GOD IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Michael Smith

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

THE ENVIRONMENT—there can be few two-word phrases quite so calculated to cause guilty feelings in most of us. We realise that we shall hand on to our children a world from which we have taken all the best bits, leaving behind a place scarcely able to support coming generations. We know we all eat too much meat, use far too much energy—electricity and carbon-based fuels—exploit and maybe devastate whole landscapes and populations to provide the things we like. We do feel guilty—we really mean to do something about the environment to leave a world worth living in for our children.

Huge forces shape our world. We load the weather machine with heat, trapped by the carbon-based gases we emit, and it will bring us extremes of drought, storms, heat; and by melting the polar ice caps it will inundate huge areas of land. We buy into multinational companies intent on making profits at all costs; we get used to travelling large distances by air; destroy areas of plant life to extract the latest health-food or beauty treatment. All these, we know, are leading to disaster. It is coming, though the details are not yet clear. The only remaining question is whether we have any time left, or whether we are already sliding inevitably towards catastrophe.

However it must be mistaken to see our world as a paradise destroyed by human selfishness or ignorance. That would imply that God created a faultless universe, and then watched, powerlessly and perhaps sadly, as progress turned to destruction. In fact we have found out, as we pieced together the history of our universe, that there never was such a paradise; and we know that God is not powerless, and continues creating still today. How else could it be? Could God drive a perfect universe, the whole of creation, into environmental catastrophe and nod, and say, 'That's right; that's all very good'?

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Matter and Spirit

Much of this article is based upon the mysticism, theology and science of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, though I would not be so bold as to claim that it is an accurate reproduction of his thought, or even that he would recognise any of it.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a scientist and a mystic, carried out his researches into biology and palaeontology at a time when Charles Darwin's work on the origin of species and evolution by natural selection was being accepted almost everywhere. The work that he and others did on the geology of our world and on the fossils that have been left behind during the four billion years or so that Earth has been in existence showed how living beings evolved, flourished and then, in many cases, were extinguished, as creation moved on in its progress. Everything he found fitted into a pattern of progress and evolution.

In Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's thought, evolution began long before the first living organism appeared. The whole universe is an evolution. The particles that were there at the moment of the big bang—gluons and quarks, or some other form of matter or energy—began to annihilate each other, or combine, as they began their journey towards greater complexity and towards spirit. And they formed the lithosphere, the universe of rocks and chemicals, of reactions and cosmic explosions. Violent and peaceful, it is the basis for the next great step. But it is still a revelation of God's love: later we shall see how a young Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was moved by a couple of pieces of steel.

Matter and spirit are not separate worlds, not two completely different kinds of being neither of which can ever really contact the other. They are simply two directions along a continuous journey, and so every step in the right direction in the material world leads to the world of the spirit, is a revelation of God.

Struggle and Progress

Somehow—and there are lots of theories about how—life emerged. It hardly matters whether it was in some warm pond here on Earth, or on Mars, or on some distant world. There were tiny cells that could not only reproduce themselves, but also change and evolve. Natural selection weeded out those that could not survive, and the rest increased in complexity to exploit the world where they found themselves. They form the biosphere: the plants and eventually animals that filled the Garden of Eden, amazing in their complexity and beauty—and fragility.

Only there never was a Garden of Eden. There never was a paradise. The biosphere—the home of the evolution of life—is filled with pain and suffering and early death, the drivers of evolution. As organisms became more and more complex, they became more and more adept at exploiting other species for food, eliminating predators and reproducing themselves. But the increasing complexity of these organisms came at a cost: almost any minor variation during reproduction meant that the organism would suffer and probably die. And if it did survive, it would be in a world where many other organisms searched it out for food. Along with the wonderful increasing complexity went increasing damage, suffering, selfishness, pain and death. It was as though life itself had a death wish. The basic drivers of evolution are random variations, and the death of any such variation that was not well adapted to its environment. It is only when occasional successful or useful changes occur that organisms can prosper and develop; otherwise, the mutations lead to suffering, bloodshed and death.

Evolution in the biosphere led to ever-increasing complexity, and to ever-increasing struggle. Once the process of producing offspring by passing on information in DNA was established, more and more complex organisms became possible, passing on to subsequent generations the details of the nervous system, digestion, skeletal shape and an uncountable number of other elements that make each animal's life possible. This increasing complexity led to increasing struggle, as each life form found the others that it would feed on, learnt to avoid those that were higher up the food chain than itself, and coped with the myriad diseases and tiny organisms that attempted to live their lives at its expense. There were, and still are, some primitive organisms that seem to survive peacefully without struggle; colonies of stromatolites in the sea off northern Australia have been living there, presumably happily, for over three billion years.

The more complex the life forms, the more fragile they seem to be; and the struggle to survive becomes increasingly difficult. As well as the complexity of each life form itself, there is an intricate web of interdependence in which plants and animals live off each other and thrive. A change in one branch of this tree of life can cause extensive changes in the many other organisms that depend on it. In the past whole branches of the evolutionary tree have disappeared following a change in global temperature or as the result of a volcanic eruption. In this web every member depends on others and has to struggle to survive. Struggle is built into the complexity of the tree of life, and is the result of the wonderful process of evolution—God's chosen method of populating the universe.

Stromatolites, Shark Bay, Australia

This process brings progress and development, and ever-increasing complexity, together with suffering and mortal struggle.

Creation Is Groaning

> … the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8: 21–23)

The creation of new human life—conception, birth and the bringing up of offspring—is a particularly clear example of the struggle and love in the complexity of the whole evolutionary process. There is so much that must be right: the chemical and biological process in conception, the first cell, the multiplication of cells and the growing of the new baby. Pregnancy is usually a joyful time, but not without its own struggles and difficulties. Even in the most developed parts of the world birth happens with pains and risks, and looking after the child as it grows up must be to oversee a struggle between hope and love on the one hand, and growing selfishness, perhaps even wickedness, and maybe suffering on the other. Yet, somehow, the whole amazingly complex process blazes out with the love of God.

Communication and Love

But the most powerful and astonishing stage came next—the *noosphere*, the stage in which human consciousness, or perhaps more accurately communication, became possible. The development of consciousness and rationality was spread over a long period of time, but the fossil record and archaeological excavations suggest that the first tool-making and communicating humans seem to have been around 200,000 years ago. Whenever it happened, the evolution of 'reflective consciousness' and the possibility of communication were a major step forward in evolution.[1]

These developments mark the transition from the existence of evil, in the sense of the suffering and pain that are built into the process of evolution, to the possibility of moral evil, in which conscious beings become aware or the effect of their selfishness on other beings and of how their behaviour may harm others. The tree in the Garden of Eden provided the basis of this awareness—the knowledge of good and evil. Being able for the first time to empathize with the suffering and pain of other beings has led humanity to the understanding that each of us can make a decision to balance our own survival and well-being against that of others. For the first time predation, self-preservation, the control of infection and much else in the web of life have come at least partly under the conscious control of one part of it. That is a tremendous power indeed.

The greatly increased complexity of the relationships made possible by communication between people, however, has transformed our world. As with all the complexities seen so far, it brings struggle, vulnerability and suffering as the inseparable companions of progress. Now a whole new variety of webs becomes possible. There is a web of communication which, at its most benign, can help us to know about and understand the suffering of beings around us and in other parts of the world, and to make decisions about our response to them. Hugely complex systems such as the telephone network and the internet bring people closer together in the warmth of friendship, concern and care, but also bring great abuse and harm. The economic system is another powerful communication network. Driven by the desire for profit, it can bring food, clothing and medical care, and every other necessity where needed, or it can destroy the means of their production. The profits of a few are permanently in struggle with the common good.

[1] See Teilhard de Chardin, 'Hominization', in *Vision of the Past*, translated by J. M. Cohen (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 63.

The environment in its widest sense thus consists of levels of increasing complexity, and at each level the struggle between the various outcomes continues. It is not a dualistic picture, but a progressive journey from matter to spirit. At every step the struggle develops as more and more possibilities become actual; it is a series of processes in which death and extinction lead to progress, and distress and suffering are integral to the process of continuing creation. At times the destructive forces seem more powerful than those leading to development, as for example when the globalised push for profit leads us to ignore the destruction that faces us. And at the moment, these destructive forces seem very real; we are clearly close to environmental tipping points that lead to catastrophe, and may indeed have gone too far to turn back.

A progressive journey from matter to spirit

A Blazing Forth of Love

This seemingly dark and gloomy picture of our environment is an explosion of light and love.

> Crimson streams of matter, gliding imperceptibly into the gold of spirit, ultimately to become transformed into the incandescence of a universe that is a person—and through all this there blows, animating it and spreading over it, a fragrant balm, a zephyr of union … the divine at the heart of a glowing universe, as I have experienced it though contact with the earth—the divine radiating from the depths of blazing matter.[2]

We are not living in a random world. Evolution, though based entirely upon chance variations, makes progress through natural selection, a process based on suffering and death but leading always to greater life. Out of the original darkness and nothingness all this has come. Where is it going? Extrapolating from what we have discovered about our origins, and from what we see in the world around us, the whole of creation is moving upwards through the lithosphere, the biosphere and the noosphere to a final destination: the omega point. In Teilhard de Chardin's thought this is bound up in the person of Christ—creation is essentially personal, and the person is Christ.

Christ's essential role in creation is spelt out in John's Gospel:

[2] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 16.

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1: 1–5)

The darkness is the primal darkness from which the big bang came exploding forth, filling the universe with light and other forms of energy. Later in his Gospel, John will fill out the promise that we are all called to oneness with Jesus Christ and the Father. Everything has been made through Jesus Christ, and ultimately will become the person of Jesus Christ. It is another way of saying that God saw all that has been made, and it is all very good.

The Looming Environment

All this is our environment. We are all carried forward and upwards as we collectively become more Christ-like and build and transform our universe into the Kingdom of God. But why does it seem so threatening? Why does it come laden with guilt? Why does it appear as an angel of death?

There is no doubt that development and progress, and the struggle that they bring, are threatening. They are like beginning a new university course or learning to play a great piece of music: we have to ask ourselves whether we can cope. Would something simpler not be better—give us a better chance of success? To back out of the struggle can lead to a simpler, but less real, spirituality. Although prayer must be one of the highest functions in the noosphere, it is tempting to regress into the biosphere, where we can ignore so much of the struggle and gaze at the simple beauty of the countryside. This is to succumb to a form of dualism in which the world is basically bad and we retreat from the world to find beauty and love and care. In this sort of world, the environment and the threats to it are evils that we should leave behind.

But this is not God's sort of world, where God sees everything, and it is all very good: a world of underground trains and computers and nuclear power and globalisation, and of more homely things such as warm homes and well-stocked supermarkets; and of things we do not like to see—dirt, squalor, misery, poverty. In that world everything brings increasing complexity and struggle, blazes with the light of God's love, and carries forward our progress towards the goal of all creation, Jesus Christ.

This looming environment, which threatens to overheat us, drown us, dry out our farmlands, also blazes out with the love of God. For our faith this is a struggle, of the kind that complexity in creation always brings. We have the power to have everything for ourselves, limitless energy and plenty of food for everyone, but these struggle with the need to share, to economize on resources and to live a more sustainable life. We know that we have not done nearly enough to stabilise the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere that threatens to eliminate us. There is certainly pain and struggle and death ahead; but there always has been in the evolution of the biosphere and now the noosphere.

Spirituality in a Complex Universe

Everything that is good and beautiful is a complex—of the blazing love of God and of struggle with hurt and harm and sorrow. This whole process of increasing complexity and the world that it has produced constitute the environment in which we live, contemplate and pray. Our spirituality has to be built on this truth.

But if we are not careful, our spirituality can lag behind this insight. We turn away from all the bustle and progress of the modern world, and go for our retreats into the country, where all seems peaceful and quiet. We see the lambs on the hillsides, peaceful and pastoral and, lifting up our hearts to the Good Shepherd of us all, we choose to overlook the lorry that will come tomorrow to take them off to slaughter for our dinner. It is odd that when we want to spend time closely with God, we retreat from the noise and bustle of daily life, and seek out the quiet places, the silent chapel or the beauty of the countryside; we make great sacrifices

to leave our phones and computers behind—or, at least, switched off for some of the day. It is as though we seek to wind back the increasing complexity of God's continuing creation, and escape into the much less challenging biosphere. But to go in that direction is to go away from spirit and towards matter.

Maybe one way to enter this struggle effectively is to ensure that our spirituality is in harmony with the world we are in. Perhaps because Jesus Christ lived in a peasant, mainly farming, society, a great deal of his teaching draws on that background for analogies and parables. Perhaps too much of our spirituality has emphasized withdrawal from the world—from the very place where the struggle is going on. For most of us, the place where we look for God must not be the rolling hillsides and woodlands that surround all the best retreat houses, but the world of economics, technology, communication and transport—all those places and systems in which our part of the universe is making its most significant progress towards the Omega Point.

In St Ignatius' exercise on the Two Standards in the Spiritual Exercises, we are presented with two stark alternatives:

> Imagine the leader of all the enemy in that great plain of Babylon … he admonishes them to set up snares and chains … how first they should tempt people to covet riches …. (Exx 140)
>
> Jesus Christ takes his place in the great plain near Jerusalem, in an area which is lowly, beautiful and attractive … [sending people] to aid all persons …. (Exx 144)

But the reality is much more complex than that. It is as though the two standards are closely intertwined until there is only one standard, tangled and complex—and it blazes out with the love of God. The choice—if there is one—becomes one of deciding in which direction along the path of progress we choose to move: towards matter or towards spirit. Or maybe the choice is between being involved or immersed in the environment, seeking God there, or opting out and remaining in a world of our own making.

God in the Environment—Hope, and the Blazing Love of God

When he was young, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was fascinated by hard things. One of his favourites was a steel pin which was used in some way to hitch a plough to the horses that pulled it. He loved it for its hardness and its strength. Back home in the town there was another piece of steel—a bolt which held up part of the nursery floor.

It is worth noting that these two objects, which brought to the young Pierre an inchoate awareness of the blazing love of God, were both manufactured items, not natural. The iron had to be refined into steel, and then worked into the objects he treasured. And later on this hardness, which seemed to be so real, would be extended to include stones which were harder still—he mentions chalcedony, a form of silicon, which is noted for its hardness and so, for Pierre, its reality. Later he would find fossils and other remnants of the world millions of years ago, all that is left of the long past struggles in the biosphere. And as he searched and researched, all these things, so very real, became the blinding revelation of the love of God. It is the mysticism of the scientist, who finds among the equations and the models and the observations and the theories a revelation—perhaps only glimpsed, and surely very hard to grasp—of the love of God; not as an explanation or a quick solution for how things work, or of how they came to be, but as a revelation of God's blazing love.

The environment consists of everything that is. It includes, for example, rocks, trees, animals, humans, food, energy, the internet, aeroplanes, galaxies; and selfishness, greed, power, starvation, death and destruction—and us. It is becoming increasingly complex, and increasingly fragile, and the struggle in which we must all participate becomes more and more stressful—a struggle for justice and freedom and health and life. As we continue in this struggle, as we contemplate the environment in which we live, we see the love of God blazing forth, and we are immersed in our part in the creation which is leading to the Omega Point.

And there is hope. Creation is moving inexorably towards the Omega Point. The end is certain—the fulfilment in Jesus Christ of the entire environment.

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