

## Theological Trends

## Towards an understanding of spirituality as evolutionary

*William Cenkner*

RECENT NATIONAL REVIEWS HAVE BROUGHT to our attention the growing compatibility between religion and science. In fact one speaks of the 'warming trend between scientific and spiritual disciplines' as scientists and theologians discover greater common ground. It is no more appropriate for cosmologists to draw upon medieval notions of God than it is for theologians to build upon medieval scientific concepts of the cosmos. As the specialization of religion and science grows among theologians, so too the boundaries between physics and metaphysics become blurred among scientists.<sup>1</sup> For example, the two revolutionary changes in our century, relativity theory and quantum mechanics, have transformed the philosophical and theological discussion of time, space, causality and other significant metaphysical questions.<sup>2</sup> The effort in this article is to probe the effect of this on our revisioning of spirituality in this century. More specifically, how does evolutionary theory impinge upon our understanding of spirituality? Within an evolutionary grid I will develop four points: spirituality embracing the totality of human life; ongoing creation effecting both a teleological and spiritual evolution; consciousness evolving along with lifelong *metanoia*; spiritual life advancing through conscious relationships.

*Spirituality in the totality of life*

A leap in evolution occurred with the emergence of humanity as moral and rational being. It is presumed in evolutionary theory that the human psyche required gradual development until a being emerged that possessed reflective moral and intellectual capacity, and ultimately a self-reflective person that we call human. Augustine was the first to speak of God creating everything in seed, in a process of gradual development.<sup>3</sup> Consequently organic evolution, psychogenetic evolution, and spiritual evolution, were frequently viewed as distinct stages in the evolutionary process. Today, however, organic and psycho-

genetic developments are seen as one process of evolution. Since a human being is an embodied reality, organically and psychogenetically, spiritual development can no longer be seen as distinct from human embodiment. What this means theologically is that the place of spiritual evolution is part of this one evolution. The human person evolves as one totality, neither separated within itself nor separated from the socio-historical reality of a particular moment in time and space. Unless this integral perspective of evolution is possible, one falls into a mechanistic view of human growth which can result in a materialist, reductionist or solely spiritual view of evolution. This is precisely what some modern physicists and theologians are trying to avoid. Such fragmentation took place in the earlier interface of science and religion. There is, however, a realization in both religion and science that the human person evolved intellectually far more rapidly than physically or biologically. There is a human potential in intellectual development, a surplus in the human psyche and spirit that seems inexhaustible.

Human development is integral as a physical, biological, historical, social, psychic, intellectual and spiritual reality: one in being and inseparable from the totality of life. The basic insight bringing this about in modern times, in science and theology, is the interconnectedness of reality, of the human in the world, of the spirit in the world.<sup>4</sup> One result of the contemporary embrace of religion and science is the seriousness with which humankind views itself as integral to the cosmic process. Cosmic evolution is the matrix of human life. There is a basic recognition of the interrelatedness and interdependence of everything in the universe: human society, selfhood, care for the world, environmental concerns and spiritual concerns form one total fabric of reality.

The interconnectedness of spirituality with the totality of life is implied in the theologies and lives of the saints of our Christian past. An example is given by the Franciscan Bonaventure who, in affirming the ascent of the person into God, makes it clear that this is not an escape from earth and material reality but a realization of divine participation in every aspect of nature, matter and socio-historical life. Drawing upon St Francis' experience of nature and the natural order, Bonaventure argued that a theology of divine participation brought about an interrelated and interdependent evolving of humanity within nature. One of the more outstanding contributions of Karl Rahner to contemporary theology is the depth and breadth he gave to the concept of the Spirit in the world.<sup>5</sup> For Rahner, hominization, the spiritual growth and development of humanity, is situated within organic and

psychogenetic evolution. Spirituality is integral to the totality of life because the vitality of the Spirit in the world interconnects and inter-relates all created reality.

*Continuing creation: teleological and spiritual evolution*

One of the profound mistakes among modern process theologians, and even scientists who support the theory of an original creation out of nothing, is the separation of original creation and continuing creation. Wolfhart Pannenberg, possibly the most outstanding theologian on the impact of science on religion, observes that the doctrine of continuing creation presupposes a *creatio ex nihilo*, since it specifies the preservation of creation out of nothing.<sup>6</sup> Traditional theology, even without the insights of modern science, has, since the high Middle Ages, consistently advanced a doctrine of the continuing activity of the primal creator in cosmic historical development. It was understood as divine conservation, divine change, providence, and even the possibility of divine intervention. This position is not without support from contemporary scientists. A growing number of modern physicists, by superseding Newtonian determinism and the physics and natural sciences of the nineteenth century, are open to the idea of a continuing creation of the Creator active within a progressing and material world.

Theological anthropology today, drawing upon a long Christian tradition, places great emphasis upon God immanent in creation, not as a static presence, but as a vital presence not only conserving, preserving and sustaining creation but gracing the universe from the very beginning. Grace in physics and philosophy remains a possibility, while in theology, grace is a reality, realized existentially as God's self-manifestation in the world. The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity with their companion gifts – wisdom, understanding and knowledge – engage and contextualize the transformation of the intellectual nature of humanity. Although it would seem that the theological virtues evolve through the human thrust towards divine transcendence, it is in the moral virtues, where grace especially builds upon nature, that these acquired and infused virtues mature as divine immanence is encountered in the growth process. With the moral virtues as habits come the gifts of the Spirit, which may be regarded as the instincts and dispositions to act with ease in the process of spiritual development. St Paul speaks of special charisms for special ministries and even charisms for all members of the new kingdom. This grand complex of habits, virtues and gifts, sustaining and preserving spiritual growth, gives testimony

both to the goal of human development, namely, union with divine transcendence, and to the ground for the hope and vitality of human growth, namely, divine immanence.

Regardless of which evolutionary theory one may employ, the nature of humanity and the universe is in a process of change and transformation. There seems today, as never before, an inevitability to the evolutionary process. More scientists than ever before recognize purpose in the evolutionary process. The dichotomy between evolutionary views and the sense of transcendent purpose, viewed by some as an insurmountable obstacle in the early part of this century, is no longer a stumbling block for many. From the perspective of Christian thinkers this may have come about partially through the work of Henri Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin, who developed a notion of teleological and spiritual evolution dependent upon God as both transcendent and immanent. Two other factors, however, have influenced scientists. The first is the work in genetics revealing a base for evolutionary inheritance, now supported by comparative anatomy, embryology, ethnology, biochemistry, parasitology, biogeography and palaeontology. Trends in cosmology also point to a purposeful creation as design is more frequently discussed. Both cosmic and human resources are looked upon as unfathomable. Some speak of an evolving *homo sapiens* as 'a youth movement' where almost everything is yet to come. All this points to a belief in a continuing creation, the inevitability of the creative process, due to a rediscovery in both science and spirituality of divine immanence, which gives purpose and a teleological base to evolution.

### ***Metanoia – a lifelong process of formation***

The Gospel of Luke (12:2) tells us that 'Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known'. Early Church Fathers wrote that as the human person becomes conscious of sin, conversion combats obstacles to growth and human development then occurs. Thomas Aquinas taught that conscience (*synteresis*) was a means for the knowledge of God *sub ratione boni*. The philosophical traditions, East and West, embraced a twofold approach to consciousness. From an Aristotelian perspective, rational analysis – an empirical approach to consciousness, through perception, inference and verbal testimony – gives growth to consciousness by way of analogy which discloses more dissimilarity than similarity with the objects of perception. From a more Platonic perspective, the way of negation through a method of abstraction and negation by elimination and detachment

gives growth to consciousness. Regardless of perspective, a change in consciousness, in vision, in stance occurs. Bernard Lonergan speaks about a change taking place in one's intellectual life, moral life, and most significantly, one's spiritual life.

Some historians of religions have contended that there was a radical shift from mythic-archaic consciousness, broadly observed throughout the world from 1200 to 400 BCE, to historical self-reflective consciousness. This transformation was not merely a paradigm shift but an alteration of ideas, meanings and even ways of analysis which produced new truths, ideas and understandings not grasped in the past. Furthermore, evolution of consciousness implies not merely a change in history, ideas and thoughts, but a change in modes of thinking and willing by which new realities come into play.<sup>7</sup> Today as evolution interrelates the physical, historical, emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual aspects of a human being, a pervasive revisioning of the evolution of consciousness is taking place. The Catholic theologian Sean Fagan observes that it is now misleading to speak of the human person 'having a conscience'; but rather, 'one is a conscience'.<sup>8</sup> Conscience is not merely a complex of physiological, psychological and sociological factors but characterizes the whole person. There is an inner thrust for self-realization and self-transcendence at the core of a person's consciousness. As Lonergan acknowledges, there is a personal demand for judgement and decision which transforms the human subject as a result of definitive intellectual and moral transformation.

Consciousness is the most essential and foundational factor in human evolution and its advance constitutes the axis of ascent to God in the spiritual journey. Further development of the human subject is a spiritual matter, since evolving consciousness is reaching new heights in the created order. Two complementary notions characterize Teilhard de Chardin's understanding of evolution on all levels of reality: the complexity of form and intensity of purpose.<sup>9</sup> An increasing complexity of form gives an increasing intensity to consciousness. Science testifies to the complexity in the organization of matter, for example, the complexity and organization of the physical systems in the human body or complexity and organization discovered by analysis in physics or biology or astronomy. Human growth in consciousness follows upon all preceding levels of organization – physical, biological or neurological. But with the first great leap in consciousness to the level of self-reflective consciousness, the creation of the 'I' emerges as a new type of being, namely, one that becomes psycho-social and, consequently, thoroughly historical.

The intensity of purposeful consciousness is evident not only from the desire for and expansion of knowledge, especially in modern times, but also results from the greater subjectivity and interiority established in both philosophy and science. Teilhard's insight is that evolution is taking place both throughout the human order and through the agency of human beings. 'We are evolution,' he writes. Or, in theological language, he observes, 'God makes us make ourselves'.<sup>10</sup> Human beings are self-conscious; they have the capacity to move still further in the evolutionary process. Drawing upon the concepts of continuing creation and divine immanence, as previously discussed, human consciousness evolves in every stage of development as an inner tendency, purpose and drive, not only from 'above' as attraction and goal but also from 'within' and 'below'. Thus, the increase in the complexity of form and the intensity of consciousness advance the spiritual nature of humanity in its ascent and/or descent into God.

Spiritual theology speaks about self-transcendence by situating the human being within the horizon of ultimacy, God. In philosophical language spirituality is the capacity for self-transcendence through knowledge and love; in theological language the capacity for self-transcendence constitutes a personal relationship with God.<sup>11</sup> Transpersonal or spectrum theology, as it is frequently called, influenced by cultural anthropology and philosophical theories of evolution, tries to move beyond the boundaries of psychology and must be complemented by contemplative stages of consciousness that are integral to human development.<sup>12</sup> For example, consciousness is open to dimensions of experience that are cosmic, transpersonal, fields of unified awareness. Teilhard's evolutionary vision is the consciousness of Christ, the Omega point, towards which all human life is directed and in which it is fulfilled.

Adrian van Kaam speaks of ongoing spiritual formation whereby the individual moves from one transcendent crisis to another. For him, at the heart of conscious humanity is a transcendent aspiration for fullness, peace and joy, through participation in the trinitarian life of God.

### *The development of relationship and its promotion of spiritual growth*

It is now axiomatic to say that we are intersubjective beings. Human beings alone can hold in consciousness not merely objects of awareness but subjects, and as such can enter intersubjective relationship freely and willingly. St Francis, perceiving divine immanence in nature,

established his relationship with God, and even with the suffering Jesus, through such intersubjectivity. St Paul was able to say that 'I live now not I but Christ lives in me', as experienced in his relationship with the suffering and risen Lord. The greater the intersubjectivity, the greater becomes the expansion of the person, personality and, consequently, consciousness.

The principle of dynamism in the human personality is relationality. Following Thomas Aquinas, a person is constituted and defined by relationship, the guiding principle of his trinitarian theology. The divine persons are subsistent relations, intersubjective with each other at the deepest level of coinherence. A human person, on the other hand, is a relation totally dependent on others, other beings and God. There is such a profound dependency for relationship that without it no human person can exist as such. If only one human being existed, such a being in fact would not be truly a human person. Relationality is the foundation for the development of humanity and of human consciousness. One first extends relationships to the world of quantity, then to the world of quality and, with growth in consciousness, into the broader world of reality. Finally, with self-reflective consciousness, relationality operates in a heightened way, drawing upon the surplus, an openness to the greater world of society, nature and divine ultimacy.<sup>13</sup> This is the projectile of human evolution. Human originality discovers its creativity through relationship, as a social being in nature and history and with divine life.

As relationships are extended in love, freedom and will, so too the ways in which freedom is exercised and necessarily evolves. Likewise, the appearance of love, as the scriptures of world religions give testimony, is neither a sporadic accident, nor present from the beginning of the creation process, but is a product of a long period of evolution. Human life, the growth into personhood, requires an orientation to the emergence of reflective consciousness and personality. Personalization takes place through focusing the energy and force of love and freedom. This is as evident in socialization as in spirituality wherein the human person through love and freedom extends intersubjectivity to the whole of creation and the world of the sacred. Although the above does not depend upon Teilhard's thought, he indeed confirms it. For him the first and the last, the Alpha and Omega, is Christ at the heart of the universe, both epiphany and diaphany. The Jesus of history is manifestation of the Omega point, established through his love and freedom. His love and freedom are manifested in human life and as such his love is our ideal.<sup>14</sup> The Omega point is Christ as a social organism of all humanity

converging and evolving at the heart of the universe. Teilhard's goal is the passage from planetary life to life in the Omega point.

Spirituality is the study of the spiritual self. From the above fourfold grid we can conclude that the spiritual self (not to be confused with the soul) is interconnected with all of reality, especially the physical and psychological self. Second: as a result of continuing creation divine immanence offers teleological inevitability to spiritual evolution. Third: evolving consciousness parallels ongoing metanoia as intersubjectivity and self-transcendence manifest the increasing complexity and intensity of the evolutionary process. Fourth and finally, consciousness evolves as the dynamism of the human personality drawing upon human relationships elicits the capacity for creative love and freedom.

### *Conclusion*

The above is based upon the warming trend between religion and science, theology and physics, and the situating of both in the arena of metaphysics. This then concludes with a plea for continuing the dialogue between religion and science, theology and physics, which seems to open a new horizon following the opposition between these fields in the last century. Mark William Worthing suggests points of dialogue between religion and science. The relationship between Creator and creation is of interest to both physicist and theologian. Knowledge of the physical world is necessary, as we enter the twenty-first century, before our knowledge of God's creation in history is truly relevant. It is only within this contingent universe that we can grasp what God manifests to us. We do not speak knowledgeably of God in the universe today unless we know what physicists are saying of the universe. It is a matter of correlating scientific and theological speculation. However, spirituality is the actual praxis of living a religious life in today's world. Spirituality should not be distinct from theological and scientific dialogue and their engagement as implied above, but should constitute access to a more fruitful dialogue of religion, science and spirituality itself.<sup>15</sup>

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parative studies in Hinduism and multiculturalism, appears in a variety of international journals.

## NOTES

- 1 'Scientist and theological discourse & common ground', *U.S. News & World Report* (20 July 1998), pp 199f. The contemporary dialogue actually began thirty years ago with *Issues in religion and science*, by Ian Barbour. It is interesting to note that the prestigious Gifford Lectures in the last decade have been given by three leaders in this new exploration: 1990, Ian Barbour, *Religion in an age of science*; 1993, A. R. Peacocke, *Theology for a scientific age*; 1994, J. Polkinghorne, *Science and Christian belief: the faith of a physicist*.
- 2 Mark William Worthing, *God, creation, and contemporary physics* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p 209; attributed to Richard Morris, p 199, 'The boundaries between physics and metaphysics have become blurred'.
- 3 Leo O'Donovan, 'Evolution', *The new dictionary of theology*, ed Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington, DL: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987), pp 363–365. Cf Leo O'Donovan, 'Was Vatican II evolutionary? a note on conciliar language', *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), pp 493–502.
- 4 Worthing, *God, creation, and contemporary physics*, p 209.
- 5 Karl Rahner, *Homination, the evolutionary origins of man as a theological problem* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965); also Karl Rahner, *The Spirit in the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1966).
- 6 Worthing, *God, creation, and contemporary physics*, ch. 4, pp 116–158.
- 7 Robert A. McDermott, 'Philosophy and the evolution of consciousness', *Cross Currents* 39 (Fall 1989), pp 322–338.
- 8 Sean Fagan, 'Conscience', *The new dictionary of theology*, pp 226–230. This is to imply that consciousness itself evolves as does the human person.
- 9 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The phenomenon of man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp 63–65; also Teilhard de Chardin, *The appearance of man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p 265. See also Beatrice Bruteau, *Evolution toward divinity, Teilhard de Chardin and the Hindu tradition* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1974), pp 155f.
- 10 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The divine milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p 70.
- 11 Joann Wolski Conn, 'Spirituality', *The new dictionary of theology*, pp 972–986.
- 12 Richard Byrne, 'Journey (growth and development of spiritual life)', *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, ed Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), pp 565–577.
- 13 I have drawn these insights from the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore.
- 14 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in times of war* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p 58. Also see Bruteau, *Evolution toward divinity*, pp 24f.
- 15 One could follow the progress of several academic centres: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley; Chicago Center for Religion and Science, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago; Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology, St Louis. The scientists writing major contributions in this are: Ian Barbour, Arthur R. Peacocke, John Polkinghorne, Philip Hefner, Mark William Worthing, Brian Swimme, Stanley Jaki, Robert John Russell, Edward O. Wilson.