

The “Omega Point” Revisited from the New Tree of Life and the Ecological Crisis

Lucio Florio

FLORIO, L.: The “Omega Point” Revisited from the New Tree of Life and the Ecological Crisis. *Studia Aloisiana*, 7, 2016, 3, s. 31 – 40.

According to Teilhard de Chardin, the process of the universe and life will culminate in the “Omega Point”. His optimistic evolutionary worldview finds two difficulties in our times: first, Phylogenetics considers Life as a forest or a network, undermining thus the image of an endpoint; second the ecological crisis leads to think about the likelihood of the disappearance of part of the biosphere and even the Homo sapiens. This probability seems to contradict the trend towards a concentration point of all the biogenesis and noogenesis. However, it is possible to rethink the “Omega Point” theory from these new lines of thought.

Key words: Omega Point, Evolution, Ecology, Tree of Life

Teilhard de Chardin had a view of the process of the universe and life culminating in the “Omega Point”. It is, in his view, a seemingly irreversible process. According to Henri de Lubac, following de Chardin’s line of thought, it is possible to reach the “Omega Point” from an empirical and metaphysical starting point.¹ Teilhard de Chardin offered a basically optimistic evolutionary worldview. But, from a theological point of view, the “Omega Point” can be perceived like the Parousia of the New Testament. This attractor would be the immanent destination of the evolutionary dynamic of the world and simultaneously the last intervention of God in history and creation.

1 Cf. GALLEN, L.: *Darwin, Teilhard y los otros : Las tres teorías de la evolución*. Buenos Aires : Epifanía, 2010; GALLEN, L.: Teilhard de Chardin : Moving towards Humankind? In: AULETTA, G., LECLERC, M., MARTINEZ, R. A. (eds.): *Biological Evolution, Facts and Theories*. Rome : Gregorian Biblical Press, 2011, pp. 493–516.

But today this view offers two difficulties: The first is originated in the Phylogenetics; at present, this perspective of life is not regarded as a tree, but rather as a forest or a network, undermining thus the image of an attraction of an endpoint. The second difficulty comes from the Planetary ecological crisis, because it leads to think about the likelihood of the disappearance of part of the biosphere and even the *Homo sapiens*. This probability seems to contradict the trend towards a concentration point of all the *Biogenesis* and *Noogenesis*.

This paper intends to reflect on the validity of the "Omega Point" from these new perspectives.

1. The "Omega Point"

Teilhard de Chardin was firstly a scientist; but, at the same time, he was a mystic, and not strictly a theologian or philosopher.² In the preface of his book *The Phenomenon of Man* he wrote: "If this book is to be properly understood, it must be read not as a work on metaphysics, still less as a sort of theological essay, but purely and simply as a scientific treatise."³ He thought his general scientific understanding of the universe could be considered as "hyperphysics", not still metaphysics. He was aware of the fact that metaphysics is more than an extension of science or an organization of its results. However, he wanted to continue what he called "the strictly experimental film".

Teilhard formulates a theory of evolution which he understands as a demonstration of a unifying creative activity. In this perspective, the theory of evolution has consequences which help us to improve our understanding of our developing reality. Therefore, the most important aspect of the evolving process is creativity, and creativity is unifying. According to Teilhard, all things are unified in the "Omega Point", which is a final and central point in evolution. It can be understood as an immanent – from a scientific point of view –, but also as a transcendent – from a theological and a philosophical point of view – cause of evolution. Reflections on the "Omega Point", which could be considered metaphysical, and, in connection with an understanding of Christ, also theological, do not lose their scientific character.

Teilhard argues that there is a maturation of the world toward the "Noosphere". But the last destination of the entire universe is a "Focus of a supremely independent union", "self-subsistent and absolutely ultimate Principle". It is, simultaneously, Alfa and Omega.

2 Cf. NUÑEZ DE CASTRO, I.: The Bio-Philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin. In: DEL RIEGO, H. (ed.): *God Seen by Science : Anthropic Evolution of the Universe*. Madrid : Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, 2008, pp. 99–126; BRION, M.: Teilhard: "Io, né utopista beat ne millenarista". *Avvenire.it*, 6. 6. 2012: <http://www.avvenire.it/Cultura/Pagine/intervista-inedita-teilhard.aspx>

3 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Le Phénomène Humain*. Oeuvres I. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1955, 21. Cf. DE LUBAC, H.: *El pensamiento religioso de Teilhard de Chardin*. Madrid : Taurus, 1967; GRENET, P.-B.: The Future of Teilhardism is a Purification of the Hyperphysical and an Opening to Metaphysics. In: GRENET, P.-B.: *Teilhard de Chardin filósofo a pesar suyo*. Buenos Aires : Paulinas, 1966, p. 238.

Teilhard's interpretation of the theory of evolution as a demonstration of a creative unity or of a unifying creative activity depicts an immense unity of the whole reality while maintaining the logical coherence of his phenomenological picture of the evolving world.⁴ From this aspect, for Teilhard, humankind is in the centre of the evolving universe, at least in a spiritual sense. The place of each human person is considered as a mirrored center in the universe *par excellence*, because humankind creates *a new face of Earth* and gives *a new skin* to Earth, a new spiritual dimension – *a new sphere* – *Noosphere*.

It is true that, into the Christian worldview of Teilhard de Chardin, the "Omega Point" has a theological dimension. In fact, it is a personal God, according to the revelation of Jesus Christ. Teilhard thinks that this "Omega" is the God-Christ, who is the unifying principle of the reality. However, the French Jesuit also argues that it is possible to capture a scientific look through an evolutionary thread that forwards to a "Point Omega" immanent to the process.

2. Rethinking the Omega Point from the Phylogenetics and Ecology

2.1. New perspective of the Phylogenetics⁵

Teilhard de Chardin states that there is an arrow of life which extends from the origin of life, passes through the emergence of the human being and culminates in the incarnation of the Son of God. Today, evolutionary biology tends to question that orientation of the process of evolution, considering that it is less linear and more complex in its network. In fact, the current phylogenetic trees show a complexity guilloche, in a non linear direction. The current Tree of Life images are represented as a network or a forest-like structure. The reason for these new representations is the detection of non-linear phenomena, such a genetic drift, which implies a reticular view of the relationship among living beings. Our position on the unity of evolution reflects the view that the actors in the evolutionary history are not the species but populations or even genes. In any case, this modifies the linear vision of the arrow of life proposed by Teilhard de Chardin. The French thinker had an outlook of phylogeny according to the scientific research of his time, understanding the evolutionary process as directed forward and upward in a linear mode.⁶ But, from the standpoint

4 Cf. PLAŠIENKOVÁ, Z.: Interpretación de Teilhard de la teoría evolutiva como unión creativa y sus perspectivas espirituales y ecológicas. In: FLORIO, L. (ed.): *Evolución y Cristianismo : Un diálogo posible*. Buenos Aires : Dunken, 2007, pp. 189–202.

5 Cf. FLORIO, L.: The Tree of Life : Philosophical and Theological Considerations. In: *Studia Aloisiana*, Vol. 4, 2013, Issue 1, pp. 15–27.

6 Nevertheless, Teilhard was aware of the not extraordinary biological origin of the human being in the history of the life. Cf. MARTELET, G.: *E se Teilhard dicesse il vero...* Milano : Jaca Book, 2007, p. 31.

of the following paleontological discoveries and the application of genetic techniques that idea cannot be maintained.

Strictly speaking, these new data do not demolish the Teilhardian theory but places it in a higher level of complexity.⁷ It would be possible to admit the existence of an attraction by an “Omega Point” on a phenomenon of life, but not in a linear way. The tendency to a complexity remains like a possible evidence of the idea of the existence of a final attractor.

2.2. Ecology

Another recent issue that requires rethinking the “Omega Point” is the emergence of the environmental crisis on the planet. Teilhard kept an optimistic outlook on technology and the overall process of Noogenesis. In a text called “Some Reflections on the Spiritual Repercussions of the Atom Bomb” he says:

“We are at the precise point where, if we are to restore complete equilibrium to the state of psychic disarray which the atomic shock has induced in us, we must sooner or later decide upon our attitude to a fundamental choice; the point where our conflicts may begin again, and fiercely, but by other means and on a different plane.

I spoke of the Spirit of the Earth. What are we to understand by that ambiguous phrase?

Is it the Promethean or Faustian spirit: the spirit of autonomy and solitude; Man with his own strength and for his own sake opposing a blind and hostile Universe; the rise of consciousness concluding in an act of possession?

Is it the Christian spirit, on the contrary: the spirit of service and of giving; Man struggling like Jacob to conquer and attain a supreme center of consciousness which calls to him; the evolution of the earth ending in an act of union?

Spirit of force or spirit of love? Where shall we place true heroism, where look for true greatness, where recognize objective truth?

It would take too long, and it is outside the scope of this paper, to discuss the comparative worth of two opposed forms of adoration, the first of which may well have attracted poets, but only the second of which, I think, presents itself to the reflective mind as capable of conferring upon a universe in motion its full spiritual coherence, its total substance beyond death, and finally its whole message for our hearts. (Witnesses of that experiment in Arizona found, in the anguish

7 Cf. GALLEN, L.: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin : L'Évolution comme un *muovere verso* : Aspetti fenomenologici ed epistemologici. In: *Quaerentibus. Teología y Ciencias*, 1, 2012, pp. 58–81: www.quaerentibus.org

of the last instants, that in the depths of their hearts they were *praying*.
[Official Report: appendices.]

What does matter here, on the other hand, to note that Mankind cannot go much further along the road upon which it has embarked through its latest conquests without having to settle (or be divided intellectually on) the question of which summit it must seek to attain.

In short, the final effect of the light cast by the atomic fire into the spiritual depths of the earth is to illumine within them the overriding question of the ultimate end of Evolution – that is to say, the problem of God.⁸

Moreover, Teilhard had considered the hypothesis of the disappearance of humanity.⁹

“Man, a *species which converges*, instead of diverging like every other species on earth: so that we are bound to envisage its ending in terms of some paroxysmal state of maturation which, by its scientific probability alone, must illumine for us all the darkest menaces of the future. For if by its structure Mankind does not dissipate itself but concentrates upon itself; in other words, if, alone among all the living forms known to us, our zoological phylum is laboriously moving towards a *critical point of speciation*, then are not all hopes permitted to us in the matter of survival and irreversibility? The end of a ‘thinking species’: not disintegration and death, but a new break-through and a re-birth, this time outside Time and Space, through the very excess of unification and co-reflection.”¹⁰

European post-war philosophy enabled him to think about the possibility of a self-disposal of mankind. However, he maintained the idea of the supremacy of the instinct of survival, even under pressure from the territorial and inter-human concentration.

Nevertheless, it is important to clarify the term “Noosphere” since it just partially corresponds to the current concept of “Anthropocene”. In fact, “Anthropocene” means a new geological era, originated by the powerful techno-scientific resources of *Homo sapiens*. It would be a period characterized

8 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: Some Reflections on the Spiritual Repercussions of the Atom Bomb. In: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004, pp. 140-142.

9 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: The End of the Species. In: TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004, chapter 22, pp. 299-307: “It goes without saying that this idea of a salvation of the Species sought, not in the direction of any temporo-spatial consolidation or expansion but by way of spiritual escape through the excess of consciousness, is not yet seriously considered by the biologists. At first sight it appears fantastic. Yet if one thinks about it long and carefully, it is remarkable how it sustains examination, grows stronger and, for two particular reasons among others, takes root in the mind.”

10 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: The End of the Species. In: TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004, chapter 22, p. 303.

by alteration of the global Earth systems caused by humans. That modification includes the emergence of phenomena such as climate change, loss of biodiversity (the “sixth extinction”), pollution of land, sea and air, the depredation of the biosphere, erosion and degradation of soils, radical transformation of ecosystems, etc. In evolutionary terminology, one can say that the biosphere has produced an organism that has finished becoming his own destructive agent. Consequently, in recent centuries, the biosphere as a whole is undergoing a dramatic period, due to human action.

Teilhard believed that the general movement of “Noogenesis” was in line for greater complexity and integration – as in the biogenesis –, anticipating what we now call “globalization”. The difference between the terms “Noogenesis” and “Anthropocene” is that the first emphasizes the positive aspects of the process, while the second remarks the destructive aspect of modification of the earth’s crust by human activity. The shades between these two terms can be useful, to think about this phenomenon from ecological as well as theological perspectives in a not necessarily antithetical way.

It is not unlikely that an environmental catastrophe might occur, destroying much of the living beings and ecosystems and even human beings.¹¹ Because of this, it is likely that humans cannot reach the “Omega Point”. Indeed, the current ecological situation reveals the probability of self-destruction of the process of “Noogenesis” and, at least partially, of the Biogenesis. Or, even, the possibility that the same “Noogenesis” could destroy the environment and make the biosphere and noosphere disappear. “Anthropocene” thus suggests that the “Noosphere” is not necessarily successful on its own.

Conclusions

“Omega Point” is a metaphysical hypothesis, scientifically based, but with theological implications at the same time. Some authors¹² have underlined its empirical roots. It is a “go-towards”, a negentropic process toward a greater complexity – certainly coexisting with the entropic principle. Certain scientific lines promoted the idea of a certain intrinsic rationality of the evolutionary process (the idea of evolutionary convergence¹³), without falling in a mechanistic

11 In fact, it has been found that four basic limits are exceeded: climate change; the loss of integrity of the biosphere; the change in ground systems (deforestation, for example); and the alteration of the biogeochemical cycles, more specifically, the phosphorus-nitrogen cycle. In addition, there are five other threatened thresholds: the depletion of stratospheric ozone; ocean acidification; the use of fresh water; the accumulation of aerosols in the atmosphere; introducing new factors (for example, organic pollutants, radioactive materials, nanomaterials or micro-plastics). Cf. STEFFEN, W., et al.: Planetary Boundaries : Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet. In: *Science*, 2015. DOI: 10.1126/science.1259855

12 Cf. DE LUBAC, H.: *El pensamiento religioso de Teilhard de Chardin*. Madrid : Taurus, 1967; HAUGHT, J.: Teilhard de Chardin y la promesa de la naturaleza. In: *Cristianismo y Ciencia : Hacia una teología de la naturaleza*. Maliño : Sal Terrae, 2009, pp. 105–126.

13 Cf. CONWAY MORRIS, S.: *The Runes of Evolution*. West Conshohocken : Templeton Press, 2015.

vision – like the idea of a pre-design in the line of Intelligent Design. However, the admission of the “Omega Point” does not necessarily imply the assertion that the movement towards it comes to a successful end: it is an attractor, but there is no evidence it could achieve its purpose. We have drawn attention on two issues that seem to have doubts about its scope.

First, new developments of the Phylogenetics show that all the process of history of life is not driven by linearity. There are phyla that stagnate, others regress and some others disappear. There are also genetic drift and design processes that demand forests or networks rather than trees. Does this cancel the veracity of an alleged “Omega Point”? Not necessarily, because that attractor (“Omega”) may act selectively, for example, just on the human phenomenon. Teilhard de Chardin makes theological references that can be supplemented in order to illuminate this situation. It is clear that the French author has a Christological focus. In fact, he does not think in the perspective of Genesis 1, but in the view of the Letter to the Ephesians 1:

² Grace and peace to you from **God** our Father and from the **Lord Jesus** Christ.

³ Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ.

⁴ Thus he chose us in Christ before the world was made to be holy and faultless before him in love,

⁵ marking us out for himself beforehand, to be adopted sons, through **Jesus** Christ. Such was his purpose and good pleasure,

⁶ to the praise of the glory of his grace, his free gift to us in the Beloved,

⁷ in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom, the forgiveness of our sins. Such is the richness of the grace

⁸ which he has showered on us in all wisdom and insight.

⁹ He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ,

¹⁰ for him to act upon when the times had run their course: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.

¹¹ And it is in him that we have received our heritage, marked out beforehand as we were, under the plan of the One who guides all things as he decides by his own will,

¹² chosen to be, for the praise of his glory, the people who would put their hopes in Christ before he came.

This christological concentration of the perspective of Teilhard,¹⁴ inspired in the Pauline hymn¹⁵ allows reading the Tree of Life as a translation of a process focused more on Christ than in humans. In other words, Teilhard invites us to a Christocentric perspective.¹⁶ Even it allows us to see the Tree of Life in a cosmological dimension that exceeds the mere creation, as pointing toward the fullness of the universe itself. In his words:

“The Incarnation is a making new, a restoration, of *all* the universe’s forces and powers; Christ is the Instrument, the Center, the End of the *whole* of animate and material creation; through Him, *everything* is created, animated and vivified.”¹⁷

Second, the ecological crisis dramatically underlines the probability of destruction of the biosphere by the human being. Here too the “Omega Point” must be re-thought as a “non-binding attractor”, because nothing prevents the anthropic principle from not ending with the “Noosphere” and even with a great part of the “Biosphere”.

The “Omega Point” remains as an empirically grounded theory that somehow refers to Aristotle’s final cause, in this case applied to a dynamic and evolving universe. Although Teilhard de Chardin did not develop his vision of this powerful negentropic attractor more fully, it remains a powerful claim for the incorporation of an evolutionary dynamism of creation into the theological understanding of reality. In the “Omega Point” theory the theological problem of the Parousia could keep a balance between “Incarnacionism”¹⁸ and “Eschatologism”. The negentropic forces combined with the actual presence of the Kingdom of God from the Incarnation, without reaching fully to the gift of the “heavens and new earth”, originated in an activity that transcends all immanent dimensions of the life.¹⁹

Bibliography

ARNOULD, J.: Evolución y finalidad : Una invitación a reintroducir a Cristo en el discurso sobre la creación. In: *Communio*, ed. Arg., 3, 2001, pp. 53–69.

14 Cf. UDÍAS VALLINA, A.: El pensamiento cristológico y la evolución en Teilhard de Chardin. In: *Pensamiento*, Vol. 63, Issue 238, pp. 583–604.

15 Teilhard calls Saint Paul the “most cosmic of sacred writers”. Cf. TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004, p. 306.

16 Cf. ARNOULD, J.: Evolución y finalidad : Una invitación a reintroducir a Cristo en el discurso sobre la creación. In: *Communio*, ed. Arg., 3, 2001, pp. 53–69.

17 TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004, p. 306.

18 About Incarnacionism in Teilhard cf. DE LUBAC, H.: *El pensamiento religioso de Teilhard de Chardin*. Madrid : Taurus, 1967, with the quotation of Teilhard in the year of his death: “I am going to meet him who comes.” (44)

19 Cf. POLKINGHORNE, J.: *El Dios de la esperanza y el fin del mundo*. Buenos Aires : Epifanía, 2007.

- CONWAY MORRIS, S.: *The Runes of Evolution*. West Conshohocken : Templeton Press, 2015.
- DE LUBAC, H.: *El pensamiento religioso de Teilhard de Chardin*. Madrid : Taurus, 1967.
- FLORIO, L.: The Tree of Life : Philosophical and Theological Considerations. In: *Studia Aloisiana*, Vol. 4, 2013, Issue 1, pp. 15–27.
- GALLENI, L.: *Darwin, Teilhard y los otros : Las tres teorías de la evolución*. Buenos Aires : Epifanía, 2010
- GALLENI, L.: Teilhard de Chardin : Moving towards Humankind? In: AULETTA, G., LECLERC, M., MARTINEZ, R. A. (eds.): *Biological Evolution, Facts and Theories*. Rome : Gregorian Biblical Press, 2011, pp. 493–516.
- GALLENI, L.: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin : L'Évoluzione come un *muovere verso* : Aspetti fenomenologici ed epistemologici. In: *Quaerentibus. Teología y Ciencia*, 1, 2012, pp. 58–81; www.quaerentibus.org
- GRENET, P.-B.: *Teilhard de Chardin filósofo a pesar suyo*. Buenos Aires : Paulinas, 1966.
- HAUGHT, J.: *Responses to 101 Questions on God and Evolution*. New York : Paulist Press, 2001.
- HAUGHT, J.: Teilhard de Chardin y la promesa de la naturaleza. In: *Cristianismo y Ciencia : Hacia una teología de la naturaleza*. Maliño : Sal Terrae, 2009, pp. 105–126.
- MARTELET, G.: *E se Teilhard dicesse il vero...* Milano : Jaca Book, 2007.
- NUÑEZ DE CASTRO, I.: The Bio-Philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin. In: DEL RIEGO, H. (ed.): *God Seen by Science : Anthropic Evolution of the Universe*. Madrid : Universidad Pontificia de Comillas, 2008, pp. 99–126
- PLAŠIENKOVÁ, Z.: Interpretación de Teilhard de la teoría evolutiva como unión creativa y sus perspectivas espirituales y ecológicas. In: FLORIO, L. (ed.): *Evolución y Cristianismo : Un diálogo posible*. Buenos Aires : Dunken, 2007, pp. 189–202.
- POLKINGHORNE, J.: J. *El Dios de la esperanza y el fin del mundo*. Buenos Aires : Epifanía, 2007.
- STEFFEN, W., et al.: Planetary Boundaries : Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet. In: *Science*, 2015. DOI: 10.1126/science.1259855
- TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *Le Phénomène Humain*. Oeuvres I. Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1955.
- TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, P.: *The Future of Man*. New York : Image Books, 2004.
- UDÍAS VALLINA, A.: El pensamiento cristológico y la evolución en Teilhard de Chardin. In: *Pensamiento*, Vol. 63, Issue 238, pp. 583–604.

Dr. Lucio Florio
Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina
Av. Alicia M. de Justo 1500, Pta. Baja (C1107AFD)
Ciudad de Buenos Aires
e-mail: lflorio.18@gmail.com

Acknowledgment

to Mag. María Cristina Rodríguez Franco, by the review of the English text.