The originality of Teilhard de Chardin is rooted in the conflict of his two professions: science and religion. He merged two domains usually considered opposed. The breadth of his thought—right brain/left brain in equal measure super strength—enabled a four-fold synthesis of Past with Future, Matter with Spirit, Cosmos with Individual, and Variety with Unity. The controversy he stirred up is based on the absolute priority that he, as a Christian, gave evolution. He wrote:

*Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow.*

British zoologist Sir Julian Huxley was a fan. He explained Teilhard’s unique value:

> We both realized that, in the million-year passage from subhuman to human, man had stepped across a critical threshold and left the slow-moving biological phase of evolution for the new, faster-moving and, increasingly, mind-directed psycho-social phase in which evolution is manifested by changes in ideas and societies and cultures rather than in organisms and their genetic constitution...

> This linking of evolutionary biology with Christian theology...is [Teilhard’s] unique contribution to thought, enabling thousands of Christians to accept the greatest scientific discovery since Newton—Darwin’s discovery of the evolutionary process as a fact and as a scientifically explicable phenomenon—and so pave the way for the eventual reconciliation of science and religion...

**EVOLUTION OF MATTER & SPIRIT**

As a paleontologist, Teilhard was dedicated to finding the traces of life imbedded in matter. His study of the fossil record revealed to him that mankind’s place in the universe fit into a significant continuity stretching from the atom to the galaxy. He felt that the different sciences combine to demonstrate that the universe must be regarded as one gigantic process of becoming. He saw all matter as part of an evolutionary process toward higher consciousness. Teilhard articulated this thesis in his magnus opus, *The Phenomenon of Man*, in four parts: Pre-Life, Life, Thought, and Survival.

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1 Julian Huxley, Foreword to *In the Field with Teilhard de Chardin* by George B. Barbour (New York NY: Herder and Herder, 1965).
The First Stage: Pre-Life

As the universe expands, matter evolves from an undifferentiated state to organized forms of more complex structures—from subatomic units to atomic to inorganic to organic. During incessant recombination of elements, loss of a percentage of total mass or energy always occurs. This is entropy. With entropy functioning over billions of years, the universe should have run down by now. The fact that it has not was, for Teilhard, evidence of a dynamic “inner face” of matter escaping our observation. That may be what scientists now call “dark energy.” Teilhard’s hypothesis was that this energy is identical with the potential consciousness present in every particle of matter. Teilhard goes one further: this “inner face” is spiritual. Matter and spirit are not two separate substances but two aspects of the same cosmic stuff. The result is a mutual evolution of the within and the without of all matter.

The Second Stage: Life

Teilhard attributes consciousness to all matter—no matter how fundamental or inert. The amount of consciousness is related to structural complexity. As matter develops into more and more organized forms—from subcellular to multicellular—the progressive complexity of the nervous system becomes key. Its growth is linked with a growth of consciousness. The appearance of primitive man represents a passage of sorts over a critical threshold of complexity. Humanity is the only species that has not resulted in a number of biologically separate sets, like the 8,500 birds or the half million insects. The human species never divided into subspecies, because, rather than the bodily structure adapting, man adapted tools separate from himself. In Teilhard’s words, “man is the ascending arrow of the great biological synthesis.”

The Third Stage: Thought

Consciousness is the result of organized complexity. Complexification leads to intense subjective mental activity—that is, the evolution of progressively more conscious mind, which is measured in cerebralization. Teilhard wrote: “The main stem of the tree of life has always climbed in the direction of the highest brain.” Consciousness expands and folds back upon itself as reflective consciousness. According to Teilhard’s cosmic law of complexity-consciousness, this quantitative progression results in a qualitative difference. “An animal knows, but man knows that he knows.” Evolution is now in the realm of the psyche. “At that point, the earth finds its soul.”

The Final Stage: Survival

No evolutionary future awaits humanity except in relation with others. During increases in population, proximity causes interpenetration, both physically and mentally, which leads to cultural differentiation. Diffusion then results from migration and improved communications, which leads to an accelerated counterprocess of ever narrower solidarity, turning the whole human species into a singleinterthinking unit. This convergence of both radial and tangential energy spirals in a collective ascent toward higher consciousness. For Teilhard, “a spiritual person is the transcendent crown of evolution.” The Omega of this spiraling ascent is a collective, personalized, and enlightened community.

Teilhard calls this Omega point the Mystical Body of Christ. That last, I think, was a concession to the Vatican with whom he was always in conflict. His biography explains this.

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4 Leroy.
7 Ibid.
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in 1881 in the mountainous French countryside of Sarcenat (Auvergne). He was the fourth of eleven children in a Catholic family that prayed together every evening. His mother was the great grand niece of Voltaire. His father was a gentleman farmer with a penchant for natural history. During the family’s walks together, the children would gather specimens. Pierre always looked for durability in his possessions, such as quartz, and was not greatly attracted by the frail beauty of butterflies or flowers.  

As was the tradition, Pierre at eleven was sent to a Jesuit boarding school for classical studies in French, Latin, Greek, and philosophy. There, he became enamored with geology and mineralogy. At 18, he entered the Jesuit novitiate. Two years later, during the anticlerical campaign in France, he was exiled along with the rest of the Jesuit order to the Isle of Jersey in the Channel Islands. During the next three years, he studied chemistry, physics, and geology. At 24, he began teaching physics and chemistry at the Jesuit College in Cairo, Egypt. He was ordained a priest at age 30.

By then, his interest in paleontology was established. His passion was sparked further upon reading Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution.* He was captivated specifically with the concept that “time” itself is the creative activity of God and that God’s will may be “materialized” through Time’s “duration.”

As a priest, Teilhard was exempt from World War I, but he joined anyway and refused a chaplaincy in order to serve for four years as a stretcher-bearer on the Western Front in Morocco. He was twice decorated, once with the Legion of Honour. Teilhard wrote to his closest female cousin with whom he kept up a correspondence throughout his life: “For us soldier-priests, war was a baptism of reality.” His fellow Jesuits and scientific colleagues sympathized for his time spent in war. Teilhard knew that war had quickened his mind with a new independence of thought. His numerous war writings are deep, intricate reflections. He wrote:

> Throughout my 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... 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 aflame.

Teilhard wondered in a letter to his cousin about this amazingly fertile period for him: “Will they ever listen to me?” After the war, he studied at the Institute of Human Paleontology of the Natural History Museum in Paris. He received a graduate degree in the natural sciences from the Sorbonne (1919) and then a doctorate in paleontology (1922). He had already become Professor of Geology at the Catholic Institute of Paris where his lectures attracted great attention among the students for the novelty and daring of his thought. The next year at 42, Teilhard went for the first time to China (Tientsin) on a paleontology expedition.

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8 Leroy.
11 Marguerite Teillard [sic]-Chambon, aka Claude Aragonnes.
13 Leroy.
14 Chardin, *The Making of a Mind.*
15 Père Licent.
When Teilhard returned to Paris a year later, he encountered his first test of obedience as a priest. Despite his stature as a scientist, Teilhard’s ideas on the evolution of primates were criticized and censored by his ecclesiastical superiors. An address on original sin and its transmutation under evolution delivered while at the Catholic Institute was considered unorthodox. His superiors told him to shun the speculative aspects of his field, confine himself strictly to descriptive paleontology, and avoid any interpretive writing during his lifetime on the meaning of facts he had discovered. He was also forbidden to teach or to publish.

As a result, Teilhard returned to China and threw himself into scientific work. He participated in several prestigious expeditions to Burma, India, Java, Japan, Ethiopia, Somaliland, and South Africa. He rose in his field as an international expert in Asian prehistory, geology, anthropology, and specifically in vertebrate paleontology. He was a member of the Academy of Sciences and the Geological Society and an advisor to numerous scientific organizations, including the National Geological Survey and the American Museum of Natural History. In all, he spent 23 years in the Far East, mostly in China’s Gobi desert and the borders of Mongolia. The peak of his career was the 1929 expedition that discovered the fossil skull of Peking Man.

His enforced isolation in China during six years of WWII resulted in enhanced spirituality. His writing during this time was prolific, including the first draft of The Phenomenon of Man. Still, he was never able to publish any of his nonscientific writing. Censure must have caused him much distress as he was conscious of a prophetic mission. However, censure probably also contributed to an increasingly active scientific life, which eventually lent more credibility to his theological vision. Still, his whole life was an enormous struggle between the integrity of his thought and his submission to the Church.

Upon his return to France in 1946, Teilhard was forbidden a higher academic position for which he was invited and certainly qualified. During this time, he recast his The Phenomenon of Man manuscript in hopes of getting it passed the censors. But, again, his religious superiors refused another request for permission to publish. The Church at that time had still not forgiven Galileo. In 1948, Teilhard was called to Rome to defend his positions before the General Superior of the Jesuit Order. Teilhard wrote a letter to his General Superior restating his compliance to obedience:

What might have been taken in my attitude during the last 30 years for obstinacy or disrespect is simply the result of my absolute inability to contain my own feeling of wonderment... I can no more change it than I can change my age or the color of my eyes. ...in spite of any apparent evidence to the contrary, I am resolved to remain a ‘child of obedience.’ Obviously, I cannot abandon my own personal search—that would involve me in an interior catastrophe and in disloyalty to my most cherished vocation; but...I have ceased to propagate my ideas and am confining myself to achieving a deeper personal insight into them.

As a result of these accumulating disappointments, Teilhard accepted an invitation in 1951 from the Viking Foundation to come to America. Except for two trips to South Africa, he spent the last four years of his life in New York devoted to anthropological studies. Teilhard’s friends prevailed upon him to leave his manuscripts with them, as only the writings of living clerics need permission to publish. The prospect of eventual publication must have been a solace to

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17 Sinanthropus Pekinensis.
18 Letter of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to Very Reverend Father Janssens in Rome, October 12, 1951.
19 Now called Wenner-Gren Foundation.
him. His philosophical writings were the keystone of his life’s work. He had once confided to his cousin: “Above all, trust in the slow work of God.” A month before he died, Teilhard wrote:

The joy and strength of my life will have lain in the realization that when the two ingredients—God and the world—were brought together, they set up an endless mutual reaction, producing a sudden blaze of such intense brilliance that all the depths of the world were lit up for me.

Ironically, Pope Pius XII did Teilhard a favor inadvertently. In his 1950 encyclical Humani Generis, the Pope expressed his disapproval of Teilhard. In his warning against Teilhard, the Pope pronounced that evolution may be defended but not as a proven fact. That concession was the first explicit nod to evolution in the history of Catholic dogma, even though it was a qualified criticism of Teilhard. Some call this Teilhard’s most unforgettable service to theology.

He died Easter Sunday 1955 in New York City. He was buried at the Jesuit Novitiate for New York up the Hudson River with a ceremony whose only distinction was its poverty.

**The Controversy Begins**

The Phenomenon of Man was published posthumously the year Teilhard died through the sponsorship of his friends. The response was predictable. The Roman Curia’s Head Office sent a warning to all Catholics about the danger of reading Teilhard’s writings. American bishops and seminary directors received an unofficial but firm communiqué with a similar warning. Permission for any public lectures on Teilhard was also denied.

Yet, six years later at the Second Vatican Council in 1962, several archbishops and cardinals approvingly appropriated Teilhard’s language in their own talks—but without attribution. Pope John XXIII in his famous encyclical “Peace on Earth” adopted expressions traceable to Teilhard de Chardin—again, without attribution. Yet this pope remarked elsewhere that “in France, ideas are born with wings. Without a trace of holy madness, the church cannot grow.” Austrian Cardinal Koenig declared that this French geologist achieved something unique, which Catholic scholarship ought to follow. Still, Church authorities continued their censure of Teilhard.

Teilhard had been well aware that his ideas were ahead of their time. As a scientist, he was accustomed to collegial skepticism and criticism. His wide range of professional studies made him impatient with over-specialization and timidity in his scientific colleagues, especially their refusal to postulate from specific detail to broad synthesis. Some biologists who interpreted evolution differently were critical of Teilhard as were some geologists. Anthropologists tended to share Teilhard’s position and, among paleontologists, Teilhard was unchallenged. As a naturalist, his research was based exclusively on real phenomena. He did not deal in revelation or in principles of metaphysics. As a paleontologist, he was vividly reminded of our origins and the slow, irreversible ascent of life. His severest critics continued to be theologians and philosophers. Still, Teilhard’s aspiration was always to put theology into contact with 20th century facts of science.

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21 Leroy.
22 Barbour.
23 Leroy.
29 North.
Teilhard believed that the motive and goal of evolution was spiritual. Yet, when referencing evolution, Teilhard preferred the term “orthogenesis,” though he knew that most scientists spurned it because of association with “lamarckism.” Lamarck was a forerunner of Darwin. Their difference lay in Lamarck’s belief that one species transformed itself into another by conscious purposeful effort, while Darwin’s belief was survival of the fittest. Darwin believed that evolution’s direction was blind or random, while Lamarck believed it was coherent and continuous toward recognizable goals. Lamarck’s position was closer to a creating God. Some think that Teilhard clung to a Lamarchian orthogenesis in the face of collegial opposition as a scientific-jargon way of affirming a creating God.30 Teilhard wrote:

...for 300 million years now, Life has been going on paradoxically in the midst of improbability. Does that not indicate that it is marching forward, sustained by some complicity in the motive forces of the Universe?31

THE OMEGA POINT

Teilhard explained that the origins of evolution are unknown. Therefore, he focused on the process and the direction toward an end. Thus, he details the Omega, not the Alpha. He starts with the expanding universe and the observable phenomenon. For Teilhard, God is the animating force behind every single event. Evolution is only the phenomenal aspect of divine creation. This view often caused Teilhard to be charged with pantheism.

Some critics say that Teilhard tied up the tree of life in a pony tail—his Omega Point. Because Teilhard believes that the universe has a direction that could—and should—result in some sort of perfection, he sometimes refers in poetic metaphor to the Omega Point as the Universal Christ. One suspects Teilhard might not have implied that Christ was the model of biological evolution if he hadn’t felt the need to placate Vatican authority. I agree with what Julian Huxley wrote:32

I was quite unable to follow him in his conclusions about Christification, Point Omega, and the like. But this in no way detracts from his essential achievement of linking science and religion across the bridge of evolution.

Teilhard’s Christocentric Omega may be easier to understand as a prototype of perfected humanity or a personalized collective of enlightened being. Teilhard wrote:

The progressive fusion of minds can come about only if they tend toward a common center—this Omega, this center of convergence, cannot be less than ourselves.33

Yet, according to Teilhard, our perfection lies not in our individuality but in what we have in common with others. Personalization of each element reaches its maximum under the creative influence of union.

LOVE AS ENERGY

Nevertheless, Teilhard stressed that evolutionary ascent was not inevitable. Freedom is key to evolution in humans. The refusal to move forward remains a possibility. Although he wrote that to be oneself is the primary responsibility of each person, all existence is co-existence; therefore, each person’s emergence is the result of constant interaction in a process of personalization. Accordingly, each one of us has a role to fulfill in the common effort of humanity. Interconnected throughout, each element sees, feels, desires, and suffers for itself the same as all others at the same time. A superlative cosmic empathy, which is similar to the “process theology” of Alfred North Whitehead.

30 North.
32 Huxley’s Foreword to In the Field with Teilhard de Chardin by Barbour.
33 Ligneul.
For Teilhard, nothing can ever burst forth as final across the threshold that has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way. To assume love’s presence in ourselves, we must assume its presence—at least rudimentary—in everything else. Love then, as the affinity of beings for each other, is not peculiar to man. Love is a general property of all matter—just with different modalities of expression. The universal gravity of bodies, for example, is a force of attraction. With such variations, the phenomenon of love reveals a deep accord between realities that seek each other: “the severed particle that trembles at the approach of the rest.”34 Thus, love is only possible in co-existence. No element can move and grow except with and by all the others with itself. Teilhard wrote:

_Driven by the forces of love, the fragments of the world seek each other so that the world may come into being._

Love alone is capable of uniting living elements by what is deepest in them, which is their connection to everything else—a “Resonance to the All.” Cosmic affinity is how we account for that irresistible instinct in our hearts that seizes us when confronted by nature, beauty, or music. This feeling is really nostalgia for the primordial connection.

Clearly, evolution does not rule out God for Teilhard—neither a God of Immanence nor of Transcendence. Still, paradoxically, he believed in a “personal God,” as providence directing the universe with loving and watchful care. He also believed in a “revealing God,” communicating through man’s reflective intelligence. Yet, these metaphorical qualifications may all have merely been an accommodation to Rome. We will never know.

Let me end as I began—with Julian Huxley’s comment on Teilhard’s contribution to modern thought:

...[Teilhard] has helped to define the conditions of advance...global unity of mankind’s... awareness, but a high degree of variety within that unity; love, with goodwill and cooperation; personal integration and internal harmony; and increasing knowledge.35

Teilhard’s best gift to us may have been his optimism about humanity’s future and his understanding that all matter has soul.