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# PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

BIOGRAPHY

810L

BIG HISTORY PROJECT

# PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

PALEONTOLOGIST,  
MYSTIC & JESUIT PRIEST

**Born**  
May 1, 1881  
Orcines, France

**Died**  
April 10, 1955  
New York, New York

By Cynthia Stokes Brown, adapted by Newsela

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was both a paleontologist and a priest. He brought science and religion together in a unique vision.

## Youth, vocation, and early thoughts on evolution

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (pronounced tay-YAR-de-shar-DAN) was born in the countryside of France. He was the fourth of 11 children.

Teilhard's father collected rocks, insects, fossils, and plants as a hobby. His mother was deeply religious. Early on, she instilled in her son a love for Jesus. The family lived in the countryside among volcanic mountains and forested hills. Teilhard grew to embrace both of his parents' greatest interests: love of the Earth and love of the Christian God.

At 10, Teilhard went to a Jesuit Christian college. Teilhard completed his studies in England in 1905. After, he went to teach chemistry and physics in Cairo, Egypt. Egypt's natural beauty fascinated him and he collected fossils at every opportunity.



Puy-de-Dôme is one of many dormant volcanos in central France

In 1908, Teilhard returned to England to study the Bible. Around that time Henri Bergson's book *Creative Evolution* had a huge effect on his thinking. Bergson proposed the idea that humans didn't evolve due to natural selection, as Darwin believed. Instead, there was a vital force that drove humans. Like nearly all modern scientists, Teilhard disagreed with Bergson's main idea. But Bergson inspired him to form his own view that the cosmos itself is evolving.

At 30, Teilhard became a Catholic priest. The next year he was sent to study at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. There, he became interested in human paleontology, the study of prehistoric man.

## During the time of the world wars

Before Teilhard could finish his studies, however, World War I began. He joined the war effort in 1914, carrying wounded soldiers by stretcher. He witnessed firsthand the terrible brutality of war. He entered "no-man's land" to go get the dead and injured. Teilhard was awarded several medals for bravery. This experience led him to envision a larger meaning of life. Humanity, he believed, must be evolving toward something bigger and more spiritual. In his 1918 essay "The Great Monad," he suggested that humankind draws closer after wars. He believed people would one day no longer group themselves by nationality, but would all live by the same law and the same spirit. He wrote: "Wait but a little longer, and we shall form but one solid block. The cement is already setting."

During the war Teilhard wrote 18 essays. In them, he developed his ideas about the relationship between a Christian God and the natural world. In the "Cosmic Life," he wrote: "There is a communion with God and a communion with the Earth and a communion with God through the Earth. In this first basic vision we begin to see how the kingdom of God and cosmic love can be reconciled: the bosom of Mother Earth is, in some way, the bosom of God." He concluded: "each one of us is an atom of the mystical and cosmic body of Christ."

Teilhard took his final vows as a priest in 1918. He lectured in paleontology and geology at the Catholic Institute of Paris. And he studied at the University of Paris (Sorbonne). In 1923, he went to China to study stones and fossils in western Mongolia.

Two years later, Teilhard returned to Paris. He resumed teaching at the Catholic Institute. There he was scolded for trying to make friendly relations between science and religion. Teilhard, for example, tried to explain how the latest discoveries about human origins fit together with the doctrine of original sin. In the Bible, this tale explains how man is doomed to sin after Adam rebels against God in the Garden of Eden. The Jesuits stripped Teilhard of his license to teach. Teilhard was sent to China for a second time.

Teilhard spent most of the next 20 years in China. In December 1929, he took part in a dig that uncovered a *Homo erectus* skull. This amazing find is known as Peking Man. As a geologist, Teilhard studied the layers of rock near Peking Man to date the skull.

While in China, Teilhard wrote what would become his best-known work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. However, his bosses refused to let him print it. He returned to Paris but was not allowed to teach. In 1951, he moved to New York City to work as a researcher.

## Teilhard's view of an evolving Universe

Teilhard was both a scientist and a mystic. His views on religion were blended with a visionary fire. In Teilhard's view, the evolving Universe is both a physical and a spiritual event. The Universe begins with matter. Some of that matter develops into a new level (life), which develops into human consciousness. From there, it becomes concentrated until it reaches what he called the "Omega Point." It's the goal toward which the Universe is heading. The Omega Point exerts its force on everything.

There is a god-like power present from the beginning. But as the Universe becomes increasingly complex and conscious, it makes the divine nature of things more clear. The Universe becomes God.

Teilhard invented words to express his ideas, including noosphere (from the Greek word *noos*, for mind). The noosphere is a "thinking" sphere circling the Earth above the biosphere. It's made of human reflection, conscious souls, and love.

## Final years and posthumous works

Teilhard lived his final years in New York City. He died in 1955.

Teilhard wrote a lot: he wrote 11 volumes of scientific work, three books, and 200-plus essays. Many of his scientific papers were published during his lifetime. However, the Church would not allow his religious or philosophical essays to be published until after his death. *The Phenomenon of Man* came out in 1955. It became an international best seller. In late 1957, the Vatican withdrew Teilhard's books from seminary libraries. In 1962, the Vatican claimed that Teilhard's books contained "serious errors, as to offend Catholic doctrine." It never indicated what those errors were.

Now that punishment is largely forgotten. Pope Benedict XVI praised Teilhard's "great vision" in July 2009. Teilhard's ideas have inspired many Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

His admirers include American writer Flannery O'Connor. She took the title of her book, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), from Teilhard's essay "Omega Point." In it he wrote:

Remain true to yourself, but move ever upward toward greater consciousness and greater love! At the summit you will find yourselves united with all those who, from every direction, have made the same ascent. For everything that rises must converge.

But Teilhard's ideas continued to offend some religious thinkers. Even some scientists object to his ideas. Most scientists today reject the notion that the Universe is moving toward a clear goal. And biologist Peter Medawar has objected to Teilhard's claim that consciousness arises from matter.

## Teilhard and the information age

More recently, Teilhard's ideas have attracted people in the technology world. To some, the Internet seems to have fulfilled his prophecy of a noosphere. Jennifer Cobb Kreisberg wrote in *Wired* magazine in 1995 that Teilhard imagined the globe would one day be surrounded by a complex layer of information. It would run on human consciousness.

"It sounds a little off-the-wall, but, think about the Net. It's a vast electronic web encircling the Earth, running through a nerve-like system of wires," Cobb Kreisberg wrote. "Teilhard saw the Net coming more than half a century before it arrived."

A movement known as transhumanism was inspired by Teilhard. Transhumanism wants to use technology to overcome the limits of being human. Followers believe that computers and humans may combine to form a "super brain." Some believe that computers may eventually become more powerful than the human brain.

Teilhard challenged religious scholars to view religion in light of evolution. Likewise, he asked scientists to ponder the ethical and spiritual meaning of their work. Teilhard fully accepted evolution. He saw it as part of a spiritual evolution toward the goal of ultra-humans and complete divinity. This hypothesis is still meaningful for some. It offers a way to place scientific fact within a larger spiritual view of the cosmos.

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