

# **BELIEVERS AND THEIR DISBELIEF: St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa, and Teilhard**

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*Abstract.* Several modern-day Christians who were known for their devotion have left accounts of their troubled faith. I consider three of these: St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Then I tell of the troubled atheism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Finally, I use texts of Sartre and Teilhard to understand the unsettled nature of belief. Recently the private writings of several devout Catholics have come to public knowledge, and, amid their many statements of faith, these devout Catholics tell of fundamental difficulties with faith. Three such devout believers who had a troubled faith, all somewhat recent, are Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. The atheist Jean-Paul Sartre also struggled—to believe there is no God. Both Teilhard and Sartre were philosophers of note, and I use their texts to understand why the ardent believer can still know difficulty or doubt.

## **TROUBLED CHRISTIANS**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) was a Jesuit priest and a noted scientist. He came from a devout family and readily accepted the traditional Catholicism in which he was raised. After his priestly ordination he began doctoral studies in geology, but these were interrupted by four years of military service in World War I. During this time he developed an original theology in a series of nineteen essays. After the war he finished his doctorate and went to Asia where he did an abundance of scientific work (his scientific writings are now published in ten volumes). Because of an essay on original sin written in 1923, church authorities put restrictions on what he could publish in philosophy or religion. No restrictions were ever placed on his scientific writings. He continued writing in philosophy and religion and circulated his work privately. After his death friends arranged their publication. They became immensely popular following the Second Vatican Council and are now collected in thirteen volumes. Many of them concern his understanding of how evolution and Christianity complement each other. Teilhard's scientific writings centered on the geology of Asia and the early human fossils found there. He came to understand evolution as leading to a future world where Christ would be the unifying Soul of all things—the “universal Christ,” “Christ-Omega,” the “trans-Christ.” The theological part of this claim is based on his reading of the Pauline letters, especially Colossians and Ephesians.

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