



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s Importance in the Development of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s Concept of the “Civilisation de l’universel”

Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) refers well over thirty times in the third volume of his essays entitled Liberté to the French theologian and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. (1881-1955). Although critical studies on Senghor and Teilhard de Chardin do mention in passing that Senghor admired Teilhard de Chardin’s theological writings including his acknowledged masterpieces Le Milieu divin and Le Phénomène humain, they have examined in detail neither possible reasons for Senghor’s extraordinary admiration for Teilhard de Chardin’s ideas on theological and philosophical issues nor his extensive use of Teilhard de Chardin’s insights in order to link the multi-faceted concept of “la négritude,” which Senghor and his friend and fellow poet and statesman Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) created in the 1930’s while they were studying together in Paris, with universal human experiences that Senghor called “la civilisation de l’universel.”

A comparison of their lives reveals that despite very real differences between them Teilhard de Chardin and Senghor had a great deal in common. Although Teilhard de Chardin was born in 1881 in Auvergne and Senghor twenty-five years later in the small Senegalese village of Joal, they both remained loyal to their Catholic faith through their long lives, no matter how much suffering they endured. His Catholic faith enabled

Senghor to remain sane during his nineteen months of brutal mistreatment as a prisoner of war in a Nazi stalag and after the death of his beloved son Philippe Maguilen Senghor at the age of 22 in 1981. Although Teilhard de Chardin was a faithful Jesuit from his entrance into the Society of Jesus in 1899 until his death on Easter Sunday 1955, the Vatican ordered him in 1924 not to publish anything on philosophy or theology and this order was never lifted during his lifetime. He regretted that his religious orthodoxy was not properly understood by European Catholic theologians. He kept writing without knowing if anyone would ever read the many books on spirituality that he wrote between 1924 and his death in 1955. In 1951, his Jesuit superiors in France consulted a specialist in Canon Law and told him that if he gave his manuscripts to a lay person, who was Jeanne-Marie Mortier, she could photocopy them and circulate them during Teilhard de Chardin's lifetime and then publish them after his death. Canon Law permits a priest to give his personal property to a lay person, who is then free to do whatever he or she wants to do with this property. In this way, Father Teilhard de Chardin could remain a faithful and obedient priest. Right after Teilhard de Chardin's death on April 10, 1955, Madame Mortier persuaded very eminent scientists, professors, and writers to serve on the "Comité Scientifique" and "Comité Général" that assisted her in editing and annotating the thirteen volumes that the Éditions du Seuil published between 1955 and 1966. The only black African to serve on either committee was Léopold Sédar Senghor whom Madame Mortier identified as an "Ancien Secrétaire d'État à la Présidence du Conseil, Député du Sénégal."¹ By 1955 Senghor was already a well-known poet whose greatly admired collections of poems *Chants d'ombre* (1945) and *Hosties noires* (1948) had been published in Paris. She could have described Senghor as an "homme de

lettres,” a description that she used for the famous French novelist and art critic André Malraux (1901-1976) who also assisted Madame Mortier in editing Teilhard de Chardin’s posthumously published works (Le Milieu divin 4). The terms that she used to identify Senghor stressed his involvement in politics, his Senegalese origin, and the fact that he lived and worked in exile, far from his native land. As Madame Mortier indicated, Senghor served in the government of Edgar Faure from March 1, 1955 to February 1, 1956. Another link between Senghor and Teilhard de Chardin was their rejection of the racist French belief in “la mission civilisatrice de la France,” which French leaders used during the colonial period in a vain effort to justify their colonization of numerous countries outside France. Countries such as Senegal did not need to be “civilized” by the French. Both Teilhard de Chardin and Senghor rejected a Eurocentric view of the world.

In an essay published in 1985, the Chilean scholar Arturo de Andraca wrote on “Teilhard’s exile” and pointed out that Father Teilhard de Chardin spent very little time between 1924 and 1955 in his native country of France.² Arturo de Andraca does not mention, however, that Teilhard de Chardin was forced to study and teach outside of France between 1901 and 1911 while he was preparing for the priesthood. An intolerant French government ordered the closure in 1901 of French seminaries for religious orders. French Jesuits had no choice but to transfer their French seminarians first to Jersey in the Channel Islands and eventually to Hastings in England where Teilhard de Chardin was ordained in 1911 after having taught in a Jesuit high school in Egypt from 1905 until 1908. Like Senghor, Teilhard de Chardin lived in exile as a student and later as a paleontologist who was involved in some of the most important anthropological

discoveries during the first six decades of the twentieth century. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Senghor spent more than half of his life in exile, first from 1928 until 1960, when he became the first President of Senegal, and then from 1981 until his death in Verson, France on December 20, 2001. After his retirement from politics on December 31, 1980, Senghor and his wife Colette moved to France so that his successor Abdou Diouf (1935-) would be free to develop his own policies without interference from his predecessor. Teilhard de Chardin also died in exile. He died in New York City and was buried in the Jesuit cemetery on the grounds of the Jesuit novitiate in St. Andrew-on-Hudson, New York. When he came to New York in 1961 to give a speech at the United Nations, Senghor went to that Jesuit cemetery to say a prayer at the grave of his spiritual guide, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.³ This was the only personal part of his one trip to the United States. His other two formal events in America were a visit to the White House, where Jacqueline Kennedy served as the French interpreter for Presidents Kennedy and Senghor, and to Harvard University because President Kennedy, a Harvard graduate, suggested that professors at Harvard could make useful recommendations to him for improving higher education in Senegal. Senghor recognized in Teilhard de Chardin a kindred spirit whose intellectual and religious development had also taken place away from his homeland. In exile, both Senghor and Teilhard de Chardin came to appreciate the universality of human experiences. The reasons for their exiles were different. Senghor came to France to undertake university studies. Teilhard de Chardin's Jesuit supervisors wisely encouraged him to work far from France because leading French bishops were adamantly opposed to his creative and original insights into the nature of

Catholicism. While he was in exile, local Jesuits looked out for him and gave him the tranquility necessary for effective research and writing.

Both Senghor and Teilhard de Chardin were clearly not Eurocentric in their understanding of the world. They were both faithful Catholics and they realized that etymologically “Catholic” means “universal.” Teilhard de Chardin began his archaeological career while he was a Jesuit scholastic teaching physics and chemistry in a Jesuit high school in Cairo. In the Egyptian desert, he discovered numerous fossils that enriched scientific knowledge of prehistoric Egypt and are now in Egyptian museums. His doctoral dissertation, which he defended in 1922, dealt with fossils in France, but he soon greatly expanded interest well beyond European prehistory. He later made extremely significant discoveries such as *Sinanthropus* skulls in 1929 that enabled him to conclude that *Sinanthropus pekinensis* in 1929 was the oldest then known human fossil. He argued that human life had begun in China. In the early 1950’s, despite his declining health, Father Teilhard de Chardin undertook exhausting digs in South Africa and Zambia. Fossils that he found there persuaded him to revise his earlier opinion and to conclude that that human life had begun in Africa. His insight was later confirmed when Louis and Mary Leakey demonstrated that human fossils for *Homo habilis*, which they uncovered in Tanzania in 1962, were older than any other remnants of human beings. Teilhard de Chardin was right. Human life had, in fact, started in Africa. This delighted Senghor. In a speech that he gave in 1967 to open a scholarly conference on African prehistory held at the University of Dakar, President Senghor affirms that it is now

“scientifiquement établi” (Senghor, III, 159) that Africa has an ancient and rich culture that has enriched world culture. With two references to Teilhard de Chardin in this same speech, Senghor affirms that Africa is “un continent béni des dieux.” (Senghor, III, 160).⁴

This brief summary of the careers of Teilhard de Chardin and Senghor reveals striking similarities between these two important twentieth-century thinkers. Teilhard de Chardin and Senghor both affirmed that ordinary daily events reveal God’s presence and the mysteries of His creation and His love for all people, no matter where they may live. As a paleontologist who discovered extremely old fossils and then observed how earlier fossils evolved into more recent fossils, Teilhard de Chardin also believed in the spiritual evolution of believers who come to identify more and more closely with God as they continue on their lifelong voyage of spiritual growth toward the perfection that he called “the Omega point.”⁵ Teilhard de Chardin develops his understanding of our personal spirituality most eloquently in *Le Milieu divin* that he wrote in the late 1920’s in China, but it was not published until 1957. Near the beginning of this book, Teilhard de Chardin affirms that it is wrong to say, as deists do, that the world was created in a distant past by God and that creation is not an-ongoing process. Teilhard de Chardin, however, explains:

We used to perhaps imagine that Creation had been over for a long time.
Error, it is still going on, and in the highest Zones of the World
(*Le Milieu divin* 50).

All human beings participate in perfecting God's creation when they identify their actions with God's love for all creatures. As a Catholic, Teilhard de Chardin associates God's love for us with Christ's Incarnation, Christ's death on the cross, and Christ's resurrection, but Teilhard de Chardin's comments on spirituality have appealed to readers who do not believe in Christianity. Although all humans decline physically as they age, the reality of our impending deaths should not inspire us with fear or dread. In an exquisite comment in a section entitled "Our apparent defeat and its transfiguration," Teilhard de Chardin writes:

God is thus not conquered, a first time, in our defeat because if we we seem to succumb individually, the World, in which we will live again, triumphs through our deaths (*Le Milieu divin* 89).

Like the Senegalese who believe in the spiritual presence of ancestors among us, Teilhard de Chardin recognizes that the past, the present, and the future coexist simultaneously and mystically in this world and in the next. Those who are searching for God come to distinguish between the ephemeral material values and eternal spiritual values. As he observed human fossils in China and peasants struggling to survive in abject poverty, Teilhard de Chardin felt the divine presence in each person created by God. All men and women are equal in God's eyes and this is why it is totally inappropriate to affirm that one culture or country is somehow better than any other. Teilhard de Chardin explains

the mysterious process by which God transforms everything into the good and the eternal by writing:

For those who seek God, all is not immediately good, but all is likely to become good: “All things are converted to the good” (*Le Milieu divin* 90).

In a note to his English translation of these lines from *Le Milieu divin*, Sion Cowell notes correctly that Teilhard de Chardin, who consistently quoted the Bible from the Latin version called the Vulgate, here replaced the Vulgate reading “cooperantur” (“cooperate”) by “convertuntur” (are converted).⁶ Teilhard de Chardin was an expert Latinist and it is reasonable to assume that he knew what he was doing when he modified the Vulgate text. He stressed that God can paradoxically transform all human actions into something good, in this life or in the next. In the original French edition of *Le Milieu divin*, Jeanne-Marie Mortier included several photographs with significant titles. Photos of Teilhard de Chardin in China and America are described as “The Divine Milieu of Exile.” The final photo in this edition shows his tombstone followed by the words “The Divine Milieu and Death.” (*Le Milieu divin*, 136-137 and 191) In his spiritual masterpiece *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin explains eloquently that all men and women created by God are equal in His eyes and equally deserving of our attention and admiration because all men and women possess elements that can enable them to return to God if they cooperate with God in perfecting his Creation. As a learned Catholic and

admirer of Ignatian spirituality, Senghor knew that two complementary mottoes of the Jesuits are “Men and Women in Service of Others” and the acronym AMDG, which stands for “Ad majorem Dei gloriam” and means in English “For the greater glory of God.” Simultaneous service to human beings and God indicate that all representations of human culture can express what Senghor called “la civilisation de l’universel.”

It is not clear whether Senghor ever met Teilhard de Chardin or when Senghor first read a book written by Teilhard de Chardin. From 1946 to 1960 Senghor lived in Paris where he represented Senegal in the National Assembly. He may have attended lectures that Teilhard de Chardin gave in Paris between 1947 and 1954 on paleontology and philosophy, but in their book *Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Centurion, 1991), p. 65, André Dupleix and Jules Carles state that even before Teilhard de Chardin’s return to Paris in 1946 from China “photocopies of many of his works were circulating among Catholic intellectuals in Paris.” This was well before Teilhard de Chardin gave Jeanne-Marie Mortier all his manuscripts so that she could photocopy and publish them. Like Teilhard de Chardin, Jules Carles was both a Jesuit priest and a distinguished scientist. Father Carles, S.J., carried out his research at France’s National Center for Scientific Research. It is reasonable to assume that Father Carles knew that Teilhard de Chardin’s theological books were known by certain Parisian readers well before the publication of his books starting in 1955. As a Catholic intellectual who was very interested in works that deepened his understanding of spirituality, Senghor may well have read selected works by Teilhard de Chardin before Jeanne-Marie Mortier asked him in 1955 to help her edit Teilhard de Chardin’s books. Madame Mortier was well acquainted then with the small

number of Catholic intellectuals in Paris who rejected the atheism and agnosticism that were then so prevalent in Paris. Madame Mortier never explained before her death in 1983 why she chose the people who volunteered to serve on the editorial committees for the posthumous publication of Teilhard de Chardin's books on theology and philosophy, but it is reasonable to assume that she chose people who had already expressed enthusiasm to her about Teilhard de Chardin.

Senghor entitled the third volume of *Liberté* "Négritude et civilisation de l'universel."

Senghor explained that as a black writer he could write only about the world as understood by a black person. Centuries of suffering by Africans through slavery, racism, and colonialism enabled them to understand feelings that white Europeans could never really understand. In a 1964 lecture given at the University of Strasbourg, President Senghor states that the "civilisation de l'universel" expresses the « common work of all continents, all races, and all nations » (*Liberté*, III, 41).

A writer can speak truthfully only about what he or she has personally experienced, but it makes no sense to believe that one culture is somehow better than another culture.

In a 1969 speech given in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senghor explains that Teilhard de Chardin helped him to understand "the total man" who uses both deductive and intuitive reason in order to make sense of this world. As a committed Catholic, Senghor knew that it is inappropriate to limit religious belief simply to logical arguments or sentimental feelings. In a 1970 speech given in Dakar, President Senghor reminds his listeners of the important role of black Africa in the growth of the Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Senghor says:

Black Africa singularly played a not insignificant role in humanization. This was the best way to defend the divine and transcendental character of religion against interpretations that are too logical, too juridical. European theologians were inclined to put religion in formulas: in pills (*Liberté*, III, 238).

In fields as diverse as religion and literature, black Africans can share with people from other continents and races personal experiences that are universal in nature. Senghor illustrates this insight by stating:

The nature of being, contrary to what people say, is not to persevere in being, but as Teilhard de Chardin wrote, to reach for the higher being, fullness where his happiness resides. But, since the universe is united, leaving from the God source and ending up in the God center, to attain the universe while reestablishing the troubled order, while reinforcing the weakened force, it is to reinforce oneself by reaching God through human society” (*Liberté*, III, 306).

His reading of Teilhard de Chardin leads Senghor to attempt to convey religious truths that reason alone cannot explain. Deductive reasoning so admired by European philosophers cannot convey the depth of religious faith or the belief that men and women

can reach the fullness of their nature only in God, from whom they came and to whom they will return. Intuitive reasoning so admired in black Africa enables men and women to sense that there is a profound unity between this life and the next. As Teilhard de Chardin affirmed, we live now in a divine milieu and after death, we will live in an eternal divine milieu.

Although Pierre Teilhard de Chardin significantly enriched our understanding of prehistory and Léopold Sédar Senghor developed a stable and tolerant democracy in Senegal and helped create the Organization of African Unity that is now called the African Union, it would be inappropriate to restrict their accomplishments to the fields of science and politics. They both recognized that traditional cultures in Asia and Africa have an appreciation of God's presence in our daily lives that is often lacking in wealthier cultures that place more importance on materialistic values. Senghor argues that for him, Teilhard de Chardin, and many Africans "the supreme goal is to approach God until we melt into Him, through the practice of a mystical life" (*Liberté*, III, 306).

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¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Le Milieu divin (Paris: Éditions du Seuil,

1957), p. 5. In this essay, all translations from Teilhard de Chardin and Senghor are mine.

² Arturo de Andraca, « Teilhard y el Exilio, » Humanity's Quest for Unity : A United Nations Teilhard Colloquium, ed. Leo Zonneveld (Wassenaar, Holland: Miranada, 1985), pp. 176-189.

³ In 1970, the New York province of Jesuits sold the novitiate in St. Andrew-on-Hudson, New York to the Culinary Institute of America, but they retained ownership of this cemetery that can still be visited.

⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor, Liberté III: Négritude et civilisation de l'universel (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1977).

⁵ For a discussion of the concept of “the Omega point,” by which Teilhard de Chardin meant attainment of optimal spiritual growth in a general sense and union with Christ in a specifically Christian sense, consult Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Le Phénomène humain (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955).

⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Divine Milieu, trans. Sion Cowell (Brighton, England: Sussex, 2004), p. 47.