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Teilhard, the Six Propositions, and Human Origins: A Response

Abstract:

Recent archival research has uncovered material that usefully explains why the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was required to remain in China for so long, despite assenting to the Six Propositions. However, the context in Rome, existing narrative evidence, and aspects of the archival evidence make it more likely than not that the Holy Office had a role in his silencing. Proposition 4 advocated monogenism, whereas Teilhard was developing a monophyletic understanding of human origins, which is consistent with recent attempts to situate Adam and Eve within an evolutionary account of these. The content of Proposition 4 exceeded existing magisterial teaching and requiring Teilhard's subscription to it suppressed legitimate theological debate.

Keywords: Christianity; evolution; original sin; origin of life; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Until recently, very little was known of the content or circumstances of the Six Propositions that the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was forced to sign in 1925. Paul Bentley and I are delighted that our article (Grumett and Bentley 2018) has prompted further research on the cooperation of the Jesuit curia and the Holy Office in Teilhard's later silencing in the 1930s, and that the archives of both the Jesuit curia and the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) have made additional new material available. It is now clear why Teilhard remained in exile in China for so long, and that staying there was not his own free decision.

In this response, I shall first address two issues that are important for understanding the Six Propositions and their impact on Teilhard. This is the likely respective roles of the Jesuit curia and the Holy Office in Teilhard's silencing, and the legitimacy of requiring Teilhard's assent to the Fourth Proposition. I shall then demonstrate that, by the later 1930s, Teilhard was more receptive to monogenism than in 1925, although he preferred monophyletism.

The Six Propositions, the Jesuit Curia, and the Holy Office

In our article, Bentley and I appraise the actions of key players and their contributions to the outcome of the investigation of Teilhard. These include Fr Włodimir Ledóchowski, who was the Jesuit superior general; the Holy Office, which was the Church's doctrinal authority and led by its secretary, the British-born Cardinal Raphaël Merry del Val; and Pope Pius XI. We identify Ledóchowski as the key actor in Teilhard's coercive silencing. Citing narrative evidence from Fr René d'Ouince and other biographers of Teilhard, we also suggest that, in the investigation, the Holy Office was the "prime mover, if not the proximate mover" (Grumett and Bentley 2018, 319, also 305–6).

In his response to our article, Kenneth Kemp (2019) reports that he has been unable to locate any archival evidence of the Holy Office's involvement. Receipt of Teilhard's "Note on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin" (1922), which precipitated the events leading to the Six Propositions, is not, he relates, recorded in its *Minutarii*. Moreover, Kemp refers to two letters from Ledóchowski to Fr Jean-Baptiste Costa de Beauregard, who was Teilhard's provincial superior, of December 18, 1924 (which we also cite) and June 29, 1925 (which we do not cite), as evidence that the Jesuit curia believed the Holy Office to be unaware of the "Note." In both these letters, Ledóchowski presents the reporting of either Teilhard or his texts to the Holy Office as something that might happen, perhaps even imminently, but had not already happened.

The absence of archival documents does not by itself refute the narrative evidence of Fr René d'Ouince and others whom we cite. These narrative sources date from within adult living memory of the events described, and their authors had direct contact with people close to the events. Although some sources, especially more recent ones, are inevitably derivative, we do not refer to those. D'Ouince was a significant Parisian Jesuit, teaching at the Institut Catholique and directing the journal *Études*. Also the superior of the rue de Sèvres residence, he was well connected and enjoyed the confidence of senior church figures (Gensac 1985). He is sufficiently sure of the truth of his claims that he emphasizes his divergence in some details from an earlier account (D'Ouince 1970, 106–07). There need to be strong grounds for calling his evidence and that of others into question. During the 1960s, the Society of Jesus underwent huge liberalization, and by the end of this decade its members had no reason to promote an account of events that minimized its role in Teilhard's silencing.

Because of the interconnected nature of Rome and its ecclesiastical institutions and politics, it is likely that there were ongoing informal interactions between staff of the Jesuit curia and the Holy Office. The Jesuit curia was, and is, located in Rome, and the Holy Office, which is

now known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was also situated there. During Ledóchowski's generalship the Society of Jesus was growing in numbers and power and its members were prominent in Rome, its congregations, and its institutions. In the 1920s, finally redressing the 1870 confiscations of its city properties by the government of the Italian Republic, a new curial headquarters was established, from which Ledóchowski was rarely absent, just outside the Vatican (Martina 2010, 54–6; Ingot 2004, 241).

Discussing the text of the Six Propositions, Kemp usefully reports that the earliest copy he has been able to locate is in a letter of April 2, 1925, from Fr Gabriel Huarte, who taught dogmatic theology at the Gregorian University, to Ledóchowski. Huarte, Kemp explains, had previously been asked by Fr Henry Carvajal, the Jesuit secretary, to review Teilhard's "Note." However, Kemp has been unable to locate any request from Ledóchowski to Huarte for the Propositions, simply stating that, after receiving the reviews of Teilhard's "Note" from Augustin Bea and Henry Pinard de la Boullaye, Ledóchowski "seems next to have gone back to Huarte on the matter." This is a significant omission from the comprehensive minuting and paper trails that Kemp's approach normally seems to require, especially given that Huarte, as Kemp describes, provides not only the texts of the Propositions but directions on the form of assent that Teilhard should be required to make and on the actions to be taken should he fail to assent. It seems reasonable for a Jesuit professor to advise his superior general, on request, on theological matters, but strange for him also to pronounce on disciplinary process and sanctions. However, if Huarte were acting as an intermediary for the Holy Office, or at its request, the content of his communication becomes easier to account for. Receiving the Propositions from Huarte, rather than from the Holy Office, would have allowed the measures against Teilhard to continue to be viewed as an internal Jesuit matter resolved by Ledóchowski's free exercise of his authority, rather than by Vatican intervention.

The question of whether Pope Pius XI encouraged or endorsed the measures against Teilhard must ultimately remain open. During his teenage years studying at the Theresianum in Vienna, Ledóchowski had acted as a page boy to the Austro-Hungarian empress Elisabeth (Slattery 1943, 2) and so had a model for running his own court, in which similar deference and obedience were required. Yet in common with other popes before and since, Pius held regular private and unminuted meetings with the superiors of religious orders and high-ranking officials, such as the secretary of the Holy Office. The relationship between Pius and the "black pope" Ledóchowski, as the Jesuit superior general is sometimes known, was particularly close (Muckermann 1973, 628–36; Ingot 2004, 243), and there is no means of knowing what passed

between them. However, it is reasonable to suppose that, during their numerous private conversations, controversial Jesuits were discussed alongside other matters, such as the Society's global expansion. Furthermore, because Pius was himself the prefect of the Holy Office, any directions issued by him, or influence exerted by him, amounted to directions or influence from the Holy Office.

Kemp questions the reading that Bentley and I offer of the December 18, 1924 letter from Ledóchowski to Costa. We write that Ledóchowski "threatened that if Teilhard continued to defend his hypotheses with such obstinacy, he would be expelled from the Jesuit order and denounced by the Holy Office" (Grumett and Bentley 2018, 310). Kemp quotes the original letter, in which Ledóchowski legalistically states that Teilhard's continued defence of his position would necessarily entail that he was a heretic, and that the only option then open to Ledóchowski and Costa would be his expulsion and denunciation to (sic) the Holy Office. The main difference between our respective presentations of this letter appears to be how far we hold individuals within a hierarchical institution responsible for their actions. Ledóchowski was at liberty to determine his own response to Teilhard, and his suggestion that only one course of action might remain available to him shows that he was more comfortable exercising power than accepting personal responsibility. However, there is a possible explanation for his approach. Because the Fourth Proposition was nowhere formally defined in church teaching, the Propositions as a whole exceeded what orthodoxy required; had Teilhard refused to sign them, his refusal could not therefore have been viewed as signifying heresy. The most likely explanation for Ledóchowski's insistence that the Propositions in their totality in fact expressed doctrinal orthodoxy was that they had been endorsed by, or had originated from, the Holy Office, which was the body responsible for defining doctrine. Kemp also queries our description of Teilhard being denounced "by" the Holy Office rather than "to" the Holy Office. The two seem practically synonymous: had the Jesuit curia denounced Teilhard to the Holy Office, the almost certain outcome would have been his denunciation—or, more strictly, condemnation—by the Holy Office.

In conclusion, because of ongoing personal contacts between Ledóchowski and the Pope, and those replicated at lower levels between other Jesuits and Vatican officials, it cannot be assumed that, if a matter had not been formally reported to the Holy Office, the Holy Office had no knowledge of it. Neither can it be accepted that the only means of influencing a situation was via a written document. Moreover, previously published narrative evidence from credible sources, and a key gap in the archival material that leaves open the question of why Huarte

collated the Six Propositions and on what authority, makes it more likely than not that, in 1925, the Holy Office had a role in Teilhard's silencing.

The Fourth Proposition

As Paul Bentley and I discuss, Teilhard experienced few difficulties subscribing to five of the Six Propositions. However, Proposition 4, that "the whole human race takes its origin from one protoparent, Adam," caused him great difficulties. The statement, introduced with the word "therefore," is followed by the parenthesized acknowledgement that "this proposition is nowhere explicitly defined; but is clearly implied by the preceding three" (Grumett and Bentley 2018, 313–14).

Kemp disputes our assessment that requiring Teilhard to subscribe to a statement that was not formal church doctrine amounted to an illegitimate exercise of power. The first of his two grounds for objecting is the nature of ecclesial authority. In view of his position and influence, it was reasonable to require Teilhard to assent to doctrines that the magisterium had formally defined, and he was willing to offer such assent. This was because the magisterium, like church councils, does not seek to define doctrines exhaustively. Rather, it defines key propositions that function as boundaries to demarcate a doctrinal topic about which free theological debate may legitimately take place. For example, during the eighteenth century, when controversy raged on the fundamental doctrinal question of the relation between grace and nature, the magisterium did not promulgate any teaching in favour of the dominant "pure nature" position, despite coming under sustained pressure to do so (Lubac 2000, 266–76). Whether one proposition follows, or does not follow, from another is the stuff of vigorous theological debate, in which different positions may be adopted and defended. Because such debate maintains the Church's intellectual life, which equips it to counter hostile and sceptical critics, the whole Church, and its mission to the world, benefits from it. When any person or authority other than the magisterium seeks to define doctrine more restrictively, or to require assent to a more restrictive definition, they are usurping magisterial authority and undermining the Church's intellectual life and apologetics.

The second of Kemp's grounds for disputing our assessment that it was illegitimate to require Teilhard to assent to Proposition 4 is the relation between faith, science, and history. Kemp contends that there is no clear distinction between doctrinal and scientific propositions because their subject matter is inseparable. However, Teilhard viewed the two as distinguished

by different sources of authority, which are revelation and empirical research respectively, and by different kinds of research activity, which are theology in the case of doctrine, and observation and theorizing in the case of science. Returning to the Six Propositions, the subject of Propositions 1–3 was Adam and his sin. These propositions were theological, being grounded in revelation and not open to empirical verification or falsification. The subject of Proposition 4, in contrast, was the human race, including people living today, and its origin. This subject was certainly open to scientific investigation and debate. A noted palaeontologist, Teilhard had already contributed twenty years of his life to these and would go on to dedicate a further twenty years to them.

As even Kemp acknowledges, that theologians should not seek to pronounce on matters within the domain of empirical science was affirmed by Pope Leo XIII, quoting Saint Augustine, in his 1893 encyclical letter *Providentissimus Deus*, which constitutes magisterial teaching. Against this, Kemp does not cite any source, authoritative or otherwise, preferring to rely on his own opinion. His point that historical questions may contain both scientific and theological aspects is well made. However, Teilhard was addressing questions precisely at this interface. Their understanding was hindered by his silencing because this contributed to the foreclosing of informed scholarly and public debate. As will next be shown, in his contribution to this he took traditional doctrinal claims seriously.

Teilhard and Monophyletic Human Origins

Teilhard's earliest published text on human origins was an encyclopaedia entry. In this, he acknowledged the tensions between church teaching and the findings of philosophy and the sciences on the origins of the human soul and the human body (Teilhard 1911, 505; Becker 1987, 185–228; Kropf 1980, 234–6). The biblical account of humankind as descended from an individual man directly created by God, Teilhard recognized, called the evolutionary understanding of human origins into question (1911, 512–13). However, he also maintained, as does Kemp, that the empirical study of the world cannot conclusively refute dogma. Monogenism, despite its problems, is grounded in an important truth: that human life is not merely a function, nor a development, of inferior life forms (1911, 505, 513–14). Human life, Teilhard contends, is so distinctive from other life forms that it cannot be understood without reference to the transcendent and the supernatural.

Proposition 4 asserted a version of monogenism: that Adam was the first parent of the entire human race. Paul Bentley and I describe why Teilhard considered that scientific research had refuted this proposition. For this reason, Teilhard could not subscribe to monogenism as Proposition 4 presented it. Moreover, Bentley and I also recount that, in response to the 1950 encyclical of Pope Pius XII, *Humani generis*, Teilhard asserted that it was in principle impossible to verify either monogenism or polygenism using scientific methodology, because the fossil record does not distinguish individuals from populations (Teilhard 1950). Scientists should therefore focus, Teilhard suggests, on the debate between monophyletism or polyphyletism, that is, on whether human life has issued from a single phylum or branch, or from multiple phyla or branches.

From a scientific perspective, Teilhard regards the question of whether humans are descended from a single couple, or from numerous couples, as part of a larger question in biology about whether origins are single or plural. He raises this in part two of *The Human Phenomenon*, when discussing the appearance of cellular life. Cells, he writes, may be pictured as arising out of complex molecules at either a single point or a small number of points, and rapidly multiplying. Alternatively, cells may be viewed as appearing from conditions of initial instability, which generate almost simultaneous similar appearances at numerous different points. Teilhard writes:

Through the entire history of terrestrial organisms, we encounter fundamentally the same problem at the origin of each zoological group: is there a single stem? or a bundle of parallel lines? And just because beginnings always escape our direct vision, time after time we experience the same difficulty in opting for one or the other of two almost equally plausible hypotheses. (Teilhard 1999 [1940], 53)

Yet the choice between these monophyletic and polyphyletic accounts of origins, Teilhard suggests, is only apparent, with the difference being in emphasis. Just as one monophyletic stem must have included diverse strands, so multiple phylogenetic stems needed to possess the capacity to unfold into new forms.

Later, in part three of *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard addresses specifically human origins, stating that the science “seems to speak out decisively in favour of *monophyletism*” (1999 [1940], 128). In support of this view, he identifies distinctive biological traits, which seem fundamental but are in fact secondary and accidental, that humans share with some other

species. One is tritubercular teeth, which enable the upper and lower jaws to mesh together, which he traces to tiny mammals in the mid-Jurassic era (1999 [1940], 79–80). These mammals could also, Teilhard adds, be termed septem-vertebrates, because, by unexpected yet significant coincidence, all possess seven cervical vertebrae regardless of the length of the neck to which these give structure. Another distinctive trait is tetrapodism, the four-limbed walking ability, which he traces from the reptiles of the Secondary (Mesozoic) era (1999 [1940], 80–2). To have become universalized, Teilhard contends, these traits must have unfolded from a “highly individualized and therefore extremely localized” evolutionary node (1999 [1940], 128). He downplays the role of convergence in contributing to this universalization, suggesting that any role it had was limited to evolutionary strands that were already very close. In view of the specific traits he discusses, as well as humankind’s homogeneity and specialization, Teilhard writes: “I would be inclined to minimize as much as possible the effects of parallelism on the initial formation of the human branch.” (ibid.) The human species “more nearly than any other species represents”, he continues, “the thickening and success of a single stem among all others.”

With respect to human origins, Teilhard thus adduces scientific evidence in support of monophyletism over polyphyletism. Yet he states in the same place that the “science of the human being can affirm nothing directly for or against monogenism (a single initial couple).” Monogenism, he writes, “seems to elude science by its very nature” (Teilhard 1999 [1940], 127; discussed in Mooney 1966, 224, 243–4). The “presence and movements of a unique couple” would be “imperceptible and indecipherable” to palaeontologists. “In *this interval*”, Teilhard continues, “there is room for everything that a transexperimental source of knowledge might require.” The quest for origins is necessarily inconclusive. Memorably summing up his position, Teilhard writes: “*In the eyes of science*, therefore, which from so far away can only see things as a whole, the ‘first human’ is, and can only be, *a crowd*” (1999 [1940], 126–7).

Why does Teilhard favour a monophyletic account of human origins but remain agnostic between monophyletic and polyphyletic accounts of cellular origins? The answer is that he regards evolution as increasingly directed and self-directed as it approaches the point at which human life is born. He identifies this life with thought and reflective capacity (1999 [1940], 108–29), which will be addressed further below.

In closing his discussion, Kemp suggests that recent scientific findings are now being shown to be compatible with monogenesis as conceived in the classic scholastic terms of the Six Propositions, in ways that do not undermine the doctrine of original sin. As examples he cites his

own work and articles by two other researchers. How close is each of these positions to Teilhard's own?

In his own account, Kemp accepts that human unity may be "conceived in various ways and common descent from an original group is not the most plausible account of that unity" (Kemp 2011, 227). Other possibilities, he continues, include genetics, culture, language, and unity of goal, which is a "better candidate for the source of unity than is unity of biological descent." Teilhard would readily accept this proposal; indeed, sin seems to be more readily associated with disunity than with unity, whereas unity is an outcome of subsequent redemption by Christ. For a traditionalist, this might seem like a concession. However, Kemp's overriding objective is to secure the doctrine of original sin. His own defence of the doctrine is based on a distinction between parental descent and ancestral descent. Whereas Proposition 4 defended parental descent, Kemp advocates ancestral descent. All humans may be descended from Adam and Eve in the sense that "all human beings have the original couple among their ancestors, not that every ancestral line in each individual's family tree leads back to a single couple" (Kemp 2011, 232). This original couple, Kemp hypothesizes, were the two members of a population of about 5,000 hominids whom God endowed with rational souls and preternatural gifts. The couple sinned and then, by reproducing, disseminated both their rationality and their sin through the entire population.

This understanding of Adam and Eve as common ancestors but not common parents, despite being presented as theologically conservative, contradicts both Proposition 4 and *Humani generis* (ch. 37), in which Adam is unambiguously described as the first parent. Although the assumption that the first human couple were chosen from a small population is monophyletic, from Teilhard's viewpoint this solution brings the significant problem of assuming a hominid condition from which death and suffering are absent, rather than as being conditions of biological life.

Kemp also cites the work of S. Joshua Swamidass, who, like Teilhard, assesses the implications of the lack of a firm evidence trail leading back to the first humans. However, the gaps he discusses are not paleontological but genetic. Swamidass (2018) explains that, although the genetic evidence for ancestry reduces to zero through many generations, this does not mean that there is no ancestry. He therefore shifts the discussion from genetics to genealogy, which does not require a genetic record. Swamidass proposes, in common with Kemp, that Adam and Eve are universal common ancestors from whom all humans are descended. However, in contrast with Kemp he posits that there are many "adams" and "eves," whom he

defines as nothing more than universal common ancestors (Swamidass 2018, 20), with two of these named Adam and Eve for the purposes of the Biblical narrative. Also like Kemp, Swamidass assumes that Adam and Eve's descendants bred with other biologically compatible beings, although unlike Kemp, suggests that they simultaneously arose in multiple world regions, and that parentage spread as a result of rare but highly significant migration. Teilhard also fully recognizes the challenges of evidence gaps, although views these as grounds for conserving elements of traditional teaching and so concedes far less to polygenism.

Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco (2018) is the third and final source commended by Kemp. Austriaco's focus is not ancestry but the shared human essence, which he identifies with language, which he supposes to be, in principle, historically traceable to a first language user. On his account, Adam is this person. Importantly, Austriaco sees language as significant not primarily because it aids communication but because it allows the abstract mapping of the world and, as Chomsky argued, enables thought. As has been seen, thought is also the fundamental human capacity for Teilhard, and he is alive to its modern, technologically-aided intensifications. He associates the birth of thought with Neanderthaloid brain expansion, cave industry, and burial (1999 [1940], 135), but argues that thought became truly reflective only with *Homo sapiens*, who did not just apply it to survival and reproduction but, through art, recorded their capacity for observation, fantasy, and joyful creativity (1999 [1940], 139). Austriaco, in contrast, attributes linguistic capacity restrictively to *Sapiens*, whom he views as a distinct natural kind of relatively advanced human, which is distinguishable from earlier *Homo sapiens* by an "additional suite of behavioural and cognitive traits" (2018, 10–11). Although, with Teilhard, he identifies the ability to think as the human essence, Austriaco closely associates thought with language. Teilhard, in contrast, connects the rise of language with the later, socialized phase of thought (1999 [1940], 155). Moreover, although Kemp cites Austriaco in his support, the implications of his theory for understanding sin are unstated.

Conclusion

The common theme in this response is origins. Neither Bentley and I, nor Kemp, in his valuable contribution to Teilhard studies, has conclusively established where the Six Propositions came from. However, we have each reviewed the existing and new evidence and have each offered our conclusions. In this article I have also reflected on where authority comes from, suggesting that, in the modern world, close and serious attention must be given to empirical scientific

evidence. This cannot and should not be discounted simply on the grounds that it contradicts inherited interpretations of dogmatic teaching. For Teilhard, an important point was that the magisterium, in prescribing doctrine, intentionally allowed some interpretive diversity in theological debate. The most important aspect of this response, however, is where human life came from. Teilhard opposed a monogenetic account of human origins, as does Kemp, and therefore experienced great difficulty subscribing to Proposition 4. Ultimately, also like Kemp, he favoured a monophyletic account of human origins, in which human beings issued out of a single evolutionary stem rather than from multiple stems.

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