

# TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S BIOLOGICAL IDEAS

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## I. Introduction

ANALYSTS OF Teilhard de Chardin's intellectual legacy today generally agree that his great evolutionary vision, as outlined in *The Phenomenon of Man* and other writings, is not scientific in the strict sense. In fact, many who came to his defense find that the main cause of the many vicious attacks against his views was the misunderstanding created by his insistence that *The Phenomenon of Man* should be read as a scientific treatise, while in reality it was a mixture of science, philosophy and theology — with a good deal of poetry and mysticism in it.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, his ideas have a solid scientific foundation, as the warm Introduction to the English edition to the *Phenomenon* by Julian Huxley, the great authority on organic evolution, testifies. Teilhard's complex personality and many-sided scholarship, versatility in such diverse subjects as philosophy and theology on the one hand and natural sciences, in particular geology and paleontology (including paleobiology) on the other, make it very difficult to segregate the various components of his thought and find the purely scientific elements in them.

In spite of these difficulties, the aim of this essay is to investigate this one particular aspect of the work of Teilhard, the scientific, or more specifically the biological, background of his thinking, and his ideas about the mechanism of organic evolution. (Emphasis is placed here on the word *organic*, i.e., the evolution of *living* beings, since Teilhard did not confine his speculations to this phenomenon, the emergence of *Homo sapiens* from the primeval slime, but started with cosmogony, the origin of matter and energy and other pre-biotic aspects of evolution. These will not be discussed here.)

It is perhaps this aspect of Teilhard's work, his concept of the

<sup>1</sup>A thorough analysis of the methodology of *The Phenomenon of Man* was made by Fr. R. J. O'Connell, S.J. in a recent lecture, the abstract of which was published in the *Newsletter* of the American Teilhard Association (O'Connell 1978). He points out that Teilhard's term *mémoire* is not accurately translated by the term *treatise*, which suggests an adherence to "all the accepted canons of present-day scientific methodology."