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Patrice Boudignon, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin : sa vie, son oeuvre, sa réflexion

Citation for published version:

Grumett, D 2009, 'Patrice Boudignon, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin : sa vie, son oeuvre, sa réflexion', *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 300-302. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9418.2008.00424_3.x

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/j.1467-9418.2008.00424_3.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9418.2008.00424_3.x)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Reviews in Religion and Theology

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Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: sa vie, son oeuvre, sa réflexion [Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: his life, work and reflection], Patrice Boudignon, Paris: Cerf, 2008 (978-2-204-08570-0), 431 pp., pb € 45

The French theologian and palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a seasoned traveller acutely aware of living in an age of global interconnectedness. Born in the Auvergne in 1881, he joined the Jesuits aged seventeen and pursued formation in various of the society's colleges in France and England. Much of his later life was spent in China and his final years in New York, where he died in 1955. Unlike many people today, he found time to reflect on the implications of his citizenship of the world during lengthy sea passages around the globe, and left traces of these reflections in his substantial written correspondence. This biography draws primarily on that correspondence in order to portray the man and his ideas through his personal friendships that in many cases were sustained over several decades.

Boudignon draws on Teilhard's extensive published correspondence which he complements with a small amount of archival material. Several collections of letters have been published in recent years, including those to his secretary Jeanne Mortier, the geologist Christophe Gaudefroy, and fellow paleontologists Henri Breuil and Marcellin Boule. Boudignon has therefore had access to a wider range of sources than Teilhard's classic biographers Claude Cuénot, Robert Speaight, and Mary and Ellen Lukas, and this is displayed in his even treatment of various different parts of Teilhard's life.

The most personally illuminating letters published recently have been those exchanged with the American sculptor Lucile Swan, whom Teilhard met in Peking in 1929. Divorced five years previously, Lucile developed a passionate Platonic friendship with Teilhard, who fascinated her. For his part, it was in Lucile that Pierre experienced most fully the power of what he had earlier described in characteristically abstract terms as the 'eternal feminine'. Such a close friendship between a Jesuit and a Protestant woman unused to the requirements of clerical celibacy was not always easy and sometimes provoked the rivalry of other admirers.

The study conveniently sifts and gathers into one place much of Teilhard's extensive published correspondence, combining quotation with exposition and including a useful lexicon of some of his correspondents. Some illuminating perspectives are offered on his critique of the Vichy regime, the dissemination and publication of his works, and his election to the Académie des sciences. Also, Boudignon presents a far more emotionally attuned biography than those previously available, in which data and concepts have abounded even though the studies were penned by direct acquaintances. He evokes the routes and destinations of a past age: packet steamers from Marseille to Alexandria then onwards to Tientsin via Suez, Aden and the horn of India; the Trans-Siberian Railway from Paris to Peking, passing through Moscow and the Gobi Desert; transatlantic liners crossing from Le Havre to New York in the final years before the launch of scheduled commercial flights. China could still be viewed as a primitive backwater that was unlikely ever to develop.

Yet readers wishing to discover how Teilhard's theology was shaped by his correspondence and correspondents will be disappointed. Some of his key works are summarized and quoted at length, but this will be of limited use to readers of English to whom translations have long been available. Selections from the letters deal largely with biography, whereas the key published correspondence with Maurice Blondel is not even cited in the bibliography. Moreover, limited use is made of the substantial collection of letters exchanged with Auguste Valensin, Bruno de Solages and Henri de Lubac, which would have been an essential source for examining theological development and influences. As a result, Teilhard appears more detached from the theological mainstream than he in fact was. This impression is reinforced by the reprinting at the end of the book of the 1962 monitum warning of the dangers of his oeuvre, even though popes following John XXIII have spoken more warmly of his theology.

Teilhard's extensive correspondence provides a lived testimony to his belief in the relationality of existence, which he saw as increasing, not diminishing, in the twentieth century. He described this as due to a 'tangential' energy that draws humans out of themselves to touch (literally) another. By providing a window into some of Teilhard's many own relationships, the study shows how his sometimes diffuse speculations informed his pastoral concern and concrete hope for the world.

Boudignon estimates that Teilhard despatched between two and three thousand letters during his lifetime, but in the present day, e-mails sent hurriedly through the ether leave little trace. It is therefore unlikely that such a biography could in future be attempted of a theologian living today. This gives all the more reason to appreciate an engaging literary treatment of a theologian whose reflection continues both to inspire and provoke.

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814 words