

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theological trouble

The Jesuit scientist questioned whether humans are descended from Adam. It got him exiled.

by [David Grumett](#) in the [July 18, 2018](#) issue



Byzantine fresco showing Adam naming the animals

At the end of his stirring sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, Bishop Michael Curry brought up the name of theologian and geologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Curry brilliantly captured the power of Teilhard's synthesis of science and theology by citing Teilhard's comments on fire and love. Curry noted that Teilhard had called fire one of the greatest discoveries in human history and had said that "if humanity ever captures the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire." With the help of a French Jesuit theologian, Curry set the love of two people for one another at the center of the material and spiritual forces that unify the world.

Few theologians have joined the disciplines of science and theology as creatively as Teilhard. He acquired his fascination with geology early on, growing up in the

volcanic Auvergne region of France. His father, an amateur naturalist, encouraged him to collect fossils and other natural objects. Meanwhile, his mother instilled in him a deep Catholic piety. He joined the Jesuits at 17, a fitting step for a young man who wished to combine his spiritual and scientific commitments.

During his formation as Jesuit, he studied philosophy on the island of Jersey, taught at the Jesuit school in Cairo, and studied theology at Hastings on the south coast of England. In all these places, he found time to study and excavate fossils, developing his knowledge of paleontology in sites as diverse as the English chalk cliffs and the vast Egyptian desert.

In 1912, he became a paleontologist at the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. During World War I he served as a stretcher bearer and began to write about how he synthesized his scientific work with his philosophical and theological convictions.

During the 1920s, Teilhard wrote an essay on how the doctrine of original sin could be reconciled with the theory of evolution. The essay, meant for private circulation, was passed on to church authorities in Rome, who saw in the essay an alarming deviation from orthodoxy.

In his paper, Teilhard argued that traditional teachings about the fall of Adam and Eve into sin were difficult to reconcile with science for two reasons. First, fossils suggested that the human species emerged out of several different evolutionary branches, not from a single pair of ancestors. Second, an earthly paradise from which death, suffering, and evil were absent was scientifically inconceivable, given that the tendency toward physical disintegration is a condition of existence.

However, Teilhard also aimed to show that the doctrine of original sin could be understood as the condition for the original act of creation. Evolution suggests that humans exist in a process of becoming, rather than being made perfect from the start. Adam and Eve are therefore best understood as images of sin, not as our biological ancestors. Paradise is a state of salvation open to all who live in unity with Jesus. Teilhard thought that attributing all sin to a single historical act that might, in fact, not have occurred was grossly immature. And to defend a version of the doctrine of original sin that ignored the evidence of reason and experience diminished its deepest meaning.

Teilhard tried to placate his critics, assuring Jesuit leaders in Rome that his essay was merely a provisional attempt to reconcile doctrine and science and promising to do everything possible to bring his views into conformity with official dogma. But the superior general wasn't satisfied. If Teilhard continued to defend any part of his position, he was told, he would be expelled from the Jesuit order. Teilhard responded that he felt compelled, under church direction, to try to reconcile doctrine and science.

A few weeks later, he was ordered to relinquish his teaching position in Paris and move to China—although not straightaway, for fear that attention be drawn to the affair. He was also required to affirm six propositions on original sin, evolution, and the relationship between faith and reason.

The first three propositions were taken from the Council of Trent's 1546 decree on original sin. They stated that Adam, on contravening God's command in paradise, immediately lost his original holiness and justice; that this sin damaged his descendants, who also lost holiness and justice; and that sin is a feature of every person and is transmitted by biological reproduction. Teilhard had minimal difficulty subscribing to these, because the universality and materiality of sin was not a problem for him. And these propositions could be understood in the light of Adam being an image of sinful humanity.

The final two propositions came from the First Vatican Council's canons on faith and reason of 1870. The fifth one presented faith as superior to reason and played down the possibility of any disagreement between them. The sixth proposition stated that it was impossible that dogma may be reinterpreted in light of advancing knowledge. Teilhard also reported having no difficulty accepting these. He also affirmed the fundamental congruence between faith and reason, and he believed that he was not reinterpreting dogma but merely drawing out its full meaning for the present day. He thus broadly accepted five of the six propositions.

It was the fourth proposition that caused Teilhard great difficulty. It read: "The whole human race takes its origin from one first parent, Adam." In a letter to his mentor, Teilhard wrote: "I am able to subscribe to it in faith only with the implicit or explicit reserve that I regard the proposition as subject to revisions (and, what is more, essential revisions) of the kind to which belief in the eight days of creation, the flood, etc., has been subjected; and I do not see how anyone could forbid me this position."

He decided to subscribe to the six propositions but make his reservations explicit. This seemed the most honest approach. He wrote that he didn't accept any statement that went beyond formally defined church teaching and that he regarded all human knowledge as subject to Christ's superior revelation. He could not accept a proposition about human biological origins that wasn't based on scientific evidence. In any case, because the subject of the fourth proposition was a scientific rather than theological topic, it couldn't strictly be assented to in faith.

The exact nature of Teilhard's subscription to the fourth proposition is unclear. Moreover, the fact that the fourth proposition was the only one of the six composed for the occasion left open the question of its validity. If that proposition was not part of existing church teaching, on what authority could the church require that it be affirmed? It seemed that Teilhard was being made to submit to a statement that the church had never formulated.

Although Teilhard signed the six propositions, it was clear that he remained deeply committed to reconciling doctrine and evolution and that if he remained in France his ideas were bound to circulate. The Jesuit authorities therefore determined that he should continue his paleontological work in China.

In Tientsin, China, he settled into the life of a paleontologist, working with a fellow Jesuit. But he hoped to rebuild his profile in the church and return to Paris. However, early in 1927 the Jesuit curia in Rome told him that, excepting short visits, he wouldn't be allowed to return. He spent most of the next 20 years in China. Teilhard's exile deprived both the church and wider society of close contact with his powerful vision for reconciling modern science and religion. During the years leading up to World War II, such a vision was desperately needed.

In 1950 the papal encyclical *Humani generis* was published, designed to critique aspects of modern thought and to tidy up some unfinished business dating back to the early 1920s. The document's approach to reconciling dogma with science was awkward. It stressed the hypothetical character of all scientific findings and, in words echoing the fourth proposition, maintained that Catholics cannot accept that "after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all."

It is correct, of course, that scientific knowledge consists of findings established by hypothesis and experimentation and that findings sometimes need to be rethought

as further experiments provide new and more reliable data. However, doctrinal knowledge also needs to be left open to adjustment, as new understandings emerge from biblical, historical, and theological sources.

For example, as more medieval theological texts are translated, we see ever more clearly that mainstream Christian theologians have long read the Bible according to several complementary senses. The literal sense is just one of these. Alongside it stands the allegorical sense, in which people and events are viewed as bearing a significance that extends beyond the immediate and explicit. From this perspective, Adam and Eve are important because of what they teach us about the nature of sin, which is, in turn, important for what it shows us about our relationship with God. It's the allegorical sense, developed through the imaginative reading of scripture, that is so often key for doctrine. This doesn't mean that the literal sense may be ignored. On the contrary, allegory is rooted in literal images and narratives, in all their rich detail. But these images and narratives don't need to be defended as literal history.

By exiling and silencing Teilhard, the church lost an opportunity to advance the much-needed reconciliation of religion with science. When his writings were finally published in the late 1950s and 1960s, the mood of wider society had swung away from traditional theology and toward new forms of spirituality. Teilhard was often wrongly perceived as advocating a secular spirituality. In fact, as the saga of the six propositions shows, his own aim was to help make the church credible in the modern world.

The paper that got Teilhard into trouble, "Note on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin," forms one of the chapters of his book *Christianity and Evolution*. This whole book is highly informative for anyone wishing to understand how God may be at work in the biological and spiritual development of the world. Those who are more interested in traditional spirituality might turn to Teilhard's *The Divine Milieu*, which unfolds the Christian life in terms of action, passion, and vision. For the mystically inclined, there is *The Heart of Matter*, which includes meditations on the Eucharist and on spirit and matter, as well as three wedding addresses. Many of Teilhard's books are collections of short essays, which may be read in digestible portions. Although he doesn't provide simple answers, his writing is profound and inspiring.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Descended from Adam?"