



Teilhard and Tao

Mutual and complementary aspects

1985, in 'Humanity's quest for Unity, United Nations Teilhard Colloquium'

References and notes

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I. Introduction

In this paper a tentative approach is presented to discuss the relation between the concepts of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the vision of early Taoist philosophy on man and the universe. Some indications are offered, showing where the two lines of thought run parallel, where they differ and how they complement and enrich each other. There are various reasons for this study. In the first place it is interesting to analyse how two important movements with a time difference of more than 2000 years come to comparable outlooks, be it through very different ways; Taoism through intuition and spontaneity and Teilhard through struggling with 2000 years of built-in dualism in Western culture.

In the second place enriching Teilhard's concepts with Taoist elements, will broaden the view, fill some gaps and even correct some aspects of his great work. This may result in a new philosophy of life that will be more complete, more convincing and more inspiring for the present and future generations of the Western world than conventional traditions and scientific education, which are to some extent responsible for creating the unbalanced feeling that very many people experience consciously or unconsciously, today.

As an additional point of interest it is intriguing that Teilhard de Chardin, who lived for 23 years in China, hardly interested himself in Taoist thinking and was unaware of the large reservoir of brilliant ideas that was within his grasp. His social and professional companions and his world-negating impression from oriental religions were the main causes for this lack of interest. As Ursula King points out, Teilhard did not recognize that Eastern religions, particularly Taoism, possess their own world-affirming orientations.¹ Finally it is within the spirit of Teilhard's concept of a growing noosphere – surrounding the geosphere and the biosphere of our globe and of which both the quality and density are increasing with very high speed that interaction of Taoism and Teilhard's thought can contribute to the maturing of mankind and the preservation of peace.

II. Parallels

a. Earth, man, universe

Basic in Teilhard's thinking and Taoism is the unity of the oneness of the earth, man and the universe. In his *Le Milieu Divin* Teilhard discusses the point that Christianity through the ages has somehow created the notion that there is the world and there is God, and to be occupied with worldly affairs is inferior to the devotion to divine affairs.

He goes on to argue that this dualism is not correct and there is an interdependence between the two. In and through the world man develops himself and through his efforts is and becomes more and more

part of the divine 'milieu'. There will be shifts of emphasis, depending on the individual and his phase in the life cycle, but 'in the general rhythm of Christian life, development and renunciation, attachment and detachment, are not mutually exclusive.'² He sees no reason to distinguish between the human centre and the divine centre, because they are in conjunction. Teilhard is convinced that apart from the two ways in which the individual may solve his conflict in choosing either the world or God: namely to force himself to confine his concern to purely spiritual, religious objects; or to force himself to concentrate solely on material and worldly objects; or - thirdly perhaps - to give up any attempt to make sense of his situation, there is a fourth way. This is the way of the middle, without force, a 'natural blend, a dynamic equilibrium of opposite and alternating forces. In essence this is the way of Tao, the divine middle, *le milieu divin*. What Teilhard expresses when he speaks of phases in human life where one develops or diminishes, attaches and detaches, acts and non-acts, is also expressed in chapter 48 of the Tao Tê Ching: In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired, in the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.

In both Taoism and Teilhardian thought the world is a reality, and part of the universe. It is this world-affirmative aspect, which is an important link between the two.

b. Transformation

When Teilhard was five years old, his mother was once cutting his hair near the fire place; he remembers that when a snippet fell in the fire, darkened and disappeared, he was terribly upset and for the first time in his life he knew he was perishable. His mother must have said that occasion: 'Pierre, ne pleure pas, les choses ne se perdent pas, elles se transforment.'³

A major issue of Teilhard's thought and one that caused him grave problems with his Church, is the phenomenon of transformation. Evolution of the universe, the earth, life and man is characterized by transformation in the succession of time, according to Teilhard. In his *Le Phénomène Humain*, he gives a thorough analysis of the history of evolution and the non-fixity of the species. This last observation is a major characteristic also of the Taoist philosophy.

In the Western culture, the reality of evolution became very late apparent being blocked by the creationist dogma of Christianity and by the belief that the date of Creation was 4004 BC, which was accepted up to the 18th century. It was only when geology became a sophisticated science, and it could be established in the 19th century (Charles Lyell) that the earth must be billions of years old, and enough time for evolution to have taken place, appeared to have been available.

For Taoist philosophers, transformation from one species into other was an intuitive notion. The mecha-

nisms being unknown, some of their assumptions were incorrectly based on the metamorphosis in nature, like the caterpillar-butterfly phenomenon.

In a paper for a symposium on organic evolution, Dr. J. Needham and Dr. D. Leslie extensively describe the early Chinese views on evolution and show that Taoist philosophers between the third century BC and the 14th century AD pay considerable attention to organic development, metamorphosis, zoological transformation, repeated evolution and speciation. Needham⁴ and Graham⁵ also refer in other publications to these facts.

In the Chinese texts one also finds indications leading to improvement of successive stages and levels in nature, thereby not restricting the observations to transformations only. As far as time is concerned, the early Chinese had a much more liberal and relative feeling for time and this kept their mind open for dynamic change. It is very interesting to observe that Taoist-influenced Neo-Confucianism developed the concept of organisational levels (li') in the various parts of nature. It included the idea that the higher the level of organisation rises, the more manifest the moral values and ethical behaviour become intrinsically present in the universe.

This compares with Teilhard's relationship between complexity of evolutionary stages and the level of consciousness. Teilhard describes also, that with the growing complexity of elements in nature, the ever present universal consciousness 'inside' becomes more and more manifest in the course of the process of unitive transformation.⁶

c. Energy/Spirit/Matter

In Taoist thinking there are no boundaries between energy, spirit and matter. They even have one expression for the combination, not existing in the linear-thinking Western world. It is quite extraordinary that in the Western world, through Gallilei, Descartes, Newton and Einstein and the latest research in sub-atomic particles a similar notion seems to emerge.

This process is very clearly described by Capra, in a recent publication.⁷

Teilhard de Chardin, through all his works, and especially in the two books already mentioned, emphasizes the interrelationship very strongly: 'Matter and energy are different forms of the same cosmic substance.'⁸ He distinguishes between 'physical' and 'psychic' energy in relation to matter and states that 'matter' in our human body cannot function without physical and psychic energy, whereas on the other hand physical and psychic energy can not be generated without material food and structure! Psychic energy relates more to concepts such as 'mind', 'soul', 'self', 'consciousness', 'information', 'memory', 'software'.

While both Teilhard and Taoism refer to energy/matter relationships in a qualitative way, Einstein intuitively developed his quantified special and general relativity theories, relating matter to energy (physical), space and time and describing their interdependence. It could very well be that psychic energy should also be incorporated in a universal relativity system.

Although Teilhard's psychic energy, comparable to the Tao concept of 'chi'i',⁹ being breath, energy, universal spirit etc., is relatively and quantitatively modest, it has a very important impact on the functioning of living organisms and the successive levels of evolution. Teilhard was genuinely worried about the fact that physical energy (he called it *tangential* energy) was given so much more attention in the economical, technical and political world than the psychic energy (he called it radial energy). He was of the opinion that we should spend more effort, research and resources on that particular energy than on physical energy. He considers psychic energy the essence in the development of the noosphere. For him the noosphere is the present, overwhelmingly important medium in which the evolution of mankind is developing a momentum and a speed that has never been before possible on this earth. Mental and spiritual interchange and cross-fertilization can take place in a few years, whilst material and genetic evolution and interchange in the past took millions of years.

Taoism and Teilhard both see matter and energy, the physical and the spiritual, as continually interchangeable, interdependent and even identical phenomena; different forms of the same cosmic substance and in dynamic equilibrium. Taoism and Teilhard both emphasize their fundamental unity as the source of everything, whilst Western culture has always emphasized their duality. Peace is generally better served with unity than with duality.

d. Systems

Related to the subject discussed above is the systems approach to the universe and consequently, to all parts and levels in the universe. In essence, everything is interdependent and the conventional (Western) way of analysing and reducing everything (reductionism), to separate levels and parts - ignoring their interdependence - leads to conclusions and constructions with limited scope. The systems approach broadens the scope of the scientist, the medical profession, the psychologist, the philosopher and last, but not least, the individual person in his vision on life and death. The importance of this method in scientific research was recently clearly presented by Böttcher.¹⁰ Both the Taoist thinkers and Teilhard were applying this approach, unaware of its present sophisticated status. As a consequence of this approach, both were dynamic-minded. This is probably the reason that their thinking can stand the test of time. They were both convinced that the creation was an on-going process in the present world. Inversely, Western

philosophy and religion, being rooted in the dualistic and static origins of the Greek and Christian traditions, are less compatible with the new findings of science.

e. Beginning and End

Science, and specifically physics, is going through a very fast growing stage of touching the essence of spiritual, mental and religious questions. A recent book by Paul Davies¹¹ makes a worthwhile attempt to inform the layman of these latest developments and their impact on man's evaluation of the universe and his place therein. The conclusion that the beginning of everything new, including the universe, is basically extremely simple, unorganised and in equilibrium can also be found in the Taoist thinking.¹²

What happens afterwards, is that what Taoists call 'the ten thousand things', and is all coming from this single (primeval or primordial) point. This holds for the universe as it holds for the individual. In Taoism, individual man is mentally able to reach the primeval or primordial point by meditation. Taoists do value the world and life, but value simultaneously the Tao, which can be reached by 'going back' to before life. For Teilhard, the ultimate single point to be reached by humankind is his Omega concept, the ultimate phase of the noosphere, where everything becomes spiritual and the material world has vanished.

Soeur Marie Ina Bergeron comes to the conclusion¹³ that the point of Tao, and the point of Teilhard are 'concordants'. If one leaves the time and space elements out of context, there is indeed a complete coincidence of the two notions.

If we compare this with the 'singularity point' of new physics approach to the emergence of the universe and the concept of the 'black hole' of cosmologists, we cannot resist the temptation to consider also these points as parallel to the Tao and to Teilhard's viewpoints.

III. Differences

a. Creator

In Teilhard's vision the Christian dogma of a Creator (God), the Incarnation (Jesus Christ), the Resurrection and the ultimate return are and remain essential. In Taoism there is no (need for a) creator. They believe in creation as ever present.

It must be emphasized that Taoism is not pantheistic, the Tao being not the universe, but a non-defined, non-nameable notion, free from objectivity and subjectivity, as is clear from chapter I of the Tao Tê Ching. Taoism does not follow the cause-effect approach, which is the backbone of Western thinking. Aquinas, for instance, applies the cause-effect approach and the 'serial' observation that there is a first cause called God.¹⁴ Teilhard is in some of his concepts clearly under the influence of the 'goal orientated linear thinking'

(an expression of Alan Watts) of Western culture where the major issue always is: 'where does everything come from, and where does it go to.' Taoists are not so concerned with this issue and prefer to accept the world, man and the universe as a total, interdependent system, and have an intuitive feeling of relativity towards time and space. It is the concept of absolute time and space, proclaimed by the Church and reinforced by the development of science in the 17th century in the West that blocked the way such as chosen by Taoists. The remarks by St. Augustine 'the world was made, not in time, but simultaneously with time' and by St. Paul 'omnis creatura ad hoc ingeniscit et partirit' were never really translated into new thinking by the Church.

On the contrary, the encyclical 'Humani Generis' of Pope Pius XII in 1950 fully reconfirmed Aquinas' formulation and disqualified Teilhard's innovative synthesis between religion and evolution. The latest development in new physics offers a new opening to the Church for the convergence of religion and science. This time it should be taken seriously.

b. Personality, life and death

Teilhard attaches, in tune with the Christian belief, great importance to the identity and immortality of the individual human person. In *Le Milieu Divin*, he emphasizes this very clearly; the end of evolution and the end of one's life lead to the furthest possible limit of differentiation among the creatures God concentrates in himself. 'Christianity alone therefore saves, with the right of thought, the essential aspiration of all mysticism: to be united (that is, to become the other) while remaining oneself.'¹⁵ 'In omnibus omnia Deus', as expressed by St. Paul.

Teilhard believes that each personality transcends death in his own mini-universe, being and becoming part of the totality of the 'milieu divin.' Taoist philosophy is less concerned with identity after death since it considers personal identity illusory; 'my birth and death are no more than moments in the universal process of transformation.' From Chuang Tzu's writings, A. S. Graham¹⁶ concludes that the liberation from selfhood is seen as a triumph over death: 'Not personal consciousness will survive death, but in losing selfhood I shall remain what at bottom I always was, identical with everything conscious or unconscious in the universe.'

In other words, Chuang Tzu, expressing the Taoist philosophy of death, does not choose for acceptance of annihilation, nor for faith in individual survival, but for withdrawal by oneself from the entire world of multiplicity and change into a solitude beyond reach of life and death. Graham describes¹⁷ the difference between the conceptualisations of the underlying ground in Chinese and Western thought. 'The goal which Western philosophy has pursued has been the

reality beyond appearances on the assumption that once we know the truth about the cosmos we shall know how to live in it.' 'Taoists do not think in terms of discovering 'Truth or Reality.' They point out the direction by using stories, verses, aphorisms and all available sources of art to express their intuitive feeling about the Tao, the Way by which to live and die.

c. Dynamic model

As discussed already earlier, there is great similarity between Taoism and Teilhard's thinking in what we call today the systems approach, in the aspect of change ('the only aspect which never changes is change' said the Taoists), in the dynamic interchange and interdependence of opposite forces. But whereas for Teilhard the movement is cyclical and directional (towards ω) for Taoists it is cyclical and circular. A circle has no beginning and no end, but within the circle are the 'ten thousand things' and is the world with all its changes, alternating yin/yang forces and evolutionary traces, within the totality of unity. This is reflected in the wellknown Taoist symbol:



A line, however, has an unknown beginning and an unknown end, unless we 'invent' them. Teilhard was fixed on his $\alpha - \omega$ line. This simplified difference of approach is quite fundamental.

d. Tension and no tension

In *Le Milieu Divin* Teilhard emphasizes his view that the Christian reaches God through his preoccupations with human developments and the pursuit of earthly improvements. Action for improvement of the world leads to detachment in a later stage. He writes: 'Men can only escape the terrible boredom of monotonous and commonplace duty to find themselves free to the inner tension and the anxieties of the creation. To create or organize, material energy, or truth, or beauty, brings with it an inner torment which prevents those who face its hazards from sinking into the quiet and closed-in life wherein grows the vice of self-regard and attachment.'¹⁸ Teilhard does point out that during his work of action and tension, man should not pause so as to bask in or possess results and should leave behind him his most cherished beginnings. In that respect he is on the same line as Taoists. But Taoists emphasize the importance of non-tension; they emphasize non-action. Again citing chapter 48 of the Tao Tê Ching:

*Less and less is done
until non-action is achieved
when nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It can not be ruled by interfering.*

To be sure, the Taoists do not proclaim to, literally speaking, do nothing. But their philosophy is based on the fact that there is a 'grain' in the pattern of the universe that is the natural way. Man should follow this way, this grain, and not take actions, which deviate from the natural course. Alan Watts calls it 'the watercourse way.' By non-action is meant following the way, the Tao. Do not force, do not create or assume counterforces that have to conflict and fight in order to destroy or lead to new and higher forms, as is the model of Hegel, Malthus and Marx. Teilhard assumes that the ω -point will be reached through tension, anxiety and action; Taoists feel that the α -point can be reached through non-tension, calmness and acceptance. In ω mankind reaches the Kingdom of God; in α man reaches Tao.

e. Nature

Teilhard and the Taoists had great affection to nature. However, there seems to be a great difference in approach. Teilhard was in favour of man and technology taking control over nature and thereby giving further direction to evolution. Taoists are aiming at control within nature, man being part of it. Taoists do not want to change nature, because they want to follow the 'grain.' Teilhard accepted man's interference in nature and thereby supports the supremacy of man over nature, thus 'using' nature in the name of evolution, regardless its side-effects. However, this is in conflict with the concept of 'oneness,' the interdependence of all parts of the universe and the role of the 'noosphere' in the evolution of mankind.

IV. Synthesis

In view of the preliminary analysis in the foregoing chapters the question arises on how can we expand Teilhard and Taoist views into mutual enrichment. First of all, in both Western and Eastern societies we cannot and should not even attempt to change culture, philosophy, or the attitude as they have developed over the ages. Western man can only try to judge the potential that Taoism offers in adding elements to Teilhard's concepts. Only the people from the East could try to judge the potential that Teilhard offers for adding elements to the Taoist philosophy. Hereafter follow some brief indication, for further study.

a. Linear, circular and cyclical thought forms

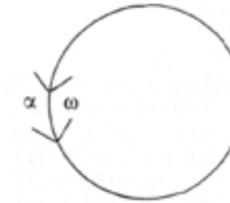
Maintaining Teilhard's conclusion that the world is evolving in the universe form the very beginning of the formation of hydrogen, via larger and ever more complex atoms, molecules, organisms into the ω -point of noosphere; maintaining his viewpoint that the

Christian tradition is compatible with this assumption; in other words accepting both the science and the religion of the West; we do not disturb but, on the contrary, start completing his concept by introducing an extra dimension from the Taoists, giving his linear presentation a circular shape.

We can draw it like this:
instead of:

α atoms, molecules, organisms, mankind, noosphere ω

comes:



Just like Newton's laws were not invalidated in their field of application when Einstein developed his relativity theory, Teilhard's concept is not invalidated by this reshaping. But in both cases the new approach leads to a broadening of the scope and extension of the field of application.

b. Tension and non-tension

There are certain processes in nature and in human society that cannot take place without certain tensions. Although Taoism maintains that if everything is going the 'watercourse way' no tension exist, we are in practice confronted with very forceful, explosive situations where man could destroy himself and his surroundings if he refrains from interfering. Yet there is a vast difference in mentality if one acts on the assumption that everything has to be solved or approached from the viewpoint of dualism, conflict, polarisation and struggle. This is certainly not Teilhard's approach and that makes his concept so valuable already in guiding man and mankind to harmony and peace. But still, in his thinking and writing, one discovers more tension approaches than seems justified when experimenting with the Tao attitude. However, incorporating original Tao attitudes of non-tension from the old philosophers would elevate the Teilhard monument to a still higher level and modify some strenuous elements.

c. Nature

The emphasis of Taoism on man within nature as opposed to the attitude of man over nature, needs to be taken very seriously in connection with the evolution of our earth. The intuitive notion of universal interdependence by the Taoists stands in great contrast to the way the modern world has interfered with nature, both in the industrial-technological field as in

the bio-medical field. This element will have to have strong emphasis in evolution theories and their interpretation into the practical world. Also Teilhard's concept will have to be supplemented in this respect.

d. Life and death

The fundamental question of the identity of the human being is in Western thinking limited to the experience during life. How can we reconcile Teilhard's strong belief in the eternal existence of the personal identity with the Taoist viewpoint that life and death are different forms of the same cosmic substance and are in fact in essence identical? If we accept the transformation principle of the Taoists and of Teilhard as basically equal and see life and death not at the beginning and the end in a space/time dimension, but in the context of a circle which has no beginning and no end, we may grasp something of a synthesis, the typical rational question about the individual personality, purely projected from the dualistic approach in the limited space/time of our earthly life becomes than irrelevant. When Teilhard was dying he apparently said: 'I am going where the One is coming.' It could very well be that in this one sentence lies the key to reconciliation with Tao.

e. Creator

When digesting the various aspects that have been briefly touched upon in this paper, one might consider the contrast creator-non-creator less essential than one would be initially inclined to do. God and Tao share in a wider and deeper sense, the same intuitive, formless and non-descriptive nature. For a truly universal approach to this subject it should be realized that, with acceptance of differentiation throughout the world, there is a fundamental unity in all religions, sciences and philosophies. This will undoubtedly lead to more tolerance, more understanding and eventually more peace on earth.

V. Preliminary conclusion

There seem to be many aspects of Teilhardian and Taoist philosophies that could be mutually important in augmenting their already high levels of quality to even higher levels. This tentative analysis shows that in many fields further study will be needed to come to clear and convincing formulations to reach new visions. The most important and difficult task will be to translate these formulations into understandable and motivating guidelines for the citizens of this earth to find the Way.