

# **Cosmology, the Origin of Hierarchy: An Essay Review on the Thought of Max Wildiers**

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**This lecture was first given at Grace College, University of Queensland. It is based on the book by N. Max Wildiers, *The Theologian and His Universe* (Wildiers1982).**

**N Max Wildiers, a Capuchin, was born in Antwerp, Belgium. He received a doctorate from the Gregorian University in Rome and has taught, for example, at the universities of Leuven and San Francisco. He was editor and also a friend of Teilhard de Chardin. Wildiers published *An Introduction to Teilhard de Chardin*. The book here reviewed was published first in Dutch, then in German and Polish. The author was awarded the Belgian National Prize.**

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## **Abstract**

The ancient Greek world-picture was adopted by 13th century and other theologians who, however, added a sphere for angels and spirits. The entire cosmos was seen to be anthropocentric and arranged in a perfect hierarchical order that was immutable. Man, consequently, should realise in himself that perfect order seen around him.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, new social and political structures were set up to fulfil the universal desire for order. States and the church too showed not only order but also hierarchy. Christ exemplified perfect order and restored order to sinful earth, so that world-picture and religious outlook were synthesised.

In the 17th century especially, the medieval world-picture was demolished, science and religion becoming separated. Later the adoption of evolutionary ideas extended the separation, and various views resulted: deism, pantheism and atheism all gained adherents. Hierarchical structures persist today in—for example—the Roman Catholic Church, but they have been replaced in many states and some other churches.

Teilhard de Chardin endeavoured to synthesise an evolutionary world-picture and theology. Wildiers, his editor and friend, gives an account of Teilhard's views.

## **Key words**

Medieval theology, hierarchy, order, Copernicus, Darwin, dynamic universe, Teilhard.

## Introduction

God, man and the world—the trio of metaphysical concepts—underlie all serious discussions of the meaning of life, but the emphasis can shift from one concept to another. For example, the ancient Greeks were chiefly cosmocentric, but, in contrast, Augustine and many Christians were inclined to ignore the cosmos, so that the inner life of man before God became of paramount concern; this is seen in Descartes and many others whose approach is anthropocentric.

The cosmos was not neglected in the bible however—'God so loved the cosmos...' (John 3:16). None the less Christians and Greeks viewed the cosmos differently—to the Christian it was created, whilst to the Greeks it was venerated if not worshipped, and even their gods were subject to it.

When a human society orders itself on the pattern of God's cosmos, the human order expresses the Creator's will, but humans then have ceased to be in control of their own situation—they are alienated because they have been *cosmatized* (in Wildiers's language.) Delineation is helped when man refers everything to an eternal framework.

With the scholastics of the 13th century, a synthesis was made of the ancient Greek view with Christian thought, so that God, man and world were in harmony. When the Greek view of the world came under questioning, as it did with Copernicus and Galileo, the cosmos, which had been the model for all human activity, disappeared.

## Part One. The Cosmological Background to Medieval Theology

The world picture of medieval theologians was drawn more from Plato and Aristotle than from the bible, and because Greek thought was governed by cosmological considerations, so was that of the theologians. For both, the study of man was inseparable from that of the cosmos. So strongly were they bound together, that microcosm and macrocosm must be considered together was an indisputable axiom; such was the theme of Plato's 'Timaeus'.

Thus we are compelled to examine the features of Plato's world picture if we wish to comprehend his view of man. The features include: the cosmos was created from a plan in the mind of God, and therefore was perfect; time is the expression of the eternity of God's model; things on earth are made from the four elements; earth is central to the universe; around the earth are seven spheres for the planets and also one for the stars; all on earth is transitory and unsettled; the heavenly bodies are imperishable and consistent; they move in circular paths and therefore (sic) are animate and guided by reason; man's body belongs to the earth but his soul which cherishes eternal thoughts has its home with the eternal stars; and, finally, all things were arranged hierarchically according to their inner dignity

To the study of the cosmos Plato attached deep ethical significance. The conclusion of 'Timaeus' is that morality has to be founded on the cosmos.

Aristotle had somewhat similar views to Plato, but he added more spheres. The consecutive spheres do not all have the same dignity: the closer they are to earth the less purity do they have. The concept of dignity accounts for the hierarchical order found in the cosmos.

The influential Pseudo-Dionysius, after Plato, saw the whole cosmos arranged in perfect hierarchical order, the lower governed and guided by the higher. The influence of the planets was the means which God used to direct events, but this influence extended only to material things and not to the spiritual. The stars did not direct the conduct of man.

Aristotle attributed motion in the cosmos to an unmoved mover, and he believed that the heavenly bodies had intelligence.

Medieval writers found little difficulty in adopting Greek cosmology, which they took to be consistent with the scriptures. The greatest effort in forging a synthesis, however, was not made until Thomas's in the 13th century. Wildiers discusses various Christian writers from the first century on and shows that all seem to have worked within the bounds of Greek cosmology, although there were differences especially over evil. Some attributed evil to God, others to demiurges -intermediates between man and God.

Christian writers added to Greek ideas the highest sphere of all, the Empyrean, where live the angels and the saints. As for man, Christians such as Augustine said that his soul and moral conduct should reflect the cosmic order. In Wildiers' words:

The more one becomes absorbed in the study of medieval culture, the more one realizes that the intellectual life of the period was... entirely governed by a unanimously accepted view (of) the general structure of the universe and of the place of man... the great spiritual unity and harmony... (of) medieval culture was predominantly derived from this ultimate cosmology..., leaving its mark ... on philosophy and theology... on literature, plastic arts, and even on the sociopolitical life... medieval man lived in the quiet certainty that his picture of the universe ...corresponded completely with reality... It was inconceivable that one would doubt... (its) correctness...

(Wildiers 1982 pp. 367f.)

Bonaventure was one of the great scholastics. In his view, man's task is reduced to self-perfection or the attempt to realize in himself that perfect, hierarchical order exemplified in the (world). Aquinas held the view that the more complete is our knowledge of nature, the more we share in God's supreme wisdom. Philosophers (including natural philosophers) look on things on their own merit, whereas the theologian views things insofar as they are connected with God and reveal knowledge about God. Aquinas was clear that it would be absurd for the theologian to be indifferent to natural science.

Wildiers discusses the views of a number of medieval Christian writers but the discussion is not pursued here. They all held similar views of at least the main features of the cosmos, namely: the world was a perfectly ordered whole, an ordered collection of creatures; to doubt the reality of a perfect world order approached blasphemy; the world order was immutable and hierarchical; the principle of hierarchy is to be found everywhere not only in the Church, but in the choirs of angels and even in God; because of the hierarchical order it was possible for theology to erect a ladder from earth to heaven using philosophy and adopting from nature all that is necessary to form an image of the supernatural the created cosmos was a perfect hierarchy; the world order was anthropocentric.

It is undoubtedly correct, then, that the world-picture of Plato and Aristotle had a considerable influence on the medieval theologians. This, says Wildiers, is only to be expected, because first a particular view of the world is one of the most important components of a culture, and secondly theology, conceived as faith seeking understanding...develops only within the limits of a particular cultural climate.

The medieval theologian's world picture was not doubted anywhere. It was unanimously accepted. Its scope was comprehensive-nothing was omitted. These facts lead to the conclusion that repeated reference to this world picture in a written document would often be superfluous, as the writer might well expect that he could take it for granted. Indeed in some places the writer himself might take it as true even without this being a conscious action. All this makes it harder to find evidence that the views just expressed are in fact correct. Where then should we look in a theological work for signs of the prevalent world picture?

The question in particular terms is: where should we look for signs of a perfect static, hierarchical and anthropocentric world order in a discussion of God, creation, providence, the angels, the first man, the fall, the incarnation, redemption, grace, the sacraments, the meaning of prayer, the church, morality, civil society, and the four last things? (The list is Wildiers'.)

In answer to the more general question, we note first that on the whole medieval culture was characterized by a pursuit of order, balance and synthesis. After the confusion that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire, man set up new social and political structures, gradually creating the possibility of an orderly and peaceful existence. In all areas of life, theology included, there was an urge for order and harmony. Wildiers says the urge in each area was the same, and suggests that this was an extension of the world-picture.

Theology thus sought to bring the entire Christian doctrine into an ordered whole. 'Summa' was a characteristic word in the title of a scholastic work. Theology and world picture were at one in their aims.

In the internal detail of a theological work, too, the arrangement was not only orderly but also hierarchical. For example, a typical sequence of

topics was God, the angels, the cosmos, man; exactly the same as in the world picture. In his 'Summa Theologica', Aquinas emphasised the world picture in his appeal to the neo-Platonic idea of the procession and return of creatures. Christology and eschatology were less emphasised than redemption, which was a return to an original world order, and of this return eschatology was a confirmation.

As well as the general structure of theological works showing a resemblance to the world picture, specific areas of theology were akin to those of cosmology. The medieval theologian emphasised the creation as an agent of revelation of God's power, wisdom and goodness. Whereas Aquinas in 'Summa contra Gentiles' argued from the motion of the planets to an unmoved prime mover, others argued from the order of the creation to God's wisdom, from the abundance of it to God's goodness, and from the forces within it to God's power. Insofar as the order was concerned, every creature had its proper place; this was wisdom. The medieval view of nature was optimistic; its beauty and order showed the face of God.

The theologian of the day asked also how God guided the world. What was the mechanism he used? The answer given was: God used intermediaries, angels for the will and the planets for material things. Theologians in discussing the providence of God were thus completely immersed in the prevalent world picture.

In order to take account of the fact of evil, which was surely counter to the optimism mentioned above, the following arguments were used: evil is the absence of something good (after Augustine); a true hierarchical order can be built only from unequal parts; original sin had upset the world order and brought to the world all sorts of evil, but God can make evil contribute to the good order of the world.

The medieval man consequently did not doubt the goodness of the world. In any case had not Plato said that a perfect God must create a perfect world? And did not Genesis confirm this?

To 20th century man the medieval emphasis on angels and pure spirits seems strange, but at that time it seemed clear that without angels the cosmos was inconceivable. Then too the hierarchical order would be incomplete if there were no infinitely pure spirit between the lower beings and God, and again scripture was seen to confirm the idea.

For reasons such as those just mentioned, the effect of the world picture is seen to be strong indeed, perhaps overwhelming. There was however in medieval times still room for argument.

Arguments about the existence of Plato's world-soul were a feature of medieval life. Another common argument then was: are the planets animate? Or are they guided by separate intelligences? Furthermore, should the planets or the separate intelligences which guided them be identified with the angels of scripture?

Why did God create the world? To this question the answer was invariable, it was created for men, or rather for the elect; man had to take the place of - the fallen angels, and then to join the other angels in praising God.

On the origin of each person, the body, through the influence of the planets which ensure the right mixture of the four elements, came from the parents. The soul, because it is spiritual, is not composed of any existing thing. Even secondary causes were considered of no use. The soul was regarded as coming into being through an immediate creation.

Christ, a living example of the perfect order, came from the empyrean to restore order on earth, and to cancel by his obedience the disobedience of the first man. When the conscience of man becomes subject to God, the will to conscience, the body to the soul, and the plants and animals to man, then order is restored.

Only a perfectly hierarchical church could fit into a perfect world order. Holy Orders was the sacrament of 'order' because it gave to the church its perfect hierarchical structure. Some theologians extended the notion of hierarchy to souls, which then became classified. Wildiers notes that the principle of hierarchy came into force in monastic institutions at the same time as scholasticism flourished. Civil society also was seen in terms of hierarchy: kings, lords, dukes, and barons. Ignatius of Loyola said that God governs human society via those in authority, just as he directs the material world through the planets. Morality was another area where appeal was made to the idea of order. An action was considered good when it agreed with the order God willed.

At the end of the world medieval theologians were unanimous that the heavenly bodies would come to a standstill. On earth the just would be purified, and made fit to inhabit the empyrean. In this respect as in others, the world-picture saturated theological presentations.

The synthesis of world view and religious outlook in medieval times thus produced a harmonious outlook on God, man and the world, a remarkable feat which is without parallel elsewhere.

## **Part Two. Decline of the Medieval World Picture**

Since Copernicus man...rolls faster and faster away from the centre...where? To nothingness?

(Nietzsche 1968)

The medieval world picture was demolished, and in the 17th century science and religion were separated, with gains to both. Science was freed from the grip of theology, and theology could purify itself of foreign elements that had nothing to do with the original message of the gospel.

As well as gains there were disadvantages: The Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture now appeared to speak in different languages, and the consequence was that various schools of thought arose amongst European intellectuals. The period has been called an intellectual revolution and the

crisis of European consciousness, and attributed by Koyre to the great change in the world-picture which then occurred.

### **From Copernicus to Darwin**

Copernicus gave the first impulse to change the world picture. Although doubts about the old picture had arisen in a few even in the 15th century, Copernicus did not just speculate but actually demonstrated that the heliocentric picture was defensible. In doing this he caused the complete disruption of the splendid hierarchy of the medieval view. Opposition to the new world-picture came both from theologians and from most astronomers, who were attached to the Ptolemaic picture. Wildiers discusses the works of Tycho Brahe, Galileo, Kepler and Newton, which together led to establishing the heliocentric picture both by observation and by theory, and so making possible a new conception of the universe. With the destruction of the old picture, there disappeared also the central position of the earth, the perfect circular orbit of the heavenly bodies, the higher dignity of the heavenly, the intervention of higher spirits in the world of men, the various spheres surrounding the earth, and all the other features of the scholastic synthesis, which, wonderful as it was as an intellectual structure, now turned out to have been a complete mistake.

After Newton, the way was open for all the sciences to develop, and they did this with a speed which has increased continually to this day. Wildiers does not attempt to tell the full history of science since Newton, but goes straight to the one at the centre of a further scientific revolution in the 19th century—Charles Darwin. Evolution by natural selection, described by Wildiers as the only workable hypothesis in the biology of the development of species, has linked the two areas which were cultivated in the 19th century: the development of the historical method and the unprecedented progress in the natural sciences. Nature has been increasingly viewed as a giant historical process in which all things are interconnected. From the remnant of the medieval world picture the existence of a static immutable hierarchical and anthropocentric world order has been abolished.

### **Crisis in religious thought**

After Copernicus the very foundations of the world picture of the scholastics were undermined, and the picture itself became worthless. Some felt that the overthrow of the old world picture meant that a new concept of God was needed, and indeed in the following years deism, pantheism, and also atheism gained ground. There was a crisis in religion.

In morals too changes occurred. God's hierarchical order in the world had provided a basis for morals. Was the old idea of order still relevant? There were all sorts of views.

The structure of society also came under scrutiny. In former times it had been thought that society should mirror the hierarchical order seen in the cosmos, and so there had been first the feudal system and then kings ruling by divine right. New conceptions saw the source of rights to be the people and not the monarch. Throughout the 16th century the old world

picture still governed the cultural climate, although scholasticism had decayed. The literature displays how old views persisted: Shakespeare, John Webster, Tillyard, Vondel and Milton are quoted. Scepticism none the less grew steadily, and in the 17th century for example John Donne discusses the new philosophy: 'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone'. (Donne 1572–1631)

For Pascal man seemed to be on some terrifying desert island, without knowing where he is and without any means of escape. Only faith, he concluded, can free man from this desperate state. Pascal saw the world as an unintelligible and sombre mystery, which we should think of as little as possible, for we can never understand it. Consequently in the 17th and 18th centuries various views flourished; deism, pantheism and atheism all gained adherents.

### **Deism**

The deist considered that God set up the world, and then left man to his own devices. Newton was the idol of deism: the order in the universe, so splendidly demonstrated in the law of universal attraction, was for Newton a clear indication of the existence of a Supreme Wisdom which had granted the cosmos its fixed laws; atheism must be dismissed as simply absurd.

Deism rejected revealed religion as it strove to bring religion into line with the new discoveries of science made by Galileo, Newton and others. It retained belief in the Creator as well as an ethical system. The God of deism differed from the God of the bible in that he no longer was concerned with everyday events in the world which he had designed and then let run along the lines of the laws of nature which he himself had imposed. For the true deist one had to worship God not by outward ceremonies but by a moral life.

The deist saw that the medieval world picture had been a mistake and that Aristotelian science was unreliable, even though the church stubbornly clung to the old picture which its spokesmen still maintained was integral to Christian belief.

The Bible too came under attack: if it had been unreliable on one point, geocentricity, how could it be trusted on others? It became common to look for errors in the bible, and many claims were made that mistakes and contradictions were reported, so much so that the bible was no longer authoritative for many intellectuals.

Newton saw himself as a Christian. Suspected of being an atheist, he replied You ascribe to me a rational soul because you perceive order in my words and actions; acknowledge then the existence of a supreme intelligent Being whenever you behold the order of the universe. Of course the order which Newton saw in the universe was that which enabled the discovery of scientific laws, and not the hierarchical order of the ancient Greeks and the schoolmen.



If the cosmos were governed by laws, what was to become of Providence, the loving care which God lavished on his people, as many Christians said? The deists could not accept that the disorder in the world should rather be seen as part of God's good care of us. What about the Lisbon earthquake of 1755?

### **Pantheism.**

Giordano Bruno quit the Dominican order after reading Copernicus. He was the first to defend the idea of a completely decentralised, infinite, and infinitely inhabited world. Bruno considered that our universe is but one of countless similar solar systems. The universe, he argued, must be infinite because it was created by an infinite God. Bruno died at the stake after meeting the Inquisition. Infinity was then considered a mark of God, and so Bruno had within him the seeds of pantheism.

The problem of an infinite world and an infinite God was considered also by Spinoza, who gave a clear view:

there is but one infinite all embracing substance. Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God.... Particular things are modifications of the attributes of God.

(Benedict de Spinoza 1632–1677)

Philosophic method, he said, ought to start with consideration of the divine nature. It is a mistake, he said, to look for meaning or purpose in nature because the order of nature follows from the nature of God. Spinoza eliminated final causality and developed a world picture in which there was no uncertainty, no purpose, no spontaneity, and no freedom: everything followed from eternal necessity, derived from the supreme perfection of God.

Spinoza's thought was rediscovered by Goethe and the German romantics, at a time when elsewhere in the West deism flourished.

### **Atheism**

In the 18th century atheists increased in number. They shared with the deists an admiration for science coupled with opposition to Christian belief. Neither group accepted revealed religion. Debate with Christians centred largely on the question of providence. In a world which ran in accordance with the scientific laws built into it from the beginning, how was man to view what the Christian called God's caring guidance for his people? In France, atheism was employed in the influential encyclopaedia written (1751-1772) by Diderot and others. Voltaire, a deist rather than an atheist, made tremendous capital out of the destruction caused by the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, and the atheists used similar arguments.

### **Moral and political theory**

The great debate of the 17th and 18th centuries was about God. Descartes introduced a new philosophy which retained belief in God, the schoolmen still were supported by many, and in most nations the

authorities supported the traditional belief, despite the increasing numbers who went in the directions discussed above.

The nature of man and the basis for morality were also re-examined as a result of the new view of the universe after Newton. Was man a machine? Of what value was human thought in the light of past mistakes? What was the basis of morality now that the old base of hierarchical order had disappeared? Some were disturbed that the new thought led others into libertinism, both of thought and of behaviour. Without revelation, a variety of ethical systems emerged: utilitarianism of Hobbes or Bentham; epicurianism of Saint Evremond. But was man free? Could he in fact choose between different moral systems?

The new world-picture had its effects also on thought about the structure of society. Rulers no longer could appeal to the order God had willed. Many now considered that the state should draw its authority from the will of the people, and the effects were seen especially in France and in North America.

Religion was delivered from the clutches of science if the idea of God was innate in the human mind, as Descartes advocated. Similarly, Kant regarded the moral law within along with the starry heavens above as an object of wonder and admiration, which led to the recognition of God's existence. Both these men saw no link of cosmology to God

Hegel also was one with little use for cosmology, but he adopted a quite different approach. For him, man was a stranger in a mysterious and hostile world and was even alienated from himself. He attempted to integrate man into the whole reality, by developing the idea of consciousness at the deepest level of history, where God the absolute Idea is to be found. It is in history, not nature, that mind realizes itself. Evolutionary theory, which came after Hegel, resulted in a fusion of nature and history. The entire cosmos is seen there to be one vast historical process. Henceforward, as well as pantheism deism and atheism, a purified form of theism laid claim to the approval of the new cosmology.

### **The new world-picture and theology**

The new world-picture, which came with the arrival of modern science, might have been expected to have changed theological formulation almost immediately. Such a thing did not happen. Why was this? The answer probably lies in the nature of the old world-picture.

Wildiers points out that a central role in the old picture was played by the concept of hierarchical order. There was a place for everything and for everyone. An individual found morality in adjustment to his proper place: the microcosm should reflect the macrocosm. Because a hierarchical structure in both state and church was seen to be natural, it must have been hard for ecclesiastical authorities to decide to adopt a non-hierarchical structure. In any event the hierarchy persists to this day in the Roman church, even though it largely disappeared or was greatly

diminished in some other churches, as well as in most states, where kings and feudal government gave way to other systems.

There are not many theologians in any generation who work at the most fundamental level. It therefore perhaps is not too surprising that Roman Catholic theologians continued to defend the medieval interpretation of Christian doctrine long after the world picture from which it derived its credibility had been destroyed in the advance of modern science. No doubt because many in the church were unable to sever the ancient world-picture from the core of Christian belief, the highest church authorities condemned the heliocentric world picture of Copernicus and Galileo.

The full teaching authority of the church, centralised as it was, affected the written work of theologians and other thinkers in the church in a strongly conservative way. In general theologians did not shift away from their old positions. Even although they introduced mention of the new world-picture, theologians of the 17th 18th and 19th centuries clung still to an interpretation of Christianity which was the same as in the days of Aquinas in the 13th century.

As recently as 1957, in the Christmas message of Pius XII, Wildiers reports that detailed consideration was given to the universal world order: God is said to have created the world in a state of perfect order and harmony so that a supreme and eternal law is to be found in all things. Though the sin of Adam has upset this order and harmony, a return to the original state is possible and necessary. The end of the world moreover is referred to as the day of return to the original state.

### **Part Three. The Contemporary World-Picture and Theology, The World in Philosophy and in the Natural Sciences**

In philosophy today, world means that world of which we are subjectively conscious, and which we experience every day. The scientific world picture, whatever it means, does not imply that it is a complete picture of reality, for each discovery raises further questions. No result is final.

Furthermore, because science is the work of people, there is an inescapable element of subjectivity in its results. Indeed Heisenberg and von Weisaecker claim that the constructs of science reflect more the human mind than they do nature.

Various views of what is science complicate our understanding of the meaning of the scientific world picture. The three most common views are:

*Instrumentalism* (Toulmin, Ramsay, Ryle): Science is a device by which men manoeuvre the world.

*Idealism* (Eddington, Jeans, Milne, Cassirer, Margenau): Science is but a construct of the mind.

*Realism* (Planck, Einstein, Campbell, Whitehead, neoThomists, Nigel, Smart): There is a reality which precedes perception, and our thought is influenced by this objective reality.

Scientists stop short of ascribing absoluteness to their conclusions, for they allow the possibility that in the future men will look at things differently. In support of this view they note that what is meant by explanation has changed over the years.

For many centuries to explain was to place a thing correctly in the world order, according to what was its true nature. Then, with Galileo and Descartes in particular, to explain meant to measure and compare. A third meaning is to analyse in detail and so to determine all the components present. Yet another meaning is used: to explain is to identify the origin and history.

Wildiers correctly says that no one can guarantee that a quite new concept of explanation will not arise in the future. With all the qualifications implicit in the remarks just made being accepted, the scientific world-picture is the sum of all the partial views from the various sciences.

Science today characterizes the world as boundless, dynamic and organic. It is organic in the sense that it is a unity which continually sees new phenomena developing from what was there before, as happens in organisms.

The question arises as to how much is the modern universe characterized by order, and the answer must be that natural science could not have been conceived let alone practised without the existence of natural laws and the order they imply.

Existential philosophers consider man as man, and ask 'what does it mean to exist as a human'. Four concepts are necessary to define man: bodilyness, self-awareness, inter-subjectivity, and the world. Each man has his own particular world that has been built up from his experiences, and which was described by Aldous Huxley as the homemade cosmos of intelligible symbols. This life-world, partly formed as it is by interaction with others, is full of meaning and is the type of world out of which grew the world of natural science. Natural science in turn has given rise to the conviction in modern man that there is a rational explanation for everything; nature has lost its magic. Modern man is critical, even sceptical.

Man also is historically conscious today more so than in past centuries. He like all else he can see is moving on the wave of events, and as he moves he feels all the time more powerful to change their course—until he contemplates the future.

The life-world in the end is wrapped in mystery. Science and technology have produced a new variety of human being who is less confident than his predecessors of old.

## **World picture and theology in the work of Teilhard de Chardin**

Teilhard attributed Christianity's loss of influence in the 20th century to a loss of credibility. The loss of credibility followed from the retention by the church of a picture of the universe which was completely unacceptable to modern man, and the message of Christ in the 20th century was still formulated in terms of the medieval world-picture of, for example, the 13th century. Teilhard was not content to say that faith and science were completely separate, as some did, but rather sought a synthesis of faith and science (that is, 20th century science), where faith was the expression of the deepest roots of theological thought as expressed by Christ and his earliest followers. Teilhard's work focussed on two themes (i) man and his place in nature; and (ii) Christ and his significance for both man and the world

### *(j) Man's place in the world*

For Teilhard, man is a problem because on one hand man seems at home in the world, and yet on the other seems not to belong to it. How can we reconcile man and the world?

Man differs from the rest of the world in that he has both freedom and self-consciousness. Teilhard wanted a unified science to explain both man and the world and the existence of both, and so he adopted evolutionary theory and wanted it extended to cover the spiritual aspect of man as well as all the rest of him. The starting-point taken by Teilhard was the twofold working hypothesis: psychism and thought are primary (and so matter is secondary); and the community is significant biologically.

In regard to psychism, matter usually, but not necessarily correctly, has been regarded as primary, and self-consciousness and freedom consequently seen as epiphenomena.

Looking back over what evolution has occurred in the past, all can see a steady growth over time in the complexity of the most complex structures. Also psychism in man is not paralleled in any other known species. Teilhard thought it necessary to postulate for the other beings at least a trace of psychism, but this necessity I personally question. When he came to considering the future of evolution, Teilhard envisaged the same two trends continuing, so that we can look forward to still more complexity and still more consciousness. (Again I personally depart from this assumption, for it seems to me that increased complexity could result in the appearance of a quite new property, rather than increased consciousness alone).

Teilhard saw that evolution has in the past moved in a certain direction towards man but he did not at all dismiss the idea that development usually has followed a very zigzag path, and that chance has been present all along the line. It is well known that many lines of development in fact have come to a full stop.

Humanity today recognises its unity and is experiencing an unprecedented surge in intellectual activity. Teilhard considered these facts as pointers to evolution being now convergent, and thus moving towards a particular point, which he termed the omega point. At the omega point mankind will be completely unified and consciousness will be at its maximum.

Wildiers says that Teilhard's project can be reduced to one question: Is man central to or merely a secondary phenomenon in the cosmos? Teilhard suggested that man shows us indeed the true face of the cosmos.

*(ii) The significance of Christ for man and the world.*

The key concept of modern science is that of evolution, and in accord with this Teilhard declared that for contemporary man Christianity must be the religion which incorporates evolution. God is known now to be the God of a universe that is dynamic.

Why was this not recognised by Aquinas? The answer given by Wildiers to this question is that every theological system is devised chiefly as an answer to a fundamental question. In Aquinas's case the question was: What is the significance of Christ to a world which was in perfect order until the order was disrupted by the sin of the first man? The success of Aquinas's answer for more than four centuries was possible only because in that period men had no way of knowing about the nature of the world in ages past. A not very extensive treatment in the bible was read to agree with the ancient and respected views of Aristotle and of the many Jews, Muslims and Christians as well as unbelievers who followed the Greek. It was then as it is now the bible was to be read for how to go to heaven, and not for how the heavens go (as was said by a Cardinal Baronius and quoted by Galileo). A certain world-picture was assumed from extra-biblical sources before Christ was considered. The significance of the Lord was then assessed in terms of that world picture.

The medieval world picture placed man physically in the centre of the universe. When such a view became impossible to hold any longer, some men decided that we had been more or less severed from the cosmos or at any rate could not draw anything either from history or from nature to secure our own significance. As a result of this some philosophers, both Christian and others, accepted that man had to find significance only from his own resources. In Wildiers' word, man was decosmatized, and existentialism arose.

The scheme devised by Teilhard restores man to the place of greatest importance in the universe although in a way quite different from that of Aristotle. Man has become recosmatized.

For Teilhard, the figure of Christ was that of orthodoxy, and the statements of the creed are retained. There is however a strong emphasis on those parts of the scriptures which associate Christ with the world of the future (Col. 1:15–20 and Eph. 1:9–10). The return of Christ to this world Teilhard not only takes for granted, but goes on to identify the omega point with the parousia. Such a suggestion of course goes beyond

the area of science and makes an appeal primarily to those who already are believers and who accept for example:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone.

I Corinthians 15:28

Wildiers notes that Teilhard in his theology placed the emphasis on the future rather than the past, and regarded work in this world as sanctified, being inspired by the Christian's relationship with his Lord. Such a position was regarded by Wildiers as requiring a new type of Christian, but it seems to me that biblical Christians have always had this point of view. 1 Corinthians 10:31 makes it clear that we should do everything to the glory of God.

The close relation between the Son and the world, whether in Teilhard's view or in the scriptures themselves, automatically ensures that the world has intrinsic value. Cynicism and pessimism become impossible for the believer.

### **The new confrontation between world picture and theology**

The Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 and the associated documents provide evidence that the theology of the Roman Catholic Church was then in a state of transition, according to Wildiers. There are, however, only sporadic references in the documents to present-day science, and whilst for example there are realistic and even beautiful expressions of eschatological views, according to Wildiers:

...we cannot speak of a consistent rethinking of Christianity within the framework of a modern world picture.

In almost every chapter Wildiers claims that modern science forbids us to believe in a perfect world order at the beginning of time, and that all attempts to preserve the traditional view of the state of paradise have failed, because it is clear that there never has been a perfect, hierarchical and immutable world order, and so the old theological synthesis has been destroyed. Wildiers, furthermore, was struck by the collapse of traditional theology and the institutions and practices which invoked its authority. Consequently he saw a need for present day theology to develop a new synthesis, and remarked that this work is now in progress in all denominations.

It is not that Christ himself is irrelevant to our culture, for the values of the sense of truth and humanity, and the desire for justice, peace and intellectual freedom, owe a lot to the figure of Jesus Christ. He is so bound up with Western culture that it can not profitably be discussed without him. Wildiers goes even further:

Christ has in fact given history a new orientation... After Paul (Gal. 5:1) 'For freedom Christ has set us free'.

'Freedom indeed is a touchstone of truth', says Wildiers; 'the truth shall make you free'. Here, in the rediscovery of the evangelical concept of freedom, is the very heart of the present theological debate, he claims.

Freedom of the Christian is a theme many have started to explore in recent years, and Wildiers takes note of various works in this area. Eschatology, a predominant theme of the first Christians, has been rediscovered by Moltmann and others and seen to justify a view of all human effort as worthwhile, to provide hope even in dark times and to stimulate the fight against injustice in this world.

The Christian is called to use his freedom for creativity, to participate in good relations with others and to share the life of God. Reality consists in events rather than things. A world without change does not exist. What a contrast with the ancient Greek view that at least at the beginning the world was perfect and that perfection implied immutability.

### **Wildiers' conclusion**

Present day theology can be said to be confronted with three important authorities:

- the natural sciences
- the human sciences and social theory
- history and the hermeneutics of biblical texts and documents of the past.

None can be neglected. Yet we are simply scratching the surface, for what is actually involved is no less than a new discovery of the Christian tradition, or rather a new spelling-out of the Gospel message in the framework of our contemporary experience of reality which differs profoundly from that of previous ages.

### **Comment on Wildiers**

From a scientific point of view Wildiers has not shown any influence on himself of twentieth century science, although this has brought more revolutionary changes in the way we view the world than ever was accomplished even by Wallace and Darwin, whose views Wildiers has done so much to accommodate. In particular, quantum theory and relativity are not even mentioned in Wildiers.

When therefore Wildiers talks of our contemporary experience he is almost a century out of date. This does not alter the validity or the truth of the basic points Wildiers makes in his book, but it does mean that much more work has to be done to bring the Christian message into a proper relation with what is indeed our contemporary experience of reality.

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