

Evolution's God: Teilhard de Chardin and the Varieties of Process Theology

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INTRODUCTION

A year and a half before his death, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) asked, “Who then at last will give evolution *its* God?”¹ His endeavor to answer that question often bears striking similarities to the process theism of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) and Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000). Yet, the differences are also important. All three are rightly classified as promoting versions of process-relational philosophy, but they show by their divergences that process thought—especially process theism—is far from yielding a monolithic viewpoint.² Teilhard’s education as a priest included philosophy, but he was a practicing geologist with a good understanding of paleontology. Whitehead was a mathematician, logician, and a philosopher with a deep knowledge of mathematical physics. Hartshorne was first and foremost a philosopher, but he also made a significant contribution to the study of oscines.³ All three were conversant with both philosophy and science, but none identified as a theologian.

My task here is three-fold: first, to argue that many of Teilhard’s posthumously published writings are most akin to what Whitehead called speculative philosophy; second, to clarify what Teilhard means by evolution; and third, to address his question about “evolution’s God” by articulating, with insights from Whitehead and Hartshorne, what I call *the ontological principle of correlativity between God and the world* (abbreviated as CP for *correlativity principle*). As we shall see, CP brings these three thinkers together without resolving their differences. Teilhard is at his greatest conceptual distance from the philosophies of Whitehead and Hartshorne in his thoughts about the future of the evolutionary process. Even so, the three speak with one voice in condemning our most narrowly constructed tribal, national, and religious identities.

TEILHARD AND THE QUESTION OF METAPHYSICS

Before Teilhard was acclaimed as a religious visionary, he was known as a scientist. Even as his scientific career advanced, however, he expressed criticisms of the traditional metaphysic of *Esse* [to be] and spoke frankly of replacing it with a metaphysic of union, *Unire* [to unite]. He was advised to steer clear of philosophy and theology, but he soon realized that even an apparently innocent note on original sin could get him into trouble. In 1922, Teilhard was asked by some theologians to sketch ideas about original sin in view of evolution. The note, which was never meant for publication, mysteriously made its way to Rome.

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Comment je crois* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1969), 288. [*Christianity and Evolution*, trans. René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 240.] All translations from the French are mine. As here, I provide citations of the standard English translations of Teilhard’s works where they exist.

² I have outlined some of the key differences between the theism of Whitehead and Hartshorne in “Process Theism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Summer 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/process-theism/>

³ Charles Hartshorne, *Born to Sing: An Interpretation and World Survey of Bird Song* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973).