

LEARNING HOW TO SEE

Teilhard de Chardin's 'Mass on the World'

Chad Thralls

I LIVE ON A NARROW STREET lined with three-storey terraced houses on both sides. The one-way street in front of my house is only wide enough for single-lane traffic and on-street parking. Because it is so narrow, shadows darken it long before the sun actually goes down. In the early evenings of long spring and summer days, with my street in shadows, I like to chase the sun. In complete contrast to my prematurely darkened street, if I walk one block north and two blocks west to Riverfront Park, I can enjoy the brightness of the sun for an additional couple of hours. As I round the corner from my house, cross the three lanes of Second Street and proceed past a six-storey apartment building, the world brightens considerably. There, at the intersection of Harris and Front Streets, I am bathed in light. Before me lies the mile-wide Susquehanna River with the sun reflecting brilliantly off its surface.

The work of the day usually leaves me preoccupied with something I have read, something that still needs to be written, or some other loose or frustrating detail that remains out of place. As I cross the three lanes of Front Street and descend the steps to the footpath at river level, the worries, stresses and strains of the day recede before the scene in front of me. The view before me encompasses the immense river itself with multiple green islands in the middle; a tree-covered ridge to the north, on top of which runs the Appalachian Trail; geese floating at leisure on the calm surface of the water; runners; fishermen; and pontoon boats out for an evening cruise. Whenever I take this stroll, I feel the burdens I carry lighten. The preoccupations of the day fade in contrast to the awe I feel before the beauty of the river as the setting sun causes the water to shimmer and the clouds to take on spectacular hues.

Experiences of the beauty of nature are visual experiences. When we witness a magnificent sunset, we receive the data of experience



Sunset on the Susquehanna River

through our eyes. Many Christians connect experiences of the beauty of nature with the experience of God. This suggests that just as we *hear* the Word proclaimed and preached, we can also in some sense *see* God visually. I want to suggest that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is one writer who can help us to sort out how this process of spiritual perception might work.

Perception, however, is a complex process. Physically being able to see a particular wavelength of light does not mean that we accurately perceive all the objects before us. Many possible obstacles hinder this process. Therefore, I will begin with a brief discussion of projection as one such impediment to seeing clearly. Then I will explore Teilhard de Chardin's claim in his mystical writings that it is possible to see the presence of Christ shining forth from the centre of matter. Finally, I will articulate his contribution to a Christian understanding of vision as a spiritual sense by interpreting his mystical writings according to the art historian David Morgan's notion of the covenant into which viewers enter with images when they look at them.

Projection: We See What We Expect to See

When we consider the subject of vision, it is important to note that seeing is not a straightforward process. In fact, there are many obstacles that prevent viewers from seeing clearly. One psychological process that

influences our perception of objects is projection. Projection occurs when we transfer on to others what we refuse to acknowledge is really a part of ourselves. Our interpretations of other people as selfish, rude or inconsiderate can partly be attributed to our inability to admit that we house these traits in ourselves. Projections are easily recognised when we have a disproportionately negative or positive reaction to someone or something. Recognition of our projections offers an opportunity to address the unconscious part of ourselves, now in full view of consciousness.

In addition to revealing what is unconscious, projection also functions as a means of perception. The psychoanalyst Ann Ulanov explains how projections help a subject come to know an unknown object. In *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality*, she claims that the unconscious process of generating projections functions as the source of our interest in any unknown object. The projection serves as a mask composed of something from inside us that initially makes the object interesting. The process of perception begins with our projection on to the object. As we move closer to the object to get a better look, the reality of it destroys our projection.¹ In other words, the independent reality of the object destroys our expectation about what the object is really like. If we allow the process of perception to keep going, a cycle of projection and destruction will continue until we know the object in itself beyond our projections on to it.

This process of perception through a cycle of projection and destruction illustrates the difficulty of seeing clearly. Though the process of projection facilitates the accurate perception of unknown objects, it does so through the generation of masks. These masks function as images of what we expect the object to look like or be. If we fail to get close enough to the object for reality to destroy our image of it, what we perceive is not the object but our mask. Thus, what we see is not reality but our image of it.

Teilhard de Chardin

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit who died in 1955. He was also a palaeontologist, and brought his scientific passion for the world to his spiritual writings. Once, on a Sunday when the gospel reading

¹ See Ann Belford Ulanov, 'Aggression and Destructiveness', in *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 107–124.

was the story of Christ's transfiguration, Teilhard was on an expedition in a remote Chinese desert. Unable to celebrate Mass because he did not have any bread or wine, he imagined what saying Mass would be like if he used different elements. In his essay 'The Mass on the World', the world serves as an altar on which he offers up its two processes, growth and diminishment, as a sacrifice to God.² Instead of bread and wine, he offers up all the forces of life and death at work in the world. As he offers up these elements, he says, 'This is my Body' and 'This is my Blood'.³ And, with that, Teilhard envisions fire, which to him represents the Spirit, lighting 'up the whole world from within'.⁴ He describes the penetration of the world by fire in this way, 'All things individually and collectively are penetrated and flooded by it ... one might suppose the cosmos to have burst spontaneously into flame'.⁵

In this essay, Teilhard provides an image of incarnation. In his imaginative reworking of the Eucharistic rite, the elements are not the customary ones of bread and wine. Instead he consecrates the two forces of nature, and the entire world is transformed into the body of Christ. This visual image expresses his conviction that God is present in matter and the forces of nature. It affirms that the body of Christ inhabits every corner of the world. It announces that Christ's presence can be seen shining forth from creation if we have eyes to see.

His book *The Divine Milieu* addresses similar themes, but here the accent is a bit different. The first two sections of the book discuss how we achieve union with God, first through the faithful working out of our vocation and then through our suffering. The third section focuses on the context, which he calls the 'divine milieu', in which we encounter God in our work and in our death. In order to flesh out a bit more his image of Christ incarnating the world and shining out from within it, I now turn to the third section of this spiritual classic.

In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard articulates his understanding of how God relates to the world and the role of human action in this

² Thomas King perceptively points out that Teilhard does not offer up the entire world in his imaginative celebration of the Mass. Rather, he offers up the forces of growth and diminishment while the world serves as the altar. Thomas M. King, *Teilhard's Mass: Approaches to 'The Mass on the World'* (New York: Paulist, 2005), 135.

³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'The Mass on the World', in *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 23.

⁴ Teilhard, 'Mass on the World', 23.

⁵ Teilhard, 'Mass on the World', 23–24.

relationship. The fundamental attribute that describes God's relationship to the world is omnipresence. The concept of the divine milieu outlines the character of this omnipresence. The divine milieu is the context in which human beings work, create and suffer. Teilhard is careful to distinguish his idea from pantheism. He insists that the milieu he describes does not reduce reality to a type of monistic oneness. In other words, everything that exists is not God wearing a different disguise. Instead, as he writes, creatures possess individuality but at the same time God is present at the centre of all matter. Thus, omnipresence means that all the elements of the world are differentiated from one another, yet potentially reveal God at their very centre.

Teilhard further specifies his understanding of the omnipresence of God by identifying the divine milieu with the cosmic Christ. The incarnation was a unification of the divine and the material in Jesus. However, the incarnation is not limited to the person of Christ. As he did in the 'Mass on the World', Teilhard supports this claim by referring to the Eucharist. Fundamentally, consecrating the Eucharistic elements sanctifies matter. As our bodies assimilate the consecrated host, the Eucharistic transformation goes beyond the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. He writes, 'Step by step it irresistibly invades the universe'.⁶ Because of the invasion of matter by Spirit in the Eucharist, he claims the incarnation spreads out in creation so that we contact God through all the forces of nature and matter of the world.

***The
incarnation
spreads out in
creation***

Teilhard maintains that the presence of Christ shines forth from the centre of all created things. For him, the world is transparent and offers a vision of God to those who know how to see. Learning to see this presence is the goal of *The Divine Milieu*. One characteristic of the way the divine is manifested in matter is that surface appearances do not change. Trees still look like trees and mountains still look like mountains, just as a consecrated host still looks like a wafer. In the act of seeing, appearances do not change, but they are, as he says, 'accentuated with meaning'.⁷ He writes that, as we look at the world, objects appear to be translucent and 'bathed in an inward light' which intensifies their significance to the viewer.⁸

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 125.

⁷ Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 130.

⁸ Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 130.

An important characteristic of how the divine is manifest in matter is that the perception of its presence is always a gift. No amount of human effort compels it to appear before our eyes. Though the perception of the divine presence in matter is a gift, there are disciplines which can prepare us to see it all around us in the world. One important discipline that Teilhard highlights is faith. Faith is not something that relieves us of our agency. Nor does it change the operation of the forces of nature. Rather, faith is our fundamental 'yes' to the reality of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In the context of the divine milieu, faith is exercised when we choose to believe in the omnipresence of God. It is an acceptance that God is so thoroughly immanent in the world that God's touch can be felt even in adverse circumstances. As he puts it,

If we believe, then everything is illuminated and takes shape around us: chance is seen to be order, success assumes an incorruptible plenitude, suffering becomes a visit and caress of God.⁹

Another discipline that facilitates sensing God through vision is fidelity. By emphasizing fidelity, Teilhard makes the point that we will not see God simply by paying attention. Seeing Christ shining forth from the centre of matter entails more than simple faith or skills of observation. Exhibiting fidelity to God means action. It means fulfilling our duties and obligations in the places where we find ourselves. Only when we do this, Teilhard claims, does the divine milieu become visible. He stresses the role of work in being able to see God because for him, progress is important. He believes that we are co-creators with God and that our work contributes to the building of the Kingdom. When we faithfully fulfil our vocation, we put ourselves in a position to encounter God in the world around us and see Christ's presence shining through matter.

In 'The Mass on the World' and *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard describes the manner of God's presence in the world using visual imagery. First, he claims that God is omnipresent in the entire universe. In our world, this means that God is present in rocks, trees and the forces of nature, as well as in our own work and the sufferings that befall us. He describes this presence using Eucharistic imagery in which Christ's body incarnates the entire world in the same way that it consecrates the communion elements. And finally, though the surface appearance of matter does not change, Christ's presence can be seen shining out from the centre

⁹ Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 136. See also 'Mass on the World', 28–29.

of matter for those who look with faith and who are fulfilling their roles as co-creators with God in the world.

Renegotiating the Contract

In order to help us appreciate what Teilhard offers to an understanding of vision as a spiritual sense, I turn now to the world of art. In his book *The Sacred Gaze*, David Morgan addresses not just images as such but, more broadly, the practice of seeing itself. The practice of seeing encompasses the viewer of the image, other viewers, the image itself, and the context in which the viewer views the image.¹⁰ It also includes the assumptions, habits and conventions the viewer brings to the viewing of the image. One aspect of the practice of seeing that Morgan highlights is the *covenant* into which viewers enter with an image when they look at it. Viewers approach a particular kind of image with specific assumptions or expectations about what they will see, which facilitate their interpretation of the image. Changing the expectations of what is there to be seen in the image requires the negotiation of a new contract between viewer and image.

For example, one assumption Morgan discusses is that 'seeing is believing'. Another way of saying this is that if we can see something with our eyes, it must be real. In 2000, photographs were released that were supposed to be the first glimpses of the inside of an atom. Common sense tells us that if atoms exist, they should look like something. The only problem is that the photographs were of a blotchy,



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

¹⁰ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze* (Berkeley: U. of California P, 2005), 3, 76.

grey haze. They did not look like anything. In order to interpret the images successfully, in order to hold on to the belief that atoms exist and are the building blocks of matter, it was necessary to revise the contract between viewer and image that says something must be visually representable for it to be real.

I believe Morgan's work helps us understand the significance of Teilhard's Eucharistic image in 'Mass on the World'. I interpret what Teilhard is doing as an attempt to negotiate a new contract between viewer (the sacramental Christian) and image (the world). He is trying to change our expectations of what is there to be seen when we look at the world around us. The world is not what separates us from the next place we need to be, the noisy backdrop that distracts us from God, or a mixed bag made up of a few beautiful things jumbled together with a whole lot of ordinary things. Instead, the world is lit up from within by the fire of the Spirit. It is a transparent entity that can erupt into flame if we have faith in God's omnipresence. As he writes, '[God], you shine forth from within all the forces of the earth and so become visible to me'.¹¹

Changing our Expectations

Visual perception is not a straightforward process. Accurately perceiving objects is much more complicated than simply opening our eyes and taking in what lies before us. Projection is just one example of the difficulty of seeing objects clearly. This psychological process illustrates that normally we see only what we expect to see. However, some images have the ability to change our expectations. One example is Teilhard's image of the forces of growth and diminishment in the world being raised at the altar, consecrated and transformed into the Body of Christ. This image attempts to change our expectation of what is there to be seen. It inserts a picture frame into our field of vision that calls us to look again, expecting to see God where before we only saw an ordinary street, park or pedestrian.

One of Teilhard de Chardin's many contributions to Christian spirituality is the visual image he presents in 'Mass on the World'. This image displays God shining forth from within matter. With this image displaying the omnipresence of God and the incarnation of Christ in the entire universe, he attempts to negotiate a new contract between viewer and image. He aids Christian vision by changing the expectations

¹¹ Teilhard, 'Mass on the World', 33.

of what there is to be seen when Christians look at the world around them. He contributes by lifting up vision as a spiritual sense by which we can experience God's presence in the world.

Chad Thralls teaches at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey. He has a PhD in Spirituality from the Catholic University of America, has taught spiritual direction, and trained to be a spiritual director with the Jesuit Collaborative at the Loyola House of Retreats in Morristown, New Jersey.