

Report on the first Conference in China on
“Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, and Process Philosophy”¹

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On November 22nd, 2024, the “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, and Process Philosophy” conference was held at Beijing Normal University by the School of Philosophy and The Center for Sciences and Humanities. Conference participants included scholars from Yale University, Institute for Postmodern Development of China, Center for Process Studies, USA, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Beijing Normal University, Minzu University of China, Beijing Institute for the Study of Catholicism and Culture, China University of Political Science and Law, Huanghe Science and Technology College.



¹ The original Chinese report was published as “德日进、贝里与过程哲学”学术座谈会在京召开,” Sino-US Times, Jan. 14, 2025, sinoustimes.com/contents/50/73206.html

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Dr. Li Meng, Associate Professor in Philosophy of Science at Beijing Normal University School of Philosophy, delivered the opening address for the conference.

First, Prof. Liu Xiaoting, Professor at Beijing Normal University School of Philosophy, surveyed the recent developments in process philosophy and the publications of Teilhard's writings in China, and reflected on the significance of the conference. Dr. Liu pointed out that the study of process philosophy should not be limited to the philosophical school of Alfred North Whitehead, but include the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Berry, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim. According to Dr. Liu, their ideas are fundamentally process-oriented and constitute important parts of process philosophy. Dr. Liu pointed out the intimate connection between Teilhard's thought and China. He noted that contemporary studies of Teilhard should focus on the relation between creation and evolution, science and religion, matter and spirit, anthropology and ethics, and Teilhard's thought and process philosophy. In addition, Dr. Liu mentioned that Berry's concept of "the ecozoic era" (in contrast to the technozoic era) also requires attention. He called for further developments in the study of Teilhard and Berry's life and thought in China.

Dr. John Grim of Yale University School of the Environment provided an overview of Teilhard's life, noting that he was born in the province of Auvergne in Southern France. From a young age, Teilhard was influenced by both religion and natural sciences. The study of matter-spirit in his early years led him to enter the Society of Jesus. During his theological training in England, Teilhard continued his love of fossil gathering. In these pursuits, he was deeply inspired by Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. After his ordination as a priest, he served in World War I as a stretch-bearer. During these years he wrote some of his most significant essays such as one on "Cosmic Life." After the war, Teilhard continued his study of the relation between religion and evolution despite opposition from his religious order. In these efforts he integrated anthropology, geology, theology, and cosmology. Eventually he took a deep dive into paleontology in China, including involvement in the discovery of Peking Man. However, because of his writings on evolution, the Catholic Church and his Jesuit Order discouraged his return to France. Thus, Teilhard lived in exile in China and eventually died in New York in 1955. Though Teilhard had a difficult life, he maintained a sense of evolutionary optimism. He was convinced that human beings exist in the dynamic unfolding of evolution. For him, reality is composed of the interactions of an integrated matter-spirit. Cosmogogenesis, namely, the emerging evolution of the universe, is pulled forward by matter-spirit, reflecting the intimate relation between the sacred and the profane, between the past and the future.

Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker from Yale University School of the Environment introduced the conference participants to the thought of Thomas Berry, who was a cultural historian and "geologian," namely, a person who reflected on the meaning of the Earth's developmental time. Berry was born in America in the southern state of North Carolina. After completing a doctorate in Western cultural history at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. in 1948, Berry visited China to study language, culture, and religion. Berry was a pioneer of ecological

civilization. He defined four major ages in human history, namely He also emphasized four wisdoms to be considered in the 21st century, namely science, history, scripture, and the wisdom of the human heart. Berry advocated for the flourishing of the planetary community and stressed the intimate relation between human beings and the Earth Community. He understood our historical mission as one of reinventing the human by means of story and shared dream experience. Dr. Tucker noted that the inspiration of the *Journey of the Universe* film and book, came from Berry's 1978 article "The New Story." In this article, Thomas drew on the evolutionary perspective of Teilhard and identified the need for a new unifying story to inspire humans. The *Journey of the Universe* project demonstrates the complex relation between human beings and the Cosmos and Earth by integrating spirituality with the scientific story of evolution. To conclude, Dr. Tucker invoked Berry's most famous phrase "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects" to stress the mutual relation and participation of all things, not as isolated individuals or objects.

Dr. Wang Zhihe, Director of the Institute for Postmodern Development of China and the Co-director of China Project at the Center for Process Studies, delivered a talk titled "Thomas Berry's Process Thought and Inspiration for Ecological Civilization." He discussed the deep affinity between the ideas of Thomas Berry and process philosophy. According to Dr. Wang, central to Berry's process thought is the emphasis on the subjectivity of the universe and the sacredness of human beings. Both are critical for the construction of ecological civilization. By stressing that "the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects," Berry moved away from mechanical materialism to consider the universe as a living organism. By doing so, Berry provided both the ontological foundation for our care for nature and the philosophical foundation for ecological civilization. While industrial civilization treats human beings as commodities to be used, ecological civilization moves beyond industrial civilization by affirming and appreciating life. Ecological civilization stresses that "human beings are a sacred expression of the universe." This implies that humans carry a unique mission in their "great work" for the healing of the Earth in all her forms and manifestations. Only when humans participate in this healing of the Earth and of themselves, will they realize their true identity. This insight shares a profound affinity with the Chinese cultural understanding of "the human being as the mind and heart of Heaven and Earth." Having studied in China, Berry deeply appreciated the ecological wisdom present in Confucianism. According to him, the value of our lives depends upon how we understand and enact our responsibility of being "the mind and heart of Heaven and Earth."

Prof. Lu Shuyuan, the laureate of the 2018 John Cobb Common Good Award, joined the conference online. He is a Distinguished Professor as well as Director of the Research Center for Eco-Culture, and Director of Constructive Postmodern Eco-Culture at Huanghe Science and Technology College. He discussed the thought of such thinkers as Roger Penrose, Alfred North Whitehead, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He pointed out that Penrose explored the connection between quantum physics and the human mind in his works, such as *The Large, the Small and*

the Human Mind, and was deeply inspired by Whitehead's cosmological ontology. According to Professor Lu, Teilhard's notion of cosmic matter-spirit resonates well with Whitehead's theory, both stressing cosmic life and human thought. Professor Lu held up a concluding remark from the film, *Journey of the Universe*, co-produced by Drs. Tucker and Grim: "We belong here, we've always belonged here...leading to a new story of the universe... Over the course of 14 billion years, hydrogen gas transformed itself into mountains, butterflies, the music of Bach, and you and me. These energies coursing through us may indeed renew the face of the Earth." According to Professor Lu, those three thinkers opened new perspectives for the study of spirituality and ecology, unveiled the profound connection between the cosmos and the human soul, and inspired us to write a new story of the universe in a positive way.

Fr. Zhao Jianming, the founder and director of Beijing Institute for the Study of Catholicism and Culture, has done extensive research on Teilhard's writings and published a translation of his *Mass on the World*. Fr. Zhao noted that Teilhard's thought integrated theology, philosophy, and science, expressing a unique wisdom. He pointed out that Teilhard provided us with inspiration for the study of human evolution, the search for self-understanding, and the construction of a community with a shared future. By studying and understanding Teilhard's thought, we can come to know ourselves and the universe, while moving toward a shared future.

Prof. Liu Huajie of Peking University Department of Philosophy is dedicated to reviving the study of natural history. Recognizing the fundamental connection between the study of natural history and philosophy, Dr. Liu stressed their ontological interconnection. He illustrated this by drawing on fractal theory, namely that micropatterns are repeated on different levels. He argued that though the study of natural history and philosophy seem to be different, their connection can be understood through dialectics. According to Dr. Liu, intellectual history and environmental history are the two major trajectories for the development of human history. They influence each other on different levels. Dr. Liu pointed out that the questions discussed in Teilhard's 1945 speech "Life and the Planet" and Dr. Donald Worster's 2024 book *Planet of Desire: Earth in the Time of Humans*, though reflecting different perspectives, are intimately connected. The human spirit has an impact on millennia of historical processes. In addition, Dr. Liu emphasized the importance of environmental history, noting that environmental issues, such as geographical changes and natural disasters, could also have long-term impact on history. Therefore, Dr. Liu noted that we must understand dichotomy in a more ontological level and integrate intellectual history with environmental history, so to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the development of human history.

Dr. Lu Feng, a professor at Tsinghua University in the Department of Philosophy spoke highly of Teilhard's thought. He pointed out that the erasure of "the Real" is a grievous mistake of modern thought, leading to a loss of respect and arrogance. Dr. Lu acknowledged the significance of the concept of "the Real" in religious thought, considering it critical for maintaining humility and prudence in our approach to technology. According to Dr. Lu, while stressing the importance of religion, we must also caution religio-political oppression, especially

its impact on scholars' freedom of thought. He promoted health, peace, democracy, and law in developing a culture of respect.

Prof. Xie Aihua at Minzu University of China School of Philosophy and Religious Studies shared his insights on the mediation between religion and science by referring to the thought of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He noted that such mediation is no easy task, as it concerns the nature of humanity, reality, and faith. According to Prof. Xie, the pursuit of scientific development must be accompanied by careful reflection and avoid the tendency to approach humanity through simplistic optimism or pessimism.

Prof. Zhang Xiuhua at China University of Political Science and Law School of Marxism presented on her newly published book *History, Praxis, and Process: The Commonality between Marx and Whitehead* and its novel interpretation of process philosophy. From the perspective of praxis, Prof. Zhang discussed concepts shared by Marx and Whitehead, including time, process, and history. She expanded the field of Marxist studies by demonstrating the intimate connection between the two thinkers and the vitality of process thought.

Noting the similarity between two French writers – Marcel Proust and Gustave Flaubert – and Teilhard, Dr. Xu Kefei at Beijing Normal University School of Philosophy pointed out that all three of them drew inspiration from their country life and sought to integrate science with literature or religion. They not only demonstrated the contemporary developments and challenges of humanitarianism and humanism but also provided inspirations for the establishment of a new cosmology that connects anthropology, theology, and ecology.

Dr. Wan Zhaoyuan at Beijing Normal University School of Philosophy shared with the participants his recent experience attending lectures and think tanks at Istanbul and Brussels. He noted that the idea of harmony and wholeness has yet to be sufficiently recognized by top think tanks. Given this situation, the Hungarian embassy's think tank proposed to incorporate Ervin László's system thinking into the vision for European cooperation. Dr. Wan recalled his online meeting with Ervin, where they discussed Ervin's relation with the Bahá'í Faith. He pointed out that Bahá'í ideas of progressive revelation and the trusteeship of the natural world share a profound affinity with Teilhard's thought and provided new resources for the development of ecological philosophy and process philosophy.

Demonstrating the intimate connection between Teilhard's thought and the Renaissance, Dr. Wang Zheng at China University of Political Science and Law School of Marxism noted that Teilhard's approach to religion and science is similar to Italian Renaissance thinkers, such as Giordano Bruno. According to Dr. Wang, Teilhard's "Omega Point" is intimately related to the Catholic theology of redemption.

The director of the Luoyang Cobb Workstation on Ecological Civilization and Chairman of Taigu Education Group, Ding Hongwei, shared the story of collaboratively establishing the Luoyang Fellow workshop named after the eco-sage and renowned process philosopher John

Cobb, Jr. According to Ding, the Workstation focuses on both scholarly exchange and ecological civilization praxis. It will utilize its connection with the Songshan Global Geology Research Museum to promote both educational theory and praxis for ecological civilization. In addition, the Workstation will include Longmen Aquarium as a site to educate the public about ecological protection, the environment, and the ocean. It will hold international and national academic conferences and promote the idea of ecological civilization. It seeks to popularize and deepen ecological civilization by passing on tradition and collaboratively exploring future possibilities.

The conference brought together diverse topics and perspectives. The candid conversation between conference participants serves a promising beginning for the ongoing study of Teilhard and Berry in China.