

Teilhard de Chardin and the Piltdown Hoax

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Disclosure of the Piltdown hoax in 1953 shook the scientific world. After careful consideration of all the evidence, Charles Dawson was named as the man guilty of putting together the combination of old and modern bones which had been accepted for some forty years as those of the earliest prehistoric man found in Europe. Attempts to identify a possible collaborator in the fraud were unsuccessful.

Then, in the March 1979, August 1980 and June 1981 issues of *Natural History* magazine (1,2,3)* Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard professor and popular writer on science for the general public, presented his "complex hypothesis" which purported to implicate Teilhard de Chardin as Dawson's co-conspirator. The 1979 article did not attract much attention, but wide newspaper publicity before the appearance of the 1980 article transformed Gould's accusations into a *cause célèbre*. In his 1981 article Gould rejected criticisms of his hypothesis that three distinguished scientists had raised. Gould's naming of Teilhard gained wider credence with the publication of the 1979 article in *The Panda's Thumb* (4) and of the 1980 article with a new "Reply to Critics" (replacing the 1981 article) in *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*. (5)

Gould's complex hypothesis is raised again at this time because, though unsubstantiated, it continues to have serious consequences. In May 1994 two grant applications from Teilhard scholars were turned down because Gould's charges had put Teilhard's reputation "under a cloud." Such rejections have long confronted writers and researchers working with the large aspects of Teilhard's thought and will likely have to be met in the future. It is time to clear the air of the unjust and false accusations against Teilhard.

This study offers a short survey of the complex story: the Piltdown hoax itself, why Teilhard's name could be included in the long list of possible collaborators, Gould's complex hypothesis, and critiques of Gould's argument which began to appear immediately after his articles were published and which continue to the present day as a new generation of scholars and scientists examine the Piltdown evidence.

*Numbers in parentheses refer to notes at end of text.