate developmental, organic and complementary thought into its own ongoing development. I will quote another line from Bronowski: "If nature is totally connected, then we should prefer those languages or systems which show the highest connection, not because they do in fact show the connections in nature, but because they are coming closest to it."⁵ In other words, we search for a language or method that can reflect this interconnectedness rather than one that less readily reflects it. Again both Teilhard and Whitehead are of help here.

As an addition to what I have said, I would like to contrast Teilhard and Whitehead for a moment. Roman Catholic theology must take process theology seriously. More and more, process theology includes not only the Whiteheadian but the Teilhardian direction as well. As Catholics we can move into process thinking and too quickly become Whiteheadian, letting go of the Teilhardian strand. We must consider both seriously. At one time we needed comparisons of Teilhard and Whitehead which showed the similarities. There are many similarities. Yet one was coming from a Protestant background and the other from Roman Catholicism. We need now to show the differences between the two as well. Let me point to three differences between Teilhard and Whitehead.

The first is the implicit eschatology in Teilhard that is not in Whitehead, based on Teilhard's notion of omega and omegalization. Intrinsic to his cosmic or cosmological thrust is an eschatological perspective simply because reality is omegalization.

The second difference is Teilhard's understanding of creativity. For Whitehead, God is not creator. Reality is self-creative. Creativity is not a word that one more appropriately applies to God rather than to any actual entity or event. For Teilhard, however, God is still creator, the source of creativity, and the source of creative union. All of reality is creative because all of reality springs at the depth of its within from that divine source. Yet for Teilhard reality is still free and the future is truly open.

A third difference (which in some ways is the most difficult and how one resolves it will probably depend in the end on whether one becomes a Whiteheadian or not) is the question of personal identity. There is more emphasis on personal identity in Teilhard than in Whitehead. From my alpha, my moment of conception or birth, to my omega, there is not only a continuity, a memory, but there is a being unfolding. In Whitehead, the discrete character of each actual occasion does remember the past and

⁵ Bronowski, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

there is the constant interrelatedness between past and future. Yet, there is less continuity than for Teilhard.

Catholic theology needs to be developmental and organic in its thinking. It should continue to explore the implications of Teilhard's thought because the Teilhardian thrust may be more Catholic than the Whiteheadian emphasis (although Whitehead has much to offer us as well). I describe my theology as developmental and organic theology rather than process theology in order to make possible this distinction and to avoid possible confusion with completely Whiteheadian thought.

I have raised the question: what are the factors in our consciousness today that we must seriously consider in theology if theology is to speak to our society, our world. I have stated several of these and I am suggesting Teilhard as someone who can provide nourishment and guidelines for the direction that we might choose to take.

Teilhard is an extremely significant voice in the Church and one from whom we can continue to learn. With the theme, "Voices in the Church," it is appropriate to reflect upon Teilhard. He was not a professional theologian although his long-range contribution may be to theology. Because he was not a professional theologian, or philosopher, we can lose sight of what he has to offer. Our task as theologians is to theologize where Teilhard was not a theologian and to use Teilhard's conceptual framework to think at the philosophical level as well as the theological level.⁶

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⁶ *Summary of the Discussion:* About half of the discussion centered around Mike Cook's reply: "It seems that development implies a progressiveness which is difficult to find if one takes historical reality seriously." Further comments on the relatedness of development, progress, and freedom, included:

A. If the concept of development cannot be separated from progressiveness, it may not be the best word. Teilhard's optimism is not necessarily progressive in that he is open to the fact that evolution might ultimately fail.

B. The question is whether eschatology is better seen in early prophetic or later apocalyptic terms.

C. Teilhard does not deny freedom of choice but sees the future in terms of statistical probability as well.

D. The myth of progress may have a value which we should not too quickly discard.

E. The relationship of the Trinity to the universe is the ground of Teilhard's optimism.

F. Teilhard is talking not about history but about consciousness and this is where he sees development taking place.

G. In order to have development you must have two things. You must have opposition as well as emphasis toward something.

Mike Cook commented further: My basic concern is that progress is mainly a static concept that doesn't take human freedom seriously. There is a tendency to adopt a system which says that, in the final analysis, no matter what we do individually and collectively,

the whole thing is going to turn out the way in which it was directed to. The issue is the question of what it means for God to create human freedom. I think, for God himself, it makes a great deal of difference what we do. The shape of the future is very dependent on the human response to the divine initiative. Therefore we give shape to the world and, in those terms, God depends upon us for the shape the world will be. My concern is precisely to put a lot of weight upon the human responsibility in responding to this divine initiative in creating the world in the first place. It seems to me that the key event which shows how God is truly dependent upon us for the way the world is shaped is the fact that Jesus, who proclaimed the kingdom of God, died on the cross, which is first and foremost a manifestation of human rejection of divine mission, of human sinfulness. And it seems to me that the world is very different because of the fact that Jesus died on the cross. There is no internal necessity that said that Jesus had to die on the cross. The Father did not send his son to die on the cross but he sent the son to proclaim the depths of the Father's love. Our response of crucifying Jesus has given shape to the future direction of the world. My point is that progress tends to remove us too far from our own personal responsibilities to the world in which we live.

A Response. It is helpful to distinguish between Teilhard and "toward a developmental and organic theology." Ten years ago Teilhard was popular. Now we have the capacity to look at him more objectively and critically and thus he can be a source for us. Yet we do not want to think of organic theology as a Teilhardian movement so that whatever we disagree with in Teilhard discredits this particular theological project. The question of freedom is well focused in Whitehead. It is compatible with Teilhard's frame of reference. There is nothing in Teilhard that excludes a mutuality between God and the world. In fact he includes it (*Human Energy*, p. 155; also his last essay, "The Christique"). What we need to say is that Teilhard is a significant voice, not think that we have to be Teilhardians. We have to go beyond Teilhard.

Another response. I agree with Teilhard on the importance of freedom at this point in evolution, but his great concern is being brought out in the 70's in a way that it was not in the 60's: our experience of human freedom, given the complexity of the problem of the human experiment, is how to override discouragement. It is not so much liberation, conflict, depression and evil. It is that we are going to quit. It is a phenomenon of apathy which comes from alienation and exhaustion with responsible freedom. We can find some suggestions in Teilhard for developing Christological images which excite the possibility of human effort. We have to be very careful how we develop the theology of the cross. Teilhard talked about how discouraging certain devotions to the cross and to the Sacred Heart can be.

Other issues raised which we did not have time to pursue included: (1) the way in which Teilhard brings scientific humanism into the interpretation of the mystical body has much to say in developing styles of liberation theology; (2) a contrast between Teilhard and Whitehead on that question of evil; (3) the need for a theology that goes beyond Christology. A Spirit theology can do this and Teilhard leaves room for that very difficult doctrine of the Spirit.