

Teilhard and Mendel: Contrasts and Parallels

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The award of the Mendel Medal of Villanova University to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (Orel and Matalová, 1976) immediately raises the question of the comparison of these two priest-scientists. Teilhard introduced such a comparison in his brief acceptance speech (Teilhard de Chardin, 1937): "I do not know how distinctly Mendel, when he was checking his famous laws of heredity, was conscious of the far reaching meaning of his discoveries. But the fact is that, being a highly religious man, and a pioneer in the study of moving life (= evolving? E. O. D.), Mendel can be regarded as a typical expression of the faith which is my deepest personal faith — the faith in spiritualistic evolution."

Pastushnyi (1976) took strong exception to Teilhard's comparison of himself and Mendel, because Mendel was a model of "scientific historical materialism," while Teilhard attempted "to integrate evolution and theology," with results which were both scientifically and theologically "inconsistent and completely contradictory." Dodson (1982) has shown that Pastushnyi erred by interpreting Mendel in an erroneous frame of reference and by biased selection of biographical references, but he left unanswered the broader question of how Teilhard and Mendel should be compared and contrasted. It is the purpose of the present study to consider that broader question.

Biographical Sources

The contrasts between Mendel and Teilhard might begin with the biographical sources which are available. There are two principal biographies of Mendel, both based upon studies of the archives of the Monastery of St. Thomas in Brunn (now Brno), where Mendel lived, did the experiments on which the science of genetics is based, and died. Iltis published his biography of Mendel in German in 1924 and in English in 1932, while Richter published in German in 1943. In addition, Dodson (1955, 1956, 1979) has published on the basis of a transcript of the archives of the monastery, and Boyes (1966) visited the Mendel Museum in the former monastery at Brno and studied some of the original documents. Most of the Mendelian materials in the archives are rather formal documents, like his baptismal certificate, transcripts of grades, the report to the Bishop of Mendel's election