

11-1-1963

Book Review of *Pere Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Letters from a Traveller 1956*,  
Translated by Bernard Wall, with introductions by  
Sir Julian Huxley, Pierre Leroy, S.J. and Mme.  
Claude Aragonnes.

Michael Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kelly, Michael (1963) "Book Review of *Pere Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Letters from a Traveller 1956*, Translated by Bernard Wall, with introductions by Sir Julian Huxley, Pierre Leroy, S.J. and Mme. Claude Aragonnes.," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 30 : No. 4 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol30/iss4/12>

## Book Review

*Pere Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). Letters from a Traveller 1956.* Translated by Bernard Wall, with introductions by Sir Julian Huxley, Pierre Leroy, S.J. and Mme. Claude Aragonnes.

### Review by

Michael Kelly, M.D.  
East Melbourne, Australia

The editor, Madame Claude Aragonnes, is cousin and intimate friend of Teilhard de Chardin. She has contributed portions of more than 124 letters from him to this book. Fifty-six were to his brother and 17 to his close friends Max and Simone Begouen. A further 39 to Teilhard's friend the distinguished palaeontologist, the late Abbé Breuil, give the work the correctly scientific atmosphere. In addition to her own touching narrative filling the gaps between the letters, the editor has included more than one footnote per page. Some of these are by translator Wall, who has added a short note by Teilhard's friend Julian Huxley, and translated into English a special appreciation of Teilhard by his lifetime friend and colleague, the Jesuit palaeontologist Pierre Leroy.

Teilhard de Chardin was a many-sided character; the book shows up well his love of God and mankind and his affection for all created things. Its title is remarkably accurate; truly Teilhard was a traveller. And while he travelled he made friends;

and he kept those friends. These letters show more of the friend, the wise counsellor and the mystic than of the scientist. But he confided to his cousin and friend, his brother and his best friend everything which was in his heart. He developed a remarkable gift for understanding men. He spent four years in the trenches as a stretcher-bearer and he won the Military Medal and the Legion of Honour (later for his scientific work he was made an officer of the Legion of Honour).

He traversed China many times in every direction, by mule-cart, by caterpillar tractor, by train, and in the last few years once or twice by aeroplane. He was there from 1923 to 1946. A week after his first arrival he was off on an expedition for 1500 miles into the heart of China. In three months he was back laden with specimens. Most of his letters are written from different parts of the interior of China; he even went 3000 miles in 1932 as far as Kashgar in Sinkiang.

He quickly tabulated the results of his journeys and contributed them to journals (his total publications number 320). He was soon recognized as an expert, and confirmed this in 1929 by identifying the Peking man (*Sinanthropus*), an important link in human descent. After this he was off every second year to a world congress or with a scientific mission. Throughout this book he seems very mobile,

writing letters now from the heart of the Gobi Desert, now from a ship in the Red Sea, now from Rawalpindi, now from Johannesburg. He visited America six times before he made it his permanent home in 1951. In reality, however, he was travelling very slowly and the shipboard and mule-cart journeys gave him time for writing and thinking. Ceaseless travel meant frequent unexpected meetings with the same people. His remarkable gift expressed himself like this: "Why am I so happy? Because the earth is round."

#### FRIEND OF ATHEISTS

Father Leroy comments on the paradox that a priest who dressed so little like an ecclesiastic and took his place in the advancement of thought, who was at home among irreligious people should have devoted his life to the qualities of Man as an animal. It was strange too that a specialist in the scientific history of the past should be so interested in the future. But above all, he was a priest deeply attached to Christ and the teaching of the Church. To Teilhard, scientific research was one great act of adoration. Matter is alive and he could picture the infinitely long course of evolution as though foreshortened.

The whole universe is an evolution — a genesis. Every genesis presupposes reciprocal dependence and mutual interconnections; a static cosmos is unthinkable. If everything is forming itself, everything must be dependent. Therefore matter and spirit are not separate; they are two distinct aspects of a single stuff. When Teilhard

realized this he lost interest in matter as matter, because he saw that it was essentially a correlative of spirit.

#### EVOLUTION OF MAN SELF-EVIDENT

To Teilhard evolution was self-evident and he sought to weave it into the fabric of Catholic orthodoxy. But feelings of mystical intensity cannot be accurately translated into words, and it was not easy for him to choose words which did not say themselves open to the accusation of pantheism. I have read *The Divine Milieu* and I confess it does not move me greatly. Some of Teilhard's admirers are thankful that his superiors did not allow him to publish this during his lifetime. Leroy says that the very richness and originality of his thoughts made them difficult to express without danger of being misinterpreted as a type of pantheism that denied to the supernatural its pre-eminent position. There was no contradiction in his own mind between his loyalty to the Church and the boldness of his philosophy.

But the theologians of Holy Office are not geniuses; they are guided largely by precedent (as civil courts are) and they know little of science. They do not claim infallibility, but normally, and for the time being, there is no chance of a successful appeal against their decision. Because of his renown as a scientist, a condemnation of Teilhard by ecclesiastical authorities — even though such a condemnation would, as it must, refer solely to his philosophical and theological opinions — would inevitably be construed by many as an assault

on his legitimate scientific discoveries. Since in many circles the Church is (unfairly) regarded as an enemy of science, we can be thankful that such a condemnation has not taken place. If it occurred, it could well set the Catholic cause, in some scientific circles at least, back 50 years.

#### THE INTELLECTUAL BARRIER

Teilhard's intellectual home was Paris; he looked forward eagerly to each return; each always resulted in disappointment greater than the last. The emotional crisis after 1939 was severe, with spells of weeping. Bureaucrats, ecclesiastical and otherwise, are not happy when someone whom they regard askance and whom they would like to muzzle becomes world famous, and in addition, turns the other cheek — particularly if they are not absolutely convinced of his guilt. Galileo wrote that he had no chance of being forgiven, if there was no crime to forgive.

In 1948, there was a still greater disappointment; Teilhard was not allowed to accept a professorship at the College de France. In 1951 he was advised to leave France and finally forbidden to propagate his philosophy and theology — even in mimeographed form. His letters tell of the indecisions of his superiors about *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*. There was never an outright condemnation — only delays for year after year. Leroy has given in full a letter Teilhard wrote to his Superior General after his arrival in America. He said, "What might have been taken in

my attitude during the last thirty years for obstinancy and disrespect is simply the result of my absolute inability to contain my own feeling of wonderment." Teilhard said he had three vivid convictions: the unique significance of Man as the spearhead of Life, the position of Catholicism as the central axis in the convergent bundle of human activities; the essential function of Christ as the centre and peak of creation. He said, "I have ceased to propagate my ideas for some months . . . My absence from Europe will allow the commotion about me that may have disturbed you recently, to die down."

During all these years, Teilhard was not known to the Catholic world as a great Catholic scientist. In ecclesiastical circles he was kept on the outer. In 1952 he was not invited to a Catholic congress on evolution at Montreal. Gaylord Simpson commented in his letter of acceptance on his regret that Teilhard, who had a greater right, was not going. But even the best people may be tempted to kick anyone who is down ecclesiastically. In 1954 Teilhard unwisely sought and got (after some delay) permission to return to Paris for three months. How he did long to be made respectable! But new restrictions were imposed and "broken by emotion he could hardly contain and torn by unendurable anguish" he cut short his stay.

To many Catholics the mere fact of Teilhard's friendship with Sir Julian Huxley (a materialist) would be self-condemnatory. The doctrine of progress has never been popular; but it

thrilled me at first knowledge of *The Phenomenon of Man* to discover that he had given the universe a sense of direction in spite of the existence of evil. In conclusion, here is what Huxley wrote about him in 1956:

The force and purity of Pere Teilhard's thought and expression, in fruitful combination with his capac-

ity for loving comprehension of all values has given the world a picture not only of rare clarity but pregnant with compelling conclusions.

**Pere Teilhard de Chardin**

Published by  
Harper and Brothers, New York,  
1962  
pp. 380, with 5 illustrations  
\$4.00

PASTORAL INSTITUTE FOR HOSPITAL CHAPLAINS

November 11-23, 1963

to be held at

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA

Washington, D. C.

Intensive course designed to cover those areas in which the general hospital chaplain should be informed.

Lecturers include a large staff of priests, doctors, nurses, experts in psychology and psychiatry and sociology.

Write for application form to:

Reverend Robert Paul Mohan, S.S., Ph.D.  
Director of Workshops  
The Catholic University of America  
Washington 17, D. C.

Fee for the Institute — \$80.00