

Evolution as Revelation of a Triune God

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One of the greatest challenges of the Christian faith is to explain what one means by a triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As theologian Karl Rahner notes, “With all due respect to the church’s official and classical formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and taking for granted an acceptance in faith of what is meant by these formulations, we still have to admit that the assertions about the Trinity in their catechetical formulations are almost unintelligible to people today, and that they almost inevitably occasion misunderstandings” (Rahner 1978, 134). Therefore many Christians relate to God only in terms of the divine interaction with the world. This raises the question of the relationship between a philosophical concept of God and the God of Christian revelation.

In 1917 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, while at the front during World War I, wrote the essay “Creative Union” (Teilhard 1968). The essay proposes union as a way to observe how the process of evolution takes place. Later in his private journals (Teilhard 1975b),¹ he reported further constructive reflection about the process of union. He concluded on 8 September 1918 that “union is essentially a cosmic, sacred act ... [that] ends up with total integration.” The private journals reveal that he spent the remainder of his life broadening and sharpening the vision based on this insight about union in nature. It is important for this discussion to stress that Teilhard never stopped seeing himself first as a scientist. He quotes in the journal his 7 April 1950 letter to Jeanne Mortier: “I am a child of the Earth before being a child of God! Before, in that sense that, irremediably, by innermost structure, I only can grasp the Divine through the Cosmic.... If you do not see that you will never understand me.”

We propose that Teilhard’s understanding of union in evolution, together with the historical developments of thermodynamics and statistical mechanics, may offer some insight into union “as a cosmic, sacred act” and even into the life of the revealed triune Christian God. The paradigm of evolution will be assumed as a basis for reflection, and we presume that evolution is a result of some form of natural selection and the phenomenon of self-organization of matter.

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