

DARWIN, TEILHARD, AND THE DRAMA OF LIFE

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Scientists and philosophers today often claim that evolutionary biology provides so complete an understanding of life that it renders all religious and theological interpretations superfluous. This assumption is especially interesting to those of us who are impressed by the work of the geologist and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin, an evolutionist who cannot make complete sense of life apart from the idea of God.

Those who take Darwinian accounts of life to be completely and ultimately explanatory may be called “evolutionary naturalists.” For them Teilhard’s theological understanding of life would seem both excessive and dishonest. My topic here, therefore, is whether a place still remains, either theologically or intellectually, for Teilhard’s deeply Christian interpretation of life and the universe.

Before Darwin it was easy to understand life theologically. The Platonically influenced Western mind usually situated life and its various manifestations within a vertical, hierarchical picture of the cosmos that emanated from and was superintended by God. Before modern times theology and philosophy located matter at the bottom of the hierarchy, and then, above that—in increasing degrees of value—came plants, animals, humans, angels, and God. This scheme made the natural world highly intelligible while providing a framework for spiritual adventure as well. The meaning of human life consisted typically of struggling virtuously against the lure of materiality with the goal of making one’s way up the ladder of being to final union with God. The vine of Christian spirituality has for centuries wound itself tightly around some version or other of this hierarchical model of the universe.