Syntheses in Science and Religion: A Comparison

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Many are attracted to the work of Teilhard de Chardin by what is perceived to be the uniqueness of that work. What is the source of that uniqueness? For many, the obvious answer is its content. I would suggest while that is important, equally important is the manner in which he developed his message—his methodology. While he was certainly not the first to attempt to bring together science and religion in developing a theological system, his approach has seldom been equaled, before or since. The manner in which he brought together Catholic religious thought and Darwinian evolutionary theory and its cognates is, I would argue, unique in the annals of Christian theology.

To be sure, it is impossible to separate completely the content of a theologian's thought from his or her method. In every theological system, there is a complex relationship between its content and how that content is arrived at. In this paper, we shall focus on the method of Teilhard de Chardin in developing his thought, and we shall do so by comparing it to the work of another Christian thinker who attempted to bring together Christian theology and Darwinian evolutionary theory, George Frederick Wright.

The interaction between science and religion has had a long and interesting history in western thought dating back to the Greeks. The manner in which the two fit together has always attracted great interest. This interest took on a special significance with the rise of Christianity. From the time of Galileo, and perhaps as early as Augustine, the notion developed that there were two books of knowledge that informed us about nature and, more importantly, about God: the book of nature (science) and the Bible. This "two books" notion as it came to be known was developed into its current form in early modernity by people such as Francis Bacon, the physicist and philosopher. Robert Boyle summarized the position well for Christian thought by stating that "...there are two chief ways to arrive at the knowledge of God's attributes; the contemplation of his work and the study of his word."[1] The problem thus arose for any Christian theologian who wished to develop a system sensitive to both, these "two books" should be fit together.