The Divinization of the Cosmos
An interview with Brian Swimme on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
by Susan Bridle

Introduction

This interview was re-edited and reprinted with a special introduction for our 15th anniversary edition. Click to read the new interview or to view the full issue.

In our reading and wide-ranging research for this issue of What Is Enlightenment?, we found the name of the mid-century French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin popping up again and again. His visionary writings, we discovered, have been an important source of revelation and inspiration for many scientists, ecologists, futurists, and theologians who are now grappling with critical questions about the state of the earth and the human being’s place within it. When we read excerpts from Teilhard’s The Human Phenomenon, The Divine Milieu, and The Future of Man, we immediately understood why.

Brian Swimme has been a student of Teilhard’s work for many years. Himself a scientist with an abiding interest in the interface of science and spirituality, Swimme’s own passion and understanding have been deeply influenced by Teilhard’s ideas. Who better to bring to life Teilhard’s vision, we thought, than he? Swimme describes his discovery of Teilhard in his Foreword to Sarah Appleton-Weber’s new translation of The Human Phenomenon:

There are days in New York City where you never see the sun but only feel its presence in the blasts of hot air that sweep through the concrete canyons and in the heat waves that radiate up from the asphalt. When my clothes finally became heavy with my own sweat and I was lost for the third time I was tempted to hide out in some air-conditioned hotel, but all I had to remember was my own misery and that was enough to keep me going. I had recently resigned as a professor of mathematics and physics and was now on a search for wisdom, and a number of people had pointed me toward New York, most notably [Aurelio Peccei], the founder of the Club of Rome, that seminal gathering of planetary thinkers and visionaries. On his deathbed, when asked who of all the brilliant minds he had worked with he would most recommend, Peccei had said simply, "Our best hope is Thomas Berry."

By the time I made it to Berry’s Riverdale Research Center and was invited into his library, I could not have had higher expectations. He listened carefully as I tried to explain my misery and confusion over the destruction of the planet and what to do about it. After a long pause, and without saying a word, Thomas Berry pulled a book from the thousands on his shelves. With stern visage he tossed across the table Teilhard de Chardin’s great work, The Human Phenomenon.

My disappointment was instantaneous. This was old stuff. I had come all the way across the continent to receive a book I had read back in my Jesuit high school? Even worse, some famous scientists had objected to Teilhard’s ideas, and I brought that up. Thomas Berry just smiled, and broke into easy laughter.

"Teilhard was the first to see the universe in a new way, so I suppose it’s inevitable that he would be criticized. If you’re bothered by what a few scientists have to say you should read some of the theologians! Fundamentally the difficulty is one of scale. Any attempt to understand Teilhard that does not begin with the entire complex of civilizations as well as the vast panorama of the evolutionary universe is doomed to failure, for it is simply too small to grasp what he is about. Surely, similar situations have occurred in the history of science?"
My mind raced with thoughts of Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr and the revolutions they initiated and how these could not be contained in the world of classical physics, but he had only asked the question in a rhetorical way. He was soon to bring our brief meeting to a close, but not before he uttered a most unforgettable statement: "To see as Teilhard saw is a challenge, but increasingly his vision is becoming available to us. I fully expect that in the next millennium Teilhard will be generally regarded as the fourth major thinker of the Western Christian tradition. These would be St. Paul, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Teilhard."

He smiled again, aware of so much that needed to be said by way of explanation, but also aware that I would be incapable at this time of taking it in. He pointed to the book he had put in my hands. "Begin with Teilhard. There's no substitute for a close reading of his work."

I would read on my own and once a week discuss the ideas with Thomas Berry; I would be regularly amazed by how much of the world's intellectual history it seemed necessary to refer to. He drew constantly not just from physics and biology but also from philosophy, poetry, linguistics, music, and above all world history and cosmology. As the months went by I began to suspect that the fundamental categories of my mind were undergoing some sort of change. The unexamined assumptions that had been organizing my experiences in the world were now writhing under the pressure from Teilhard's massive and penetrating cosmology.

Swimme's intense contemplation of Teilhard's work culminated in a profound spiritual experience that overcame him one day while walking with his four-year-old son in a forest just north of New York City. It was an epiphany of the mystical fire at the heart of Teilhard's vision, a timeless moment of living recognition of the creative, blazing, flaring forth of the cosmos—a vision that remains very much alive within him today. At the end of our conversation about Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and his ideas, Swimme admitted with a laugh, "Good old Teilhard. I've never recovered from that day."

**Interview**

WIE: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a great thinker who had a profound influence on your own understanding. Can you tell us a bit about Teilhard—who he was, and what you believe his most significant contributions were?

BRIAN SWIMME: He was a French Jesuit paleontologist who lived from 1881 to 1955. His most important achievement was to articulate the significance of the new story of evolution. He was the first major thinker in the West to fully articulate that evolution and the sacred identify, or correlate. Teilhard de Chardin in the West and Sri Aurobindo in India really arrived at the same basic vision, which is that the unfolding of the universe is a physical evolution and also a spiritual evolution. I think that's his principal contribution. On the one hand, you have this awesome tradition about God or Brahmin, and on the other, you have this tradition about evolution—and adherents of each view tend to be very critical of the others. Christians said, "Evolution, that's horrible!" And scientists said, "Theism, that's horrible!" Aurobindo and Teilhard brought them together. So I think of them both as geniuses who synthesized the two visions. Teilhard attempted to get beyond the fundamental subjective/objective dualism in much of Western thought. He began to really see the universe as a single energy event that was both physical and psychic or even spiritual. I think that's his great contribution: He began to see the universe in an integral way, not as just objective matter but as suffused with psychic or spiritual energy.

Also, in my thinking, the central idea of Teilhard is his law of "complexification-consciousness." He identifies this as the fundamental law of evolution. He sees that the whole process is about complexifying and deepening intelligence or subjectivity. The entire movement of the universe in its complexification is simultaneously a movement further into the depths of consciousness, or interiority. He saw the whole thing as a physical-biological-spiritual process. He was the one who saw it all together. You could summarize his thought simplistically and say that the universe begins with matter, develops into life, develops into thought, develops into God. That's his whole vision, right there. Now clearly, this God that develops—it's not as if God is developed out of matter. God is present from the very
beginning, but in an implicit form, and the universe is accomplishing this great work of making divinity explicit.

**WIE:** What was Teilhard’s vision of the nature and role of the human being in evolution?

**BS:** His view was that the birth of self-reflexive consciousness in the human was a crucial moment in the earth’s journey. And he stated that the discovery of evolution by humans represents the most dramatic change in human mentality in the last two million years. You think of the Bill of Rights, the journey to the moon, the great religions, all of these incredible things! He thought all of these were secondary compared to this discovery of evolution by human consciousness. He saw it as "the universe folding back on itself." There are all these creatures that live in nature, and then suddenly you have this one creature that looks nature back in the eye and says, "What exactly are you up to?" That switch he saw as fundamental. He explored this idea further by speaking of—and I love this idea—the earth as a series of envelopes. First you have the lithosphere, or the surface layer of rock, and then the atmosphere develops, and the hydrosphere, and the biosphere. But his understanding is that in our time, there’s another layer being added, and that is the "noosphere"—a layer generated by human thought. It’s not possible to understand the earth unless you see it in terms of these layers. The way in which this has captured the contemporary imagination is in the development of the Internet—it’s almost like the sinews of the noosphere.

**WIE:** Wired magazine did an article on Teilhard a while ago that makes this point. But they went a bit too far and seemed to equate Teilhard’s noosphere with the Internet, suggesting that his vision was simply a precognition of the Internet.

**BS:** Yes. I guess there are different ways to reduce his thought down and miss parts of it, and one would be to say the noosphere is the Internet. But of course, Teilhard would say that, like everything else in the universe, it has a physical as well as a spiritual dimension.

**WIE:** What is the significance of our becoming aware of the process of evolution?

**BS:** Teilhard gave a great analogy. Our moment of waking up as a species is very much like what happens in the individual at around two years old. I don’t know the exact time, but there comes a moment when the young child gets depth perception for the first time. So in their phenomenal field, there’s a rearrangement of the phenomena into the third dimension as opposed to a two-dimensional map. He said that the species is going through that right now—we're discovering a depth of time. Before, we saw everything in terms of this much smaller space, and now, "Wham!" the universe as a whole opens up in the depths of time.

Teilhard also had this phrase called "hominization." Hominization is the way in which human thought transforms previously existing practices and functions of the earth. Let me give you an example. The earth makes decisions all the time; it makes choices. And in a broad sense, this is called natural selection. But when you throw human thought in there, it explodes into all of the decisions we're making all over the planet. Human decision has "hominized" the natural selection process—for good and ill. Everything that has existed up until now is going through this process of hominization. Another example would be—look at young mammals and the way they play. They mess around with each other and hide and chase, and we hominize that by creating this whole vast industry of sports and arts and entertainment. Everything seems to go through this explosion when it's touched by the human imagination. Teilhard's ultimate vision of what is taking place with the human is the hominization of love. You see, he regarded the attracting force of gravity as a form of love, and the way in which animals care for one another as a form of love, and so the hominization of love would be focusing that and amplifying it to make it a monumental power in the future evolution of the earth. That is his most famous phrase: "The day will come when we shall harness for God the energies of love. And, on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, the human being will have discovered fire."

**WIE:** How does our becoming aware of the evolutionary scale of time help the "universe develop into God"—as you said earlier—or further the invocation of God through human consciousness?

**BS:** He had this sense that a deep change at the level of being—a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of actual body—can take place in the human who learns to see the universe as suffused with divine action. And he made a huge deal out of this word—"see." His sense of spiritual practice
would be to develop those qualities that are necessary for us to truly get it, to truly see where we are. One thing he would speak about is how we tend to be overwhelmed by large numbers, and so he would say we have to develop a capacity to see the patterns in the large numbers. As we develop this capacity, rather than being crushed by the immensity of the universe, we'll suddenly, instead, resonate with the universe as a whole as the outer form of our own inner spirit. That was his cry, for humans to develop these capacities.

He also had an interesting view of spiritual traditions in general about this. He seemed to say that eternity is easier than evolution. The idea of awakening to eternity he regarded as very, very significant in human history—but not as difficult as awakening to the time-developmental or evolutionary nature of the universe.

WIE: What do you mean by "awakening to eternity" in this context?

BS: How at any moment we arise out of eternity, moment after moment. To escape the illusion of transience and to see into the absolute moment—Teilhard regarded this as a great mystical event in the life of an individual, as well as in the human journey. But he said that a deeper and harder achievement and challenge before us is to awaken to the time-developmental nature of the universe. The whole journey is this moment—it's not just the year 2000—this moment is also the birth of the universe itself. But more significantly for this particular discussion, it's also the moment of the "absolute future." The challenge before us is the absolute future calling to the present. This is really his mysticism. He would say that by learning to see, by becoming alert and awake in this universe, you feel the call and the presence of the unborn God asking for, or guiding us into, the type of creative action that gives birth to the next moment in a process that he called "divinization."

WIE: This is something that we've been thinking about a lot in putting together this issue of the magazine. Often in the Eastern traditions, the focus is solely on the "awakening to eternity" that you were just describing. Yet in Teilhard's work, there is another call. There is a call for the perfection of the Absolute to be manifest in form—for there to be greater and greater complexity, greater and greater order, greater and greater perfection, in form, in time, in space, in matter. Teilhard seems to bring together the absolute and the manifest in a truly nondualistic vision that does seem unique.

BS: That's right. I love his orientation and his view of the traditional religions. He says that the future of the spiritual traditions on our planet will be determined by the degree to which they enhance the divinization process. And he makes the point that one of the difficulties is that, up until the present moment, we have tended to see ourselves inside of these traditions. But now, he says, it's the universe that is our home. So it's a way of valuing them but seeing them from the proper perspective of the ultimate context—which is the universe as a whole.

WIE: Teilhard is probably best known for his idea of the "omega point." The term has become quite popular, but it seems that few people really understand what he meant by it. Can you explain Teilhard's omega point?

BS: By the "omega point," Teilhard meant a universe that had become God. He meant God in embodied form. He regarded the omega point as two things. It's an event that the universe is moving toward, in the future. But what he also imagined, which is difficult for us to really conceive, is that even though the omega point is in the future, it is also exerting a force on the present. When we think of the omega point, in our Western consciousness it's hard to escape thinking in terms of a line with the omega point at the end of the line. His thinking wasn't that way; it was that the omega point permeates the whole thing. He imagined the influence of the omega point radiating back from the future into the present. In some mysterious way, the future's right here. Teilhard regarded that the way in which the future is right here is in the experience of being drawn or attracted, or in our "zest." That's his word, and I love that so much. We—"we" meaning anything in the universe—are drawn forward, and this attractive power is what begins a process that eventuates in deeper or greater being. That attraction he regarded as love, and it is evidence of the presence of the omega point. When you experience that attraction, that zest, you're experiencing the future. You're experiencing the omega point. You're experiencing God. You're experiencing your destiny.

WIE: What does it mean for the universe to become God?

BS: Because we're in the midst of this process, at the best we can have crude images, metaphors. We have little glimmers and insights. The image
that I like is this: You have molten rock, and then all by itself, it transforms into a human mother caring for her child. That’s a rather astounding transformation. Of course, it takes four billion years. You’ve got silica, you’ve got magnesium. You’ve got all the elements of rock, and it becomes the translucent blue eye and beautiful brown hair and this deep sense of love and concern and even sacrifice for a child. That is a deep transfiguration. Love and truth and compassion and zest and all of these qualities that we regard as divine become more powerfully embodied in the universe. That would be an image of how I think about the universe becoming divine.

WIE: So it’s a process of God becoming more and more explicit or embodied in the forms of the universe?

BS: Yes, exactly. Teilhard also spoke in terms of “giving birth to person.” For example, your colleague Craig is there across the room. But if you go back five billion years, all of the atoms in Craig’s body were strung out over a hundred million miles. The process, as mysterious as it is, of matter itself forming into personality or personhood, is what Teilhard regarded as the essence of evolution. Evolution isn’t cold. He saw the omega point as that same process of giving birth to or actualizing this new, encompassing Divine Person—through not just all the atoms interacting with one another, but also the ‘persons’ of all the humans and other animals. All of us together are part of this same process, so that the entire universe becomes God’s body. To really get how radical Teilhard’s view is, think about an animal and dissolve the animal back in time in your imagination, back into individual cells. There weren’t any multicellular organisms until about seven hundred million years ago. For over three billion years, there were just single-cell organisms. If you get to know an animal well, the animal really has a personality. But the personality is something that is evoked by the cells of the animal. It’s truly mysterious. The animal’s personality is real, but that personality is evoked by the cells. So in Teilhard’s view, the individual members of the universe are actually in a process of evoking a Divine Person. We are actually giving birth to a larger, more encompassing, mind-spirit-personality.

WIE: In one sense, that was no less true sixty-five million years ago than it is now. But at the same time, humans are now becoming conscious of our own evolution and our conscious participation in this larger process. How do you think that has changed this process?

BS: Well, I think the difference is that while every member of the universe participates in the construction of the cosmos, that participation proceeds without a conscious reflection upon it. We, too, are participating in constructing the cosmos, but we have the awareness that we’re doing that. That’s the essential difference of being human. We recognize this process as happening, and we can actually awaken to the fact that we are actively doing it. We’re not just doing it. We’re awakened to the fact that we’re doing it. This then calls for spiritual development so that we can find our way between the two extremes of how we tend to respond to this. On the one hand, we can be so overwhelmed by what that means, so frozen by the responsibility, that we divert ourselves from really embracing that destiny. And I think that happens a lot. Right now it’s what our civilization is about, for the most part. But the other extreme is just as bad. We become so inflated with the thrill of that role that we lopside into thinking that we are the real action of the universe and that the human, and human enlightenment, is all that really matters. But I think it’s not that. It’s rather that we’re participating in this huge, vast, intricate event, and we’re a member of the community, but we seem to be especially destined to reflect upon this and to participate in it consciously. So I try to emphasize the fact of uniqueness here—but at the same time there’s an equality. There’s both. We’re unique in our particular role. But on an ontological level, there’s an equality. We’re not somehow superior to the moon or to the phytoplankton or to the spiders or to anything else. Everyone is essential.

WIE: What is the importance of Teilhard’s understanding of evolution and the role of the human being for our current planetary crisis?

BS: There are two points I’d want to make. First, Teilhard’s thoughts on evolution enable us to begin to appreciate the true significance of our moment. It’s extremely difficult for us to really understand what it means to make decisions that will have an impact on the next ten million years. Even if you understand the idea, it’s only at one level of your mind. So studying Teilhard’s thought and his work can be considered a spiritual practice for beginning to think at the level that is required of humans today—to think in chunks of ten million years, for example. It’s so hard for people to get that.
The second thing I would say is that much of ecological discussion is framed in negatives because the destruction is so horrendous that anybody with any intelligence whatsoever, once she or he looks at it, becomes gripped by just how horrible it is. One of Teilhard’s great contributions is that he enables us to begin to imagine that this transition has at least the possibility of eventuating in a truly glorious mode of life in the future, and his vision provides the energy that we need for enduring the difficulties of this struggle. That, to me, is extremely important. He can activate the deep, deep, deep zest for life and existence that I think is required for true leadership in our time.