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Chris Smith

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A Collection of Essays Presented at

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FRANCES WHITE EWBANK COLLOQUIUM

ON

C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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**Until the End of the World:
Omega Point Eschatology in C.S. Lewis and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**

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Introduction

The Bible, in its wonderful weaving of the tale of the universe, does not fail to describe the end of time. However, it shapes its depiction not only out of words—crafty creatures themselves—but also out of particularly ambiguous terms and symbols. Thus, many diverse understandings have arisen over time as humankind seeks to interpret these futuristic passages using the tools of a given historical, socio-political, scientific and philosophic context. The twentieth century is no exception, and a number of new eschatologies have emerged from it. One of the most prominent, and one of the most misunderstood, is the vision of the French Jesuit anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In two books that would only emerge posthumously, Teilhard thoroughly described an “Omega Point” at the end of time when God would re-unite the church unto Himself. A contemporary of Teilhard’s, the British scholar C.S. Lewis would present his

own Omega Point eschatology in the 1946 novel *That Hideous Strength*. By synthesizing Literature, Science, Philosophy and Faith, one can begin to analyze these two related perspectives on the world’s end.

Two Different Approaches to the Omega Point

Before discussing either eschatology, one must understand the men from whom these visions flowed and how each description emerges from its personal context. Lewis, an author and literary critic, appropriately encapsulates his views in the form of a story. Accordingly, one must approach his work as a work of fiction. Thus, Lewis was not explicitly trying to describe Reality, but instead, through the reality of the world of Edgestow, Bracton, and Belbury, he approached the Truth of our world. Story is a wonderful medium for expressing the hypothetical unforeseen. Indeed, even the biblical account of the world’s end consists mostly of John narrating his divine revelation.

Omega Point Eschatology in Lewis and de Chardin • C. Christopher Smith

In contrast, Teilhard—an anthropologist and scientist—speaks from the context of the Reality of our world. Any eschatology must certainly be speculative, but its expression must flow from some rhetorical form. For Lewis this form was story, and for Teilhard, it was science.

The Role of Evolution

Anyone familiar with the works of both Lewis and Teilhard will note their apparently contradictory views on evolution. As an anthropologist, Teilhard was a staunch evolutionist, and was even involved in a team effort that unearthed the infamous Peking Man (Wright 259). Teilhard's ideologies however, unlike those of many of his colleagues, were not atheistic. James Reilly notes that Teilhard's work was "a criticism of [Henry] Bergson's [naturalistic] doctrine of evolution" (51). Instead, he passionately sought to unite faith and science, and thus was one of the first to accept evolution as Teleological. Teilhard gives a thorough documentation of his theistic evolutionary views in *The Phenomenon of Man*.

On the contrary, Lewis passionately sought to refute evolution. In fact, a bold defense of the faith against naturalistic and mechanistic evolution is one of the main themes of his space trilogy. In the introduction to *That Hideous Strength*, he recognizes the work of the renowned science fiction writer Olaf Stapledon, whose perspective he aimed to refute. In his critical work on Lewis's Space Trilogy, David Downing notes that one of the main themes of *Strength* is a response to the naturalistic idea that "some sort of god . . . is evolving amid the galaxies" (53). Lewis also very clearly spoke his opposition to (atheistic) evolution in an essay in the collection *The*

Weight of Glory entitled "Is Theology Poetry?" and in his heavily sarcastic poem "Evolutionary Hymn."

There appears to be no clear statement of Lewis's opinion on theories, like Teilhard's, of theistic evolution. He does seem to indicate a belief in evolution on some scale, as he says in "Is Theology Poetry?": "However, even if evolution in the strict biological sense has some better grounds than Professor [D.M.S.] Watson suggests—and I can't help thinking that it must—we should distinguish evolution in this strict sense from what may be called the universal evolutionism of modern thought" (89-90). The "universal evolutionism" in this passage refers to the aforementioned emergent evolution of Stapledon, Bergson, and others. Thus, one realizes that Lewis—though by no means a scientist—accepted evolution on some level. However, one cannot be sure of whether he was simply referring to the scientifically well-documented models of micro-evolution, or to some more grandiose notion like the ideologies of Teilhard. Regardless of Lewis's understanding of the role of evolution, his character Dr. Dimble in *That Hideous Strength*, a key figure among the forces of Good, apparently accepts a Teleological model of evolution, as demonstrated in his articulation of an "Omega Point" eschatology.

Lewis's Presentation of Omega Point Eschatology

Lewis sets Dr. Dimble about describing this Omega Point eschatology on pages 283-286 of *That Hideous Strength*. After a period of prolonged thought, Dimble begins:

Have you ever noticed that . . . the universe and every little bit of it, is

Omega Point Eschatology in Lewis and de Chardin • C. Christopher Smith

always hardening and coming to a point? . . . I mean this, . . . If you dip into any college, or school, or parish, or family—anything you like—at a given point in history, you always find that there was a time before that point when there was more elbow room and contrasts weren't quite so sharp; and that there's going to be a time after that point when there is even less room for indecision and choices are even more momentous. Good is always getting better and bad is always getting worse . . . The whole thing is sorting itself out all the time, coming to a point, getting sharper and harder. (283)

Dimble proceeds to talk about the role of evolution in the progression toward this "Omega Point" of sorts, "Evolution means species getting less and less like one another. Minds get more and more spiritual, matter more and more material" (284). He posits the example of Merlin, in whose era spirits were less defined than at the present, and indeed some may have had a neutral impact on the universe. It is important to note here the vital role that the spiritual realm plays in Dimble's view of the progression of the universe. However, all non-divine spiritual beings are apparently also subject to evolutionary processes.

Embodiment of this eschatology in *That Hideous Strength*

Lewis has the wonderful privilege through the medium of story, of developing this eschatology through its conclusion. The congregations of Belbury and St. Anne's indubitably represent the two camps of Evil and Good that Dimble has predicted. As the tale progresses, the tension mounts between the two groups, as N.I.C.E. gradually becomes

more evil and as the community at St. Anne's grows in its virtue. Due to the relatively small historical scope of the novel, the role of evolution as such is not particularly evident. The minor exceptions would be the aforementioned spiritual evolution toward better or worse, and the historical references such as those pertaining to Merlin that described the shift in the Earth's condition. Lewis portrays the Omega Point (or in this case, points) toward which both Evil and Good were progressing. The organization at Belbury peaks at the Great Banquet, which terminates in all manners of chaos and death. St. Anne's reaches its apex in the final chapter when Perelandra sets upon this community. The Earth glows with an undue brilliance (364), and the animals liberated from Belbury revel in sexual glee (377-378)—a state somewhat reminiscent of Isaiah's glorious vision of the world to come (11:6-9). One should note how Lewis deftly unites the physical and spiritual realms in his eschatology. The physical event of Venus drawing nigh to the Earth concurs with the spiritual culmination of human history. As the Director says, "she comes more near the Earth than she was wont to—to make Earth sane. Perelandra is all about us and Man is no longer isolated. We are now as we ought to be—between the angels who are our elder brothers and the beasts who are our jesters, servants and playfellows" (378). It is interesting to note the similarity of Lewis's paradise in *Strength* and the one he describes in *the Last Battle*.

Teilhard's Vision of the Omega Point

Teilhard produced two major works during his lifetime, and continuously polished these two works because the Catholic church prohibited their publication due to their aim of uniting religious faith and evolution. The theme of each of these works was his vision of the impending Omega Point. However, each book takes a very different approach to describing this eschatology. *The Phenomenon of Man* presents the vision through the media of the natural sciences and thus, as a self-professed "scientific treatise" (29), focuses primarily on the "natural" process of evolution. Contrarily, *The Divine Milieu* describes the Omega Point eschatology from a spiritual perspective, detailing the theological aspects which relate to the "natural" processes described in *Phenomenon*. It is outside the scope of this discussion to provide a detailed exposition or analysis of Teilhard's evolutionary ideologies. Instead, the aim will be to make connections in Teilhard's works to the primary facets of Lewis's eschatology.

Creation Evolving Toward the Omega Point

Both Teilhard and Lewis imagined that evolution played some role in drawing the universe to the Omega Point. Both recognized that there was a rise in what one could vaguely call the "universal consciousness"—a term best expressed in Dimble's notion of increasing definition, that "the possibilities of even apparent neutrality are always demising" (283). Teilhard laboriously details the biological possibilities of this hypothesis in *Phenomenon*. One must proceed with caution when discussing an emerging "universal consciousness." Indeed, it was opposition to

a variety of this "emergent evolution" that spurred Lewis to pen the space trilogy.

The vital difference between the Lewis/Teilhard vision and that of Bergson and Stapledon is the underlying motivation. Evolution in *That Hideous Strength* and that of Teilhard was Teleological, driven by the hand of God and incorporating the spiritual realm as well as the natural. Contrarily, Stapledon, Bergson, et al. saw evolution as a wholly naturalistic process. Teilhard posits a model of how physical and spiritual energies indeed are two aspects of one universal energy (*Phenomenon* 62-64). *The Divine Milieu* reinforces the Teleology of Teilhard's ideologies, in accord with the Pauline descriptions of Christ as "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28) and "over all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6).

Probably the most striking similarity of the eschatologies of Teilhard and Lewis is their depiction of the distinct evolutions of Good and Evil. This aspect of Lewis's vision is readily apparent in Dimble's description. However, it is less evident in Teilhard's work, only emerging as one of two hypothetical states of our universe as it "approaches maturation" (*Phenomenon* 287). The opposite hypothesis is more idealistic and universalistic: one where humanity will evolve to a state of peace and unity prior to the Omega Point (*Phenomenon* 283-284). The latter conjecture is the one that has, mistakenly, arisen as stereotypical of Teilhard's work. However, Christopher Mooney makes a strong case in his book *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* that Teilhard, despite his hope and optimism, favored the former hypothesis (131 ff.). The evidence lies in Teilhard's acceptance of the necessity of freedom, stemming from Love (132). Mooney also notes that Teilhard

Omega Point Eschatology in Lewis and de Chardin • C. Christopher Smith

does accept the necessity of hell and damnation (*Milieu* 147-148), which would tend to support a dual evolution of Good and Evil.

Regardless of which hypothesis Teilhard thought more probable, his depiction of the Good/Evil co-evolution (*Phenomenon* 288-290), is strikingly reminiscent of Lewis's. Teilhard says that Evil "too may attain its paroxysm at the end" (*Phenomenon* 288). He proceeds to say:

Are we to foresee a mechanizing synergy under brute force, or a synergy of sympathy? Are we to foresee man seeking to fulfill himself collectively upon himself, or personally on a greater level than himself? Refusal or acceptance of the Omega? A conflict may supervene. (288)

Earlier in *Phenomenon* (62-66), Teilhard's discussion of the interaction of "radial energy" (spiritual, drawing toward the Center) and "tangential energy" (material, pulling away from the Center) is particularly similar to Dimple's notion that "Minds are getting more and more spiritual and matter more and more material" (284). Teilhard also inclines toward the Good/Evil dichotomy in his Epilogue to *The Divine Milieu*:

Segregation and aggregation. Separation of the evil elements of the world, and 'co-adunation' of the elemental worlds that each faithful spirit constructs around him in work and pain. Under the influence of this twofold movement, which is still almost entirely hidden, the universe is being transformed and is maturing all around us. (150)

Conclusion

Despite the different rhetorical forms in which Lewis and Teilhard shape their eschatologies, one finds that they are remarkably similar. First, both depict a coming Omega Point when the Parousia will occur. Each of these eschatologies is adamantly Teleological. As Robert Wright says, they represent "a divine means to an end" (273). Teilhard indubitably grounds his vision in evolutionary theory. Lewis, although his personal stance on theistic evolution is unclear, appears to have expected evolution to play some sort of role in his eschatological vision expressed in *That Hideous Strength*. Finally, both seem to accept that both Good and Evil will peak at the end of time. Lewis is explicit in his expression of these twin peaks, and thought strong evidence exists showing his inclination was toward this view. Teilhard's writings are less committal.

The aim of this discussion was not to advocate either Lewis's or Teilhard's vision as the most appropriate eschatology at the present. Indeed, both religious and scientific communities have recently questioned Teilhard's. The evangelical community has spurned Teilhard's work, primarily because they mistakenly view his work through the "New Age" universalists who hail him as a prophet. The science of Teilhard's vision is undoubtedly vague and obsolete, lending him little favor among scientists. However, a new, trendy school of physicists (e.g., Frank Tipler) have adopted his concept and terminology of the Omega Point, although their science has little to do with Teilhard's. The renowned quantum physicist and Anglican priest, John Polkinghorne, has aptly criticized this school of thought as "a kind of cosmic Tower of

Omega Point Eschatology in Lewis and de Chardin • C. Christopher Smith

Babel" (66). Lewis's views could likewise be condemned as scientifically archaic, though such judgment would be unfair, as Lewis had no pretense of speaking as a scientist. The primary value and exhortation of both eschatologies is that they seek to understand and interpret the Scriptural accounts in light of the present human understanding of the world. One would do well to follow the example of both Teilhard de Chardin and Lewis, and illuminated by the Spirit, passionately seek to know creation and its Creator through the integrating of Faith and Reason.

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