

History in a Teilhardian Context: The Thought of Teilhard de Chardin as a Guide for Social Science

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The present study has as its main objective an attempt to convert key concepts from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*¹ into a usable social science methodology, specifically for the analysis and writing of history, but potentially for other fields as well. Woven into the narrative is a demonstration that, translated from abstract language into plain English, many of Teilhard's ideas are quite consistent with much recent work in the biological and social sciences.

My approach will be as follows. I am in agreement with the observation by the Eighteenth Century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, that one cannot understand a phenomenon without understanding from whence it came.² With this in mind, it would appear useful to share a bit of the intellectual odyssey which led to the writing of this article. Some of the points will be better understood if the reader knows the perspective from which they are made.

I grew up in a solidly Presbyterian home in the South, and took an undergraduate degree in political science and international affairs at what is today Rhodes College—a Presbyterian liberal arts college in Tennessee. My early orientation was Calvinist. But, like many contemporaries, I was deeply troubled by the chasm which appeared to exist between the world of religion and the world of science. Logic appeared to force a choice and, also like many contemporaries, I gradually gravitated toward the side of reason and scientific explanation.

About the time I commenced graduate study in history, I read the works of two writers who subsequently had considerable impact on my thinking. One was the French Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the other was the Jewish philosopher and mystic, Martin Buber.

Teilhard's synthesis of evolutionary biology, traditional humanism, and classical Christianity offered a bridge between science and religion. I was most impressed by two of his points. His notion of the "within of things" (the spiritual dimension) and the "without of things" (the material world of sciences and ordinary experience) as two complementary dimensions of the same underlying essence struck me as true. Subsequent reading, especially on some of the recent progress in sub-atomic physics, has reinforced my conviction that Teilhard was on the right track. To paraphrase Shakespeare, "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our present scien-