

The Texture of the Evolutionary Cosmos: Matter and Spirit in Teilhard de Chardin

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A. Introduction

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born in 1881 in central France. After becoming a Jesuit, he practiced geology and paleontology in Europe, Asia, and Africa and wrote a series of essays in which he attempted to integrate his scientific understanding of the evolutionary world with his religious beliefs. But due to the controversial nature of his work at the time, he died without having received permission from his Jesuit superiors to publish these essays. Since his death in 1955, however, they have all appeared in print and have been studied extensively.

Teilhard's imagery is vivid, even sensuous, attractive even when, at times, his precise meaning is difficult to grasp. Stored within his imagery are a depth and a richness that will take many more decades to plumb. Although Teilhard relied heavily on images from physics, he often refers to the texture of things. In an early lecture, for instance, he muses about "the ultimate texture of the world" (S, 25) and writes later about analyzing the "texture" of the stuff of the universe (AE, 24). He also ventures into the realm of spirit, stating that the "pattern . . . in which our experience unfolds [things] may very well disclose to us the fundamental texture of Spirit" (W, 162). Moreover, a careful reading of his works reveals a pervasion of textural images such as weaving and spinning, looms and tapestries, fibers and threads.¹ Teilhard extends the concept of texture to the realm of biology, physics, and mathematics referring to evolutionary landscapes, topological surfaces, and space-time diagrams.

In this essay, I weave together some of Teilhard's many textural references, especially those dealing with fibers and threads, and show how this particular strand of imagery elucidates his view of the relationship between matter and spirit. I begin by investigating how he conceptualizes the texture of Matter and explore what he means by the texture of Spirit. Then, after a short introduction to chaos and complexity theories, I point out the concepts,