

The Extent and Impact of Racism and Eugenics in the Writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

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The impact of eugenics on the early-twentieth-century scientific community was vast, including nearly all evolutionary scientists, paleontologists, and biologists. The Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a French paleontologist, was no exception. This article analyzes the full extent and impact of racist and eugenic ideas in Teilhard's writings between 1905 and 1955. It examines the underlying causes of eugenics as specific philosophical and scientific arguments and traces the lineage of these arguments within the writings and letters of Teilhard. This research reveals a consistent colonialist and paternalistic racism within Teilhard's writings, as well as a firm commitment to eugenics in the last fifteen years of his life. This study concludes with a review of the lack of discussion of race and eugenics within Teilhardian scholarship, and points to a way forward.

Keywords: eugenics, Teilhard, racism, bias, colonialism, anthropology, evolution

Introduction

PIERRE Teilhard de Chardin was born into a world of eugenics. In 1883, when Teilhard was two years old, Francis Galton coined the term “eugenics” (Greek for “well bred”) in a scientific essay about the possibilities for directed human evolution in light of the works of Charles Darwin, Galton’s cousin.¹ As Teilhard studied paleontology in the first two decades of the twentieth century, eugenic science slowly became the standard for scientific pursuits of human heredity and progress. In the United States, the first sterilization laws were passed in 1907, followed by dozens of similar laws over the next few decades. By 1922, when Teilhard earned his

¹ See Francis Galton, *Inquiries into the Human Faculty and Its Development* (London: Macmillan, 1883).

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Competing interests: The author declares none.

doctorate, eugenic approaches to applied evolutionary theories, as well as to racial theories, were celebrated throughout the scientific world. The 1921 Second International Eugenics Congress had just occurred in New York City, attended by some of the brightest minds in evolutionary science. The results of the congress, and many of its speeches, were reprinted on the front pages of scientific journals.²

Over the first four decades of the twentieth century, eugenics was promoted as the best hope for the evolutionary future of humanity by the majority of the biological and anthropological scientific communities. The eugenics movement would find its way into forced sterilization bills, anti-miscegenation laws, Jim Crow laws, forced birth controls and abortions, and eventually scientific experiments on and death camps filled with Jewish, Black, disabled, LGBTQ+, and other so-called imperfect individuals.³ Eugenics, as a popular movement, lasted until the end of World War II, when the death camps were discovered and the full depravity of the Nazi regime shocked the wider culture into at least a partial realization of the outcome of eugenic ideas. The change was sudden. By 1950, UNESCO had published a statement on racial equality written “by the world’s scientists,” and by the middle of the decade, nearly all previously named eugenic labs, papers, and organizations had renamed themselves into something more palatable. In 1955, amid this abrupt shift of public and scholarly opinion, Teilhard died. Teilhard’s life and death line up neatly with the rise and fall of eugenics. He was born when Galton and others first published the idea, wrote his most memorable works at the height of the eugenics movement, and died amid its public downfall.

This article represents the latest chapter in the study on the impact of eugenics on the writings of Teilhard. In 2017, I argued for a reconsideration of some of Teilhard’s works in light of his support for racist and eugenic ideas between 1923 and 1955.⁴ The 2017 article was followed by several years of sometimes tense discourse between myself and several Teilhard scholars. In 2018, John Haught published the piece “Trashing Teilhard” in *Commonweal*

² See, for example, Henry Fairfield Osborn, “The Second International Congress of Eugenics Address of Welcome,” *Science* 54, no. 1397 (October 7, 1921): 311–13.

³ There are many resources for this history. An excellent recent survey can be found in Alison Bashford and Philippa Levine, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴ See John P. Slattery, “Dangerous Tendencies of Cosmic Theology: The Untold Legacy of Teilhard de Chardin,” *Philosophy and Theology* 29, no. 1 (2017): 69–82; also published in a popular form online as John P. Slattery, “Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s Legacy of Eugenics and Racism Can’t Be Ignored,” *Religion Dispatches*, May 21, 2018, <https://religiondispatches.org/pierre-teilhard-de-chardins-legacy-of-eugenics-and-racism-cant-be-ignored/>.

Magazine, directly critiquing my work.⁵ Haught's criticism rested largely on my use of merely "eight stray citations," which he claimed more "speculative" rather than "declarative." Many theological classics have flaws, including Aquinas and Luther. "Teilhard's reflections and principles," argued Haught, "put forth a theologically and morally rich framework within which we—and he—should be able at least to ask the hard questions without having to be accused of ethical monstrosity."⁶ Later that year, Joshua Canzona also responded to my work, arguing that my sample size was minuscule and that his racist ideas are not substantial enough to affect all parts of his impact.⁷

In my published response to Haught, I questioned Haught's claims of Teilhard's speculation, as well as his claim that Teilhard's negative elements should be simply footnoted instead of highlighted, given the history of scientific racism and the contemporary importance of eugenics.⁸ In my response to Canzona, I argued that the severity of the quotes requires scholars to pay special attention to this aspect of Teilhard and that any impact on Teilhard's overall ideas should be flushed out, even if small.⁹

After careful consideration of these discussions, I felt that the only way forward was a systematic study of Teilhard's entire corpus to investigate his full attitude toward race, racism, and eugenics so as to avoid any future critique of "eight stray citations." I also needed to provide contextual support for the scientific, eugenic, and philosophical milieu of the early twentieth century in order to properly couch Teilhard's work. After many years of further study and analysis, it is clear to me that my earlier arguments were in need of significant update and expansion, being inaccurate and accurate on various accounts. My earlier arguments were inaccurate in that they did not sufficiently delineate the type of racisms present in Teilhard's work, and they were inaccurate in my timeline of Teilhard's development of these ideas. My arguments were

⁵ See John Haught, "Trashing Teilhard: How Not to Read a Great Religious Thinker," *Commonweal*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/trashing-teilhard>. A version of the essay has since been reprinted in John Haught, *The Cosmic Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021): 218–22.

⁶ John Haught, "Trashing Teilhard."

⁷ See Joshua Canzona, "Teilhard's Legacy Can't Be Reduced to Racism: A Response to John Slattery," *Religion Dispatches*, August 22, 2018. <https://religiondispatches.org/teilhard-legacy-cant-be-reduced-to-racism-a-response-to-john-slattery/>.

⁸ See John P. Slattery, "Teilhard and Eugenics: A Response to John Haught," *Commonweal*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/teilhard-eugenics>.

⁹ See John P. Slattery, "Author Responds to Criticism of Teilhard Eugenics Essay," *Religion Dispatches*, August 22, 2018, <https://religiondispatches.org/author-responds-to-criticism-of-teilhard-eugenics-essay/>.

accurate, however, in the claim of significant presence of racist and eugenic philosophies. This article will show that Teilhard held a lifelong commitment to a colonialist racist attitude, developed a scientific racist anthropology by the 1920s, and committed fully to eugenic ideas by the late 1930s. He professed strong beliefs in all three ideas until his passing in 1955.

As I have stated previously, I do not believe that this aspect of his legacy must overwhelm all others or that we cannot appreciate his cosmic, emergent approach to liturgy, Christ, and humanity. His works have profundity and depth that these flaws cannot fully erase. Instead of erasure, I argue here that we must do something long overdue in Teilhard scholarship. We must allow the difficult parts of his legacy to speak openly and clearly, however they might affect the future of his legacy. It is my sincere goal that scholars will seriously address the challenges posed by this work, either through dialogue with my own work or with others like it. As Haught himself argued, I only wish to see Teilhard treated as we treat any other historical scholar with known serious flaws: by allowing those flaws to be openly discussed, understood, and critiqued. I have no wish to see Teilhard canceled—I want him to be properly understood.

Methodology

To conduct the systematic analysis required for this article, I first catalogued and eventually acquired in digital form the entire corpus of Teilhard's theological and philosophical essays, totaling more than 200 essays in fifteen translated English volumes, plus ten volumes of letters published in English. I then divided these by years and indexed them as fifty separate collections, bringing my total digital corpus to twenty-five volumes with approximately 247 individual texts and more than 1.5 million English words.¹⁰ With this corpus in hand, I performed a number of digital analyses, transformations, and searches, looking for similarities, trends, arguments, and key words.¹¹

¹⁰ The number is approximate. I automated word counts of each of the 247 essays minus front and back matter but had to estimate word counts for the four collections of letters for which I had only online search access. I did not include any works in French, nor did I include any of Teilhard's strictly scientific works because I wanted to focus on the impact to his theological work.

¹¹ This is shorthand for my long process of using the Python programming language and running the entire corpus through a large number of machine learning and complex search algorithms, including overall word counts, word frequencies, word pairings, combinations, and trends over time. It was a tedious process that could go on forever even while giving extremely helpful results in the meantime, which is what this article represents.

I was particularly interested in changes in Teilhard's language over time, examining, for instance, whether I could chart a rise and fall of eugenic and racist arguments or whether these arguments would lead to some other use of eugenic and racist logic.

The single most helpful result from this digitalization and analysis was the ability to identify groups of words that Teilhard (via his translators) used when referring to groups of people, ideas about superiority, and racial groups.¹² While a single use of a word from this list might be incidental or benign, analyses of contextual paragraphs surrounding these words over Teilhard's forty-year corpus allowed for much more accurate charting of ideas.

In order to properly situate and understand Teilhard's words, this article will first briefly examine the underlying causes of eugenics as philosophical and scientific arguments. I will then trace the lineage of these arguments within the writings and letters of Teilhard, breaking his half century of writing into more manageable sections based upon content and impact. Although imperfect, I find it helpful to divide the writings into early years (1905–1919), development years (1920–1937), and post-*Phenomenon of Man* years (1939–1955).

The Philosophical and Scientific Roots of Eugenics

Eugenics is best understood as the deliberate combination of two older philosophies, early modern scientific anthropology and cultural progressivism, combined with a specific interpretation of Darwin's theory of biological evolutionary development by natural selection. Early modern anthropology is best understood as the taxonomic systems describing a divided, hierarchical humanity, which was developed largely in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This scientific codification of racism and misogyny—women were always named the weaker gender within any group—was both influenced by and heavily influenced the growing racism within European and North American society. This codification was so pervasive that nearly all students of anthropology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would have been taught and tested in the theories of the many human races, would be

¹² The word list is inherently arbitrary and may seem odd; it changed multiple times in my research because the context of each instance of each word mattered much more than the frequency of the words themselves. In any case, the final word list that I found most helpful was the following: Aborigines, Africaans, Africans, Africanus, Australian, Blacks, Chinaman, Chinese, ethnic, eugenics, exotic, nationalism, Native, Negroes, Negus, Oriental, overpopulation, Pharisees, race, savage, superhuman, tribe, unequal, UNESCO, Vatican. All variations of each word were considered (e.g., race = race, races, racial, etc).

expected to know the ways in which Caucasians are superior, as well as the ways in which men's brains are superior, generally speaking, to women's.¹³

Cultural progressivism, alternatively, can be roughly understood as philosophies of cultural, scientific, and religious progress championed by European philosophers beginning around the same time period as early modern anthropology. These philosophies placed white Christian European men as the most advanced humans on the planet and Christianity as the most advanced religion on the planet. Progressivism differed from anthropology in that progressivism argued that the development of culture itself was a moral good and that the benefits of science and technology were God-given miracles that proved the moral righteousness of European and, eventually, North American cultures.

These two philosophies suffused European and US culture in the middle of the nineteenth century when Darwin published his groundbreaking *Origin of Species* in 1859. While Darwin's theories pushed back against some aspects of early modern anthropology, race-based discrimination within anthropology was present even within Darwin's own work such as *The Descent of Man*.¹⁴ Furthermore, Darwin's notion of evolutionary development by natural selection allowed scientists such as Francis Galton to see in Darwin's theories a chance for humanity to deliberately advance toward evolutionary perfection. Given the presence of race-based anthropology and the predominance of cultural progressivism, it is no surprise that late-nineteenth-century eugenics carried with it major racist, antisemitic, ableist, xenophobic, and colonialist themes. Eugenics became part of standard scientific arguments by the early twentieth century when a young Jesuit named Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was studying theology, philosophy, anthropology, and paleontology.

A Note on the Definitions of Racism

Throughout this article, I differentiate between what I understand to be two intersecting types of racism common during Teilhard's life. I use the terms "colonialist racism" or "paternalist racism" to describe a bias against all manners of people that are not of European descent, including Africans, African Americans, Chinese, Indigenous Australians, Indigenous Americans, and so on. This bias is often stated using nonhateful language, treating the inferior so-called races like one would treat children, thus paternalist, instead

¹³ For example, Samuel Morton, *Crania Americana; Or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America: To Which Is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia, PA: J. Dobson, 1839).

¹⁴ See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Murray, 1871).

of treating them with antipathy. This bias is contrasted with what I will term “hateful racism,” which is the common type of anti-immigrant, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, or generally xenophobic racism in much of the world today. Hateful racism is exemplified by hateful words and actions directed at a particular group of people, usually a single perceived ethnicity, culture, or nationality, such as was personified by hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. In Teilhard’s time, colonialist racism had a symbiotic relationship with hateful racism, with most Europeans and North Americans holding one or the other in various degrees throughout their lives, and people in power knowing that the emotion of hate was necessary to get racist laws passed by the people, while the high-minded language of colonialist racism was necessary to convince those in the upper classes. While the two racisms thrived symbiotically, some people either held just one or the other, like a Klan member who hates without knowing anything of colonialism, or like Teilhard himself, who, as this article will show, frequently disparaged hateful racism while defending colonialist racism against all manner of scientific and theological attacks.

Inherited and Incipient Ideas of Race, 1905–1919

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was born into a moderately wealthy family in central France in the late nineteenth century, replete with a governess, servants, and land.¹⁵ As such, before he even began doctoral scientific work, it seems clear that he was raised on a colonialist, paternalist racism that would have been expected of anyone from his pedigree. This approach can be seen throughout his early letters, especially during his time in Egypt. There is a clear distance between Teilhard and the “natives” that he frequently mentions in *Letters from Egypt*, whom he describes often in delightful, cheerful, and inquisitive tones, such as:

The great luxury in Eritrea is the possession of a European hat; Iñes Bey saw a native proudly wearing the paper covering of a top hat.¹⁶

I traveled with a Senegalese who was at pains to talk to me in very correct French, and with all the warmth of a compatriot; natives of British colonies would certainly not talk like that with nationals of the mother country.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Robert Speaight, *The Life of Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 21–25; Claude Cuenot, *Teilhard de Chardin* (London: Burns & Oates, 1958), 1–4.

¹⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “December 22, 1906,” in *Letters from Egypt: 1905–1908* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 136.

¹⁷ De Chardin, “November 22, 1907,” in *Letters from Egypt*, 204.

There seems to be no malice in Teilhard's words, but simply an assumed otherness and superiority.

After his time in Egypt, Teilhard spent four years studying to become a Jesuit in England, and he was ordained a priest in August 1911. He wrote mostly of his budding and active faith life in these years, but once again revealed an implicit racism and colonialist tendencies in a few encounters with Americans.

Tuesday morning, I left Oxford and once again spent some time in London, reaching Charing Cross at the same time as the negro Johnson in person, who was flanked by an obsequious trainer, just as black, dressed just as brightly from head to foot, and equally as colossal. Perhaps most curious was to see how everyone's attention was turned towards them, just as though the objects of attention were curious animals.¹⁸

This quote is a study of separation and curiosity from Teilhard. He makes no judgment as to whether *he* considers the men animals, nor does he judge the crowd for considering them as animals. He merely notes it and finds it significant enough to include in a letter. The very next line states how little this affected him, noting that "all these little things rarely distracted me from things more important in themselves, like the war in Tripoli."¹⁹

A few months later, Teilhard has an encounter with an American from New Orleans who is distraught over the treatment of Black Americans in the United States. Teilhard commiserates but then offers a glimpse into his patriarchal racism and racial superiority.

Speaking of New Orleans, we have an American who comes from there; he tells us some very curious stories about the trouble some white people take to avoid the negroes; these poor negroes are obviously quite spurned, and to take an example, prevented from riding in the same car as whites; *it seems that this ostracism isn't completely without reason. Only Catholicism is able to bring something out in these poor people*; but in return, it has succeeded in establishing one or two negro congregations of nuns—something my American colleague considers a permanent miracle. I don't know if Olivier has had time to get some insight into the negro question.²⁰

The two emphasized sentences are the first recorded instances of Teilhard voicing explicitly what was implicit throughout his earlier letters from Egypt: a colonialist superiority and paternalist racism. He concludes the section with a reference to his friend, Olivier, asking whether he has some "insight

¹⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "October 8, 1911," in *Letters from Hastings: 1908-1912* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 169.

¹⁹ De Chardin, "October 8, 1911," in *Letters from Hastings*, 169.

²⁰ De Chardin, "February 22, 1912," in *Letters from Hastings*, 182; emphasis added.

into the negro question.” This paragraph ends with a seemingly innocent inquisitiveness but betrays an alarming but not unexpected lack of self-awareness on the part of Teilhard, his parents, and probably his classmates as to their assumptions of superiority and race.

Between 1912 and 1922, Teilhard pursued advanced studies in paleontology, which would culminate in his doctoral thesis in 1922. His studies were interrupted for several years by the First World War, in which Teilhard served as a decorated stretcher-bearer between 1914 and 1919. During this ten-year period, Teilhard wrote regularly and with more precision. His scientific ideas matured, and he began to articulate mystical experiences into theological and philosophical language. His scientific studies at this time largely assumed the aforementioned cultural progressivism and racist anthropological science, and these studies would have confirmed many of Teilhard’s early colonialist attitudes.²¹ Teilhard’s learned colonialist racism becomes better articulated and begins to filter into his scientific and philosophical work.

First, we see his colonialist racism in several writings from 1916 in the trenches of war. In the essay “Cosmic Life,” he talks of a “universal effort” that leads to all beings “united in totality,” but is careful to note that this does not mean “egalitarian fusion” but a “segregation that allows a chosen elite to emerge,” which he notes is “mankind” itself.

The true way to be united with totality is not to squander oneself and spend oneself equally on all beings, but to make one’s impact with all one’s weight and all one’s strength on that specially favored point on which the universal effort converges and applies its mass. The essential law of cosmic development is not the egalitarian fusion of all beings, but the segregation that allows a chosen elite to emerge, to mature and to stand out alone.²²

A few months later, however, similar reflections on the enduring spirit of humanity reveal that his penchant for a “chosen elite” refers not just to humanity itself, but to a subset of humanity. One result of war, he writes:

Will be that of mixing and welding together the peoples of the earth in a way that nothing else, perhaps, could have done. With some Africans, no doubt, the fusion is distasteful, but even so it may well bear fruit. In any case, with the Russians, Australians, etc., it will have most valuable consequences.²³

²¹ The evidence for this will be clear as Teilhard’s scientific work becomes entangled with his theological writings. His scientific assumptions are firmly based in the ideologies discussed previously.

²² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “April 24, 1916,” in *Writings in a Time of War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 35.

²³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “September 8, 1916,” in *Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier Priest: 1914–1919* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 125.

In two letters from 1918, he reiterates this point, arguing in one letter that one of the lessons from the war is that “it illustrates the grave danger of large racial agglomerations” while teaching “the impossibility of preventing ‘natural’ combinations.”²⁴ In another, he muses on the importance of an “élite” within humanity and calls it “one of the most decisive and permanent convictions I’ve acquired from my experience in recent years.” He states:

I greatly admired the view of the castle you sent me. It seemed to me like a proud affirmation of the need for an “élite,” which is, I believe, *one of the most decisive and permanent convictions I’ve acquired from my experience in recent years*. None but a race of men, strong and conscious of having outstripped their fellows, could have conceived and built those towers, proudly poised on the rock, overlooking the torrent. The whole difficulty (and secret) of real democracy is to encourage the renewal and the recruitment of the elite, and to make inclusion in it as universal as possible. But *in itself*, the mass of humanity is profoundly inferior and repulsive. Don’t you find it so?²⁵

Even very early in his writing career, the ideas expressed in letters and essays are quite close to similar ideas expressed by popular eugenicists at the time. For example, from Charles Davenport, the director of the Department of Experimental Evolution at Cold Spring Harbor: “Since the weak and the criminal will not be guided in their matings by patriotism or family pride, more powerful influences or restraints must be exerted as the case requires.”²⁶ Even more extreme, with perhaps even greater impact, are David Starr Jordan’s chilling words from 1907, “Indiscriminate charity has been a fruitful cause of the survival of the unfit. To kill the strong and to feed the weak is to provide for a progeny of weakness.”²⁷

First Articulations of Evolutionary Racism, 1920–1923

In addition to his casual observations and early philosophical writings, Teilhard’s colonialist racism also appears quite clearly in his scientific work beginning in the 1920s. As noted previously, this scientific racism is far from unique to Teilhard, instead reaching back to the seventeenth century, a tradition that Teilhard would have been expected to learn, critique, and

²⁴ De Chardin, “November 17, 1918,” in *Making of a Mind*, 252.

²⁵ De Chardin, “September 8, 1918,” in *Making of a Mind*, 232; emphasis in original.

²⁶ C. B. Davenport, *Eugenics: The Science of Human Improvement by Better Breeding* (New York: Henry Holt, 1910), 31–34.

²⁷ David Starr Jordan, *The Human Harvest: A Study of the Decay of Races through the Survival of the Unfit* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 62.

demonstrate mastery of in order to earn his degrees and widespread scientific acclaim.

“From the Palaeolithic,” he argues in 1921, “there were White, Black and Yellow races, and they already occupied, by and large, the place in which we find them today.”²⁸ The differences among human races are “fixed in their fundamental distribution” based upon Teilhard’s reading of the fossil record.²⁹ In 1923, he continues and expands upon this argument. All non-European races, like Australian Aborigines, are races “which have diverged from ours” at some earlier point in time and “have become fixed. . . . The Australian aborigines and Neanderthals represent types of men perfectly successful in their line of development. Only for us they are ‘marginal’ types.”³⁰ These inferior human groups are not a recession, but the pinnacle of their own evolutionary tree, and yet merely draft “sketches” of the pinnacle of humanity, Teilhard’s own race, European humans, which is the only race of humanity he calls “*Homo sapiens*.” He says:

No, the so-called inferior races are not fallen races; they are merely races which have diverged from ours, or races which have become fixed: races which retain or accentuate certain characteristics eliminated by the more vigorous races that are victorious today. The Australian aborigine and Neanderthals represent types of men perfectly successful in their line of development. Only for us they are “marginal” types. . . .

Basing oneself on palaeontological facts, there is only one way of understanding the truth about present-day humanity. It represents the highest (privileged, if you like) achievement of the same biological process which has produced the entire tree of living beings. Humanity at the centre of the primates, *Homo sapiens*, in humanity, is the end-product of a gradual work of creation, the successive sketches for which still surround us on every side.³¹

This and related arguments concerning the existence of multiple, distinct, inferior human races, can be found throughout Teilhard’s paleontological

²⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Fossil Men” (1921), in *The Appearance of Man* (New York: Harper, 1965), 31.

²⁹ De Chardin, “Fossil Men” (1921), in *The Appearance of Man*, 31.

³⁰ De Chardin, “Palaeontology and the Appearance of Man” (1923), in *The Appearance of Man*, 52.

³¹ De Chardin, “Palaeontology and the Appearance of Man” (1923), in *The Appearance of Man*, 52.

works in the 1920s.³² Based upon these writings, Teilhard's vision of progressive racial evolution can be described as twofold. First, he believes that three main human races succeeded Neanderthals, races that he calls "the Blacks, the Yellows, and the Whites."³³ These represent most of a "complicated bundle of modern humanity"³⁴ and, of these, the whites are the most progressive. Second, further back on the evolutionary timescale, Teilhard postulates that Indigenous populations of Australia and North America—which he called "Bushmen" and "Eskimos"—represent "the oldest human layers" that are being supplanted by "more progressive races."³⁵ As noted previously, he believes that these races are not malformations or "fallen races" but are each, instead, the fixed pinnacles of their own weaker and imperfect evolutionary lines.

Before moving on, it is helpful to reiterate some contextual points. First, in these discussions, Teilhard is explicitly in conversation with the general paleontological and anthropological communities who largely agreed with his racial theories.³⁶ While he would arguably become peerless in his synthetic work of later years, his early scientific papers were always written in conversation with other scholars.

Encountering China and Chinese People, 1923–1929

Teilhard's first trip to China in 1923 began a decade of frustrations for Teilhard, including forced capitulations on evolution and refusals by the Vatican of permissions to publish on the basis of his acceptance of human evolution.³⁷ Although explicit mention of eugenics is scarce during this time period, the impact of eugenics and its related philosophies can be seen through the continuation of aforementioned themes and the addition of a few more.

³² Similar arguments can be found in "The Natural History of the World" (1925) and "The Basis and Foundations of the Idea of Evolution" (1926), both in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

³³ De Chardin, "Fossil Men" (1921), in *The Appearance of Man*, 31.

³⁴ De Chardin, "Palaeontology and the Appearance of Man" (1923), in *The Appearance of Man*, 51.

³⁵ De Chardin, "Palaeontology and the Appearance of Man" (1923), in *The Appearance of Man*, 51.

³⁶ For example, he cites heavily from Marcellin Boule, *L'Homme fossile de La Chapelle-aux-Saints*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Masson, 1911), and is in regular dialogue with many works of William King Gregory, the noted and widely published zoologist, primatologist, and paleontologist.

³⁷ See David Grumet, Paul Bentley, "Teilhard de Chardin, Original Sin, and the Six Propositions," *Zygon* 53, no. 2 (June 2018): 303–30, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/zygo.12398>.

“Sleep on, ancient Asia; your people are as weary as your soil is ravaged,” remarks Teilhard, continuing his racial progressivism in one of his first essays upon arrival in China. “By now your night has fallen and the light has passed into other hands. If we want to understand the Far East . . . we must look at it at dusk when the sun, bearing the spoils of Asia with it in its glory, rises in triumph over the skies of Europe.”³⁸ Reflections on the primitive and inferior nature of various peoples in Asia would be a constant theme in his letters throughout the 1920s.

He writes in 1924, for example, “I have thus been able to verify what I had already been told, that the greatest trial for a missionary in China is to find that he is lost in a sea of primitive beings, kind and affectionate, no doubt, but as inquisitive, persistent and tactless as savages.”³⁹ Later in 1926 he comments on the vast deforestation project by European rubber companies in Vietnam as a positive development, commenting that “it would be absurd” to regret the disappearance of old forms of life, which includes “the deer, the elephants, and the peacocks, but also these poor Mois⁴⁰ [Indigenous peoples in Vietnam] who are so picturesque but who belong to a bygone age.”⁴¹ In 1927, he develops such a low opinion of Chinese potential that he argues that Chinese people

³⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “October 23, 1923,” in *Letters from a Traveller: 1923–1955* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 102–03. Teilhard continues, “And it seemed to me that it was no longer the fiery sun I saw, but the very focus of terrestrial life setting over the Mongolian desert—to rise again on us. And, from the whole of sleeping Asia I thought there rose a voice which whispered, Now, my brothers of the West, it is your turn. . . . It is our turn. Yes, I believe this more than ever. . . . This evening, as I watch the flight of wild geese showing black against the play of gold and red clouds above the river, I repeat to myself again and again: if we want to understand the Far East, we must not look at it at dawn, nor at high noon; we must look at it at dusk when the sun, bearing the spoils of Asia with it in its glory, rises in triumph over the skies of Europe.”

³⁹ De Chardin, “April 12, 1924,” in *Letters from a Traveller*, 111–13.

⁴⁰ This was a common yet pejorative term for Indigenous people of the Central Highlands region of Vietnam, literally meaning “savages.” They are referred to today as Montagnards (translated as “Mountain People”), a large group of people who speak more than thirty distinct languages. Montagnard peoples have migrated around the world, including many to the United States. Compare Dan Southerland, “An Update on The Montagnards of Vietnam’s Central Highlands,” *Radio Free Asia*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/vietnam-montagnards-10232018155849.html>.

⁴¹ In case we worry that he says this without thinking, Teilhard notes that “temperamentally I am not disposed to think this way; it is through reflection and deliberation that I passionately welcome the life that is coming, without allowing myself to regret anything of the past. But it seems to me that this attitude succeeds and gives great strength.” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “May 23, 1926,” in *Letters to Two Friends: 1926–1952* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 27–28.

belong with other Indigenous people, and not *Homo sapiens*, in his evolutionary tree. Chinese people, he argues, seem most likely to be “arrested primitives, victims of retarded development whose anthropological substance is inferior to ours.”⁴²

Later in the same essay, Teilhard makes an argument that he will repeat many times over the next three decades: Christian love does not erase biological inferiority:

Neither the Christian attitude of love for all mankind, nor humane hopes for an organized society must cause us to forget that the “human stratum” may not be homogeneous. If it were not, it would be necessary to find for the Chinese, as for the Negroes, their special function, which may not (by *biological* impossibility) be that of the whites. I do not like these prospects. But they may some day become necessary. Is not the real way to conquer the world to utilize its faults, and not to deny them, *if* they are irremediable?⁴³

He repeats this definition of Christian love in a letter from 1929, when he asks: “Do the yellows [the Chinese] have the same human value as the whites?” He notes that others say their inferiority “is due to their long history of Paganism,” but Teilhard disagrees. “The cause seems to be the natural racial foundation. And this has nothing to do with Christian love . . . which overcomes all inequalities, but does not deny them.”⁴⁴

Embracing Postmillennialism in the 1920s

The 1920s is where one can also see clear expressions of Teilhard’s postmillennialism, the idea that humans can work with God toward a more perfect world, or to help bring about the eschaton. Nonbiological theories of eschatological postmillennialism have a long history within Christian theology, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a biological postmillennialism became a standard way that some Christian theologians engaged with evolution, contributing to the acceptance of eugenics by many Christian postmillennialists.⁴⁵ Now that Darwin had laid open the mysteries of evolutionary creation, pro-evolution Christians could assist God in perfecting creation by perfecting humans biologically through self-directed evolution.

Teilhard begins to articulate his version of this popular philosophy alongside his racist and progressivist ideas in the early 1920s, although he does not

⁴² De Chardin, “April 6, 1927,” in *Letters to Two Friends*, 67.

⁴³ De Chardin, “April 6, 1927,” in *Letters to Two Friends*, 68; emphasis in original.

⁴⁴ Letter to Auguste Valensin, SJ, April 2, 1929, from Günther Schiwy, *Teilhard de Chardin: sein Leben und seine Zeit*, vol 2. (Munich: Kösel, 1981), 105; my translation.

⁴⁵ See Christine Rosen, *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16–18.

yet weave the arguments together.⁴⁶ These beginnings of postmillennialist perfection represent a stark difference from Teilhard's essays on progress from the late 1930s and 1940s, which are explicitly intertwined with racially charged eugenic ideas.⁴⁷ In 1927, Teilhard completed *The Divine Milieu*, one of his best-known works, where he developed his mystical approaches to the intersection of science and faith and presented an incipient version of his larger philosophical system. Although there are no explicit references to eugenics and racist anthropologies in this text, it is perhaps Teilhard's clearest work on postmillennialism.⁴⁸

Even without the explicit racist or eugenic language of his later years, *The Divine Milieu* would have been read very favorably by many in the eugenics conversation in the 1920s. Such a declaration, however, should not be necessarily read as a condemnation of postmillennialism broadly, but of the past and continued dangers of biological postmillennialism.⁴⁹ This connection among biological postmillennialism, evolution, and eugenics in the early twentieth century offers yet another point of evidence as to why Teilhard could so easily incorporate explicit eugenic ideas a decade later.

Emergence of Eugenic Ideas, 1930–1937

If the 1920s were times of initial articulations, the 1930s represented a time of clarifications on race and the first emergence of an explicit eugenics. One might call this a natural maturation process as Teilhard analyzes, expands, and defines his previously assumed ideas, beginning to weave them into a greater systematic whole. This weaving is true of his racial, progressivist, and colonialist ideas, as well as his postmillennialist and general theological ones.

⁴⁶ See "Hominization" (1923) and "How the Transformist Question Presents Itself Today" (1921) in de Chardin, *The Vision of the Past*; De Chardin, "Fossil Men" (1921), and "Palaeontology and the Appearance of Man" (1923), in *The Appearance of Man*.

⁴⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "A Note on Progress" (1921), in *The Future of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 9–10.

⁴⁸ For example, "If this is so, then our individual mystical effort awaits an essential completion in its union with the mystical effort of all other men. The divine milieu which will ultimately be one in the Pleroma, must begin to become one during the earthly phase of our existence. So that although the Christian who hungers to live in God may have attained all possible purity of desire, faith in prayer, and fidelity in action, the divinisation of his universe is still open to vast possibilities." Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 143, 128ff.

⁴⁹ For example, the philosophies of biological postmillennialism remain a strong presence in the contemporary transhumanist movement.

The decade begins with Teilhard developing a more specific articulation of the history of human races in several texts, including in “The Phenomenon of Man” (1930) and “Man’s Place in Nature” (1932). Here, he reiterates, clarifies, and builds off his earlier scientifically racist argument that *Homo sapiens* comprise three major races—“Whites, Yellows, and Blacks”—and that Indigenous peoples not fitting these categories are from previous evolutionary forms of humans.⁵⁰ Alongside this declaration, Teilhard continues to discuss his post-millennialist desire to merge all peoples into one, beyond race and nation, to progress the work of God.⁵¹ But in this merging, not all races or nations are equal to Teilhard.

In a 1932 essay entitled “The Road of the West,” Teilhard offers his most expansive articulation of Western supremacy and thus cultural progressivism. The entire essay is a diatribe against Eastern ideas, religions, and cultures in favor of the superior ideas, religions, and cultures of the West. After fifteen pages of arguments why Western Christian ideas are superior to Eastern ideas, he concludes:

If Christianity is to continue to live and be supreme, it must henceforth think and speak, unambiguously and exclusively, the language of the West: it must not resign itself passively, but attack; not ignore, but seek; not despise the tangible universe, but become enraptured by its contemplation and in its fulfilment. . . .

There can be no hesitation; and, what is more, the choice has already, to all intents and purposes, been made long since. History and experience both insist that it is in the Western direction that we must guide the progress of life. . . . Individuals, nations, races and religions, everything will disappear tomorrow which has not today hazarded its soul on the road of the West.⁵²

This essay represents the clearest articulation of cultural progressivism to date in Teilhard’s corpus. It is both a reflection of a lifetime of racist, colonialist superiority and an exemplar of a scholar expanding and systematizing previously implicit thoughts.

A few years later, in 1936, Teilhard begins to sharpen his racist ideas. This is first found in two letters in which he describes perhaps his first difficult

⁵⁰ See “The Phenomenon of Man” (essay) (1930), 163–165, and “Man’s Place in Nature” (1932), 177–178, in *Vision of the Past*.

⁵¹ For example, “The Spirit of the Earth” (1931), in Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 31–32.

⁵² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Road of the West” (1932), in *Toward the Future* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 53, 55–56.

encounter with people of faith who disagree with his ideas of racial inequality. He says:

The more I get around the world, the more I fear that Geneva (of which I am in my heart a great supporter), numbers of liberal Catholics, and especially my colleagues the “Missiologues,” are making a grave mistake in recognizing the equality of races in the face of all the biological evidence. “Universalism” is not democracy (=egalitarianism).⁵³

He continues his frustration against the Missiologues in a letter written just five days later. “There could be nothing more dangerous for ‘humanitarians’ . . . than to shut their eyes to the fact of the complexity (or heterogeneity) of the human mass.”⁵⁴

In a somewhat startling turn, Teilhard goes on to declare support for some of Mussolini’s ideas as preferable to ideas of racial equality:

I think in some confused way we are to understand “war of construction” (that is to say the right of the earth to organize itself by reducing, even by *force*, the refractory and backwards elements). In this sense, in *last analysis* [*sic*], I am with Mussolini against the liberals of the left and the Missiologists. Mussolini seems to me to be most wrong when he uses force in a cowardly and gratuitous way (when other factors could have been brought into play), and does so at the risk of disturbing the ideas and agreements painfully built up by the Western bloc. I would like to write an article about this. But I would never find anyone to approve, nor any review to publish it.

And yet the objective fact seems to me this: (1) no international morality is possible without previous acceptance that there is an earth to be constructed which transcends states; (2) and once this construction has been agreed to, everything must give way; and, as not all ethnic groups have the same value, they must be dominated which does not mean they must be despised—quite the reverse.⁵⁵

⁵³ De Chardin, “January 21, 1936,” in *Letters from a Traveller*, 219–20. Just before this quote, Teilhard shares a colonialist remark about the state of India: “As individuals, Indians are charming, but taken as a whole the country seems to be just as incapable of self-government as China or Malaya. Unfortunately, dislike of the English is general among the ‘natives.’ They want complete independence at all costs, even if it means death to the country. The English allow them as much rope as they can, but they don’t let go: and I imagine they’re quite right.”

⁵⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “January 26, 1936,” in *Letters to Leontine Zanta: 1923–1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 116–17.

⁵⁵ De Chardin, “January 26, 1936,” in *Letters to Leontine Zanta*, 116; emphasis in original.

Teilhard seems attracted to Mussolini's notions of returning to a grand vision of the ancient Roman empire and affirms his support for war as a force of "constructing" the new earth. Teilhard knows he has detractors in this view but, given his history of rejection from the church over his views of evolution, it is not surprising that contrasting views do not sway Teilhard easily. He concludes the letter by once again reaffirming racial inequality, arguing that the natural order of different ethnic groups means that some groups "must be dominated," although, he points out, "This does not mean they must be despised," emphasizing his dislike of hateful racism while holding on closely to colonialist and scientific racism.⁵⁶ Finally, just in case she is still confused, he reaffirms this *once again* in the postscript:

In other words, *at one and the same time* there should be official recognition of: (1) the primacy and priority of the earth over nations; (2) the inequality of peoples and races. Now the *second* point is currently reviled by Communism . . . and the Church, and the *first* point is similarly reviled by the Fascist systems (and, of course, by less gifted peoples!).⁵⁷

In these two letters, Teilhard merges his racist anthropology (inequality of humans) with both his cultural progressivism (superiority of white humans) and his postmillennialist eschatology (the human-driven future of humanity for God). It should be no surprise, then, that he explicitly mentions eugenics just one year later.

In an essay called "Human Energy" from 1937, Teilhard argues that there are many types of human energy that must be harnessed for future progress, including love, but also including organic energy. In a section entitled "The Conscious Organization of Human Energy," Teilhard writes at length about what might be needed to perfect the human condition, describing the eugenic project without mentioning its name. Humanity holds "an immense task" to not only research the "conquest of disease and the phenomena of counter-evolution (sterility, physical deterioration) which undermine the advances of the noosphere," but to search for "a higher human type" by "various methods" such as "selection, balance of the sexes, action of hormones, hygiene, etc."⁵⁸

Teilhard is not naïve. He says plainly that this is a controversial stance. "For a complex of obscure reasons, our generation still regards with distrust

⁵⁶ De Chardin, "January 26, 1936," in *Letters to Leontine Zanta*, 116. This seems to be Teilhard's way of continuing his division between colonialist racism and hateful racism.

⁵⁷ De Chardin, "January 26, 1936," in *Letters to Leontine Zanta*, 117; emphasis in original.

⁵⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Human Energy" (1937), in *Human Energy*, 127.

all efforts proposed by science for controlling the machinery of heredity, of sex-determination and development of the nervous system. It is as if man had the right and power to interfere with all the channels in the world except those which make him himself.”⁵⁹

Despite such reservations, Teilhard is clear both on the necessity that “we must try everything to its conclusion” and on the “delicate” nature of the eugenic program that must be “reverently and religiously pursued”:

And yet it is eminently on this ground that we must try everything, to its conclusion. A delicate undertaking, if ever there was one; but precisely because of their delicacy, these undertakings require, if they are to be soundly, reverently and religiously pursued, the precautions and surveyance of methodically conducted research. No longer only man experimenting on his fellows; but humanity feeling out in order to give its members a higher quality of life.⁶⁰

Despite these and other related paragraphs, Teilhard only uses the word “eugenics” once in this essay, seemingly aware of the power it holds. A few pages after the aforementioned quotes, he shares with his readers a new development in science called “birth control” that is “too often” focused on “individual hardships” but can now open our eyes to the societal “anomaly” that faces humanity.⁶¹ Teilhard can now call this transformed field by its proper name, “eugenics.” Softening the blow of using such a word, he quickly notes that “all sorts of questions” are raised by this new idea and proceeds to list a litany:

Now eugenics does not confine itself to a simple control of births. All sorts of related questions, scarcely yet raised despite their urgency, are attached to it. What fundamental attitude, for example, should the advancing wing of humanity take to fixed or definitely unprogressive ethnical groups? The earth is a closed and limited surface. To what extent should it tolerate, racially or nationally, areas of lesser activity? More generally still, how should we judge the efforts we lavish in all kinds of hospitals on saving what is so often no more than one of life’s rejects?⁶²

Halfway through the questions, Teilhard notes that there is truth and beauty in one’s desire to save the life of another individual, but perhaps individuals

⁵⁹ De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 127.

⁶⁰ De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 127.

⁶¹ De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 132.

⁶² De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 132–33.

should “balance” this impulse with “a higher passion” toward “worldwide achievements of our evolution”:

Something profoundly true and beautiful (I mean faith in the irreplaceable value and unpredictable resources contained in each personal unit) is evidently concealed in persistent sacrifice to save a human existence. But should not this solicitude of man for his individual neighbor be balanced by a higher passion, born of the faith in that other higher personality that is to be expected, as we shall see, from the worldwide achievements of our evolution?⁶³

He continues, extrapolating on this eugenic argument:

To what extent should not the development of the strong (to the extent that we can define this quality) take precedence over the preservation of the weak? How can we reconcile, in a state of maximum efficiency, the care lavished on the wounded with the more urgent necessities of battle? In what does true charity consist? So many problems the solution of which can only be approached by previously fixing, on a very broad basis, a scale and plan of distribution of human values. How are we to sort and distribute materials without first deciding what we have to build?⁶⁴

This section is full of theoretical ideas and provocative questions, but they are dangerous, deadly questions that already had a profound impact on millions of lives between 1900 and 1937. Similar questions will spur the genocide of the Jewish population in Nazi Germany, which began in earnest on Kristallnacht in November 1938, just a year after this essay was written.

A Turning Point: *The Phenomenon of Man*, 1938

In 1938 Teilhard finished what would become his most popular and enduring text, *The Phenomenon of Man*. The posthumous publication of this book in 1959 catapulted Teilhard to international fame and caused his vision of evolutionary Christianity to be a foundational vision of a renewed Catholic Church leading up to the Second Vatican Council. One must recall that Teilhard was censured not for his racist, colonialist, or eugenic attitudes, but for his direct support for scientific theories of human evolution. As such, the publication of *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1959 (and the subsequent publication of many letters and other essays) was a watershed moment for a church that had never allowed a theologian to fully accept human evolution. One must also recall that 1959 was more than a decade after the end of World War II and

⁶³ De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 133.

⁶⁴ De Chardin, “Human Energy” (1937), in *Human Energy*, 133.

the common use of the word “eugenics.” Some reviewers openly supported Teilhard’s eugenic and racial arguments, but for most people Teilhard’s use of “eugenics” in this book seems to have gone unnoticed, either disregarded as a passing mention from the pre-war era or simply a minor point with which readers agreed.⁶⁵

In *Phenomenon* Teilhard repeats many of the aforementioned arguments, expanding upon them in bits and pieces, including his support for vague eugenic practices. He first reiterates his racial anthropological belief in multiple unique human races that diverged from the evolutionary tree at different moments in history, with current Aboriginal groups diverging quite early and the main three human races—Black, white, and yellow—emerging simultaneously but with different qualities and characteristics.⁶⁶

He then expands upon the superiority of the West over the East, noting explicitly that “we would be allowing sentiment to falsify the facts if we failed to recognize that during historic times the principal axis of anthropogenesis has passed through the West. . . . Even that which had long been known elsewhere only took on its definitive human value in becoming incorporated in the system of European ideas and activities. It is not in any way naïve to hail as a great event the discovery by Columbus of America.”⁶⁷

He also continues previous themes of differentiating colonialist racism from hateful racism, as discussed earlier. Teilhard pushes several times against hateful racist ideas, noting that the future of humanity must be the coming together of all groups:

Also false and against nature is the racial ideal of one branch draining off for itself alone all the sap of the tree and rising over the death of other branches. To reach the sun nothing less is required than the combined growth of the entire foliage. The outcome of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the super-human—these are not thrown open to a few of the privileged nor to one chosen people to the exclusion of all others.⁶⁸

And yet, a few pages later, Teilhard explicitly ties these reflections to his desires for a eugenic future, one of perfect control over global human evolution:

So far we have certainly allowed our race to develop at random, and we have given too little thought to the question of what medical and moral factors must replace the crude forces of natural selection should we suppress them.

⁶⁵ See the discussion following on Robert Speaight and Julian Huxley.

⁶⁶ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 184–86.

⁶⁷ De Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 212.

⁶⁸ De Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 244.

In the course of the coming centuries it is indispensable that a nobly human form of eugenics, on a standard worthy of our personalities, should be discovered and developed. Eugenics applied to individuals leads to eugenics applied to society.

It would be more convenient, and we would incline to think it safe, to leave the contours of that great body made of all our bodies to take shape on their own, influenced only by the automatic play of individual urges and whims. . . . But is it not precisely the world itself which, culminating in thought, expects us to think out again the instinctive impulses of nature so as to perfect them? . . . If there is a future for mankind, it can only be imagined in terms of a harmonious conciliation of what is free with what is planned and totalized.⁶⁹

The Phenomenon of Man is not a book about eugenics any more than any one of Teilhard's theological constructions are inherently about eugenics. Both this book and Teilhard's many constructions, however, rely upon a twofold approach to controlled human evolution, spiritual *and* physical. For Teilhard, the latter is just as important as the former, and only in the combination of the two can we hope to reach human perfection, divinization, and the omega point.

As previously mentioned, Teilhard did not go on a book tour after publishing *Phenomenon* and have public discussions with leading figures of evolutionary Christianity. This and other texts were circulated among friends and repeatedly rejected by censors not for any racist or eugenic leanings, but simply because of their continued insistence that human evolution was a fact, and a fact that must be considered theologically. As such, Teilhard simply continued writing after *Phenomenon* was completed. Essay after essay, some longer, some shorter, never diverging from his original theses, always expanding and entrenching deeper.

My decision to break the narrative here is arbitrary because there was no big publication and no public reception until well after Teilhard died, which was well after eugenics had gone out of fashion and largely but not entirely out of practice. But as the combination of "Human Energy" and *Phenomenon* marks Teilhard's first use of the word "eugenics," I felt it important to pause and consider why he continued to use the word. By 1937, eugenics was hotly debated, with some major scientists noting its deficiency in producing accurate results and the general public wary of increasing sterilization programs. Many eugenic organizations still existed, but the open glorification of eugenic language and eugenic practices by Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich made

⁶⁹ De Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 282–83.

the rest of the world uneasy. Even before the nadir of Nazi antisemitism was realized, the existence of violent antisemitism and mass sterilization practices tied to eugenic practices and language was well known in the late 1930s.

Although Teilhard was racist in his anthropology and paternalism, he was, as this article has pointed out, ardently against many forms of explicitly hateful racism that existed in the early twentieth century. He insisted, until his death, that some unequal mixture of all the peoples of the world would create the next evolution of humanity. Still, in his private letters and unpublished essays, he betrays himself smitten with the notion of eugenics as a way to better humanity, even after the war is over and the genocide revealed. Teilhard was nothing if not confident in his approach to science, philosophy, theology, and the universe. Why should a bad representation of eugenics sway him to change his perception of a potential way to change humanity for the better? Why should Mussolini's violence change Teilhard's liking of his desire to make his race great? Why should the calls for racial equality change Teilhard's scientific conclusions that human races are inherently unequal?

The final fifteen years of race and eugenics in Teilhard's writings are the most striking to present because they are the profile of a man in his fifties, sixties, and seventies who never lets go of views that are considered repugnant and dangerous in most places today. During these years Teilhard often found himself heralded in scientific quarters while being rejected by Jesus and Vatican censors, while at the same time being praised and exalted in the underground Catholic progressive communities who read his unpublished works.⁷⁰

Would things have been different if the Catholic Church had acted differently against Teilhard? If other Catholic authors had begun to engage with evolution more directly, would Teilhard have altered his eugenic approach? We will never know, but if we take the example of his commitment to scientific racism, the answer is likely no. It is clear from his writings that he understands the many scientists and nonscientists who disagree with his racial approach and that he disagrees strongly with all of them. The remainder of this article will highlight Teilhard's commitments, in the face of rising disagreements, both to his racial anthropology and to his views on eugenics. The disagreements are faced head-on and consistently disregarded by Teilhard, even when faced with the Nazi genocide, even when the disagreements reach global proportions in the famous UNESCO statement on equality of the races in 1950. Teilhard remains consistent in his theology, his science, and his certainty until the end.

⁷⁰ See John Cowburn, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: A Selective Summary of His Life* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 80–100.

Teilhard's Continued Racist Anthropology, 1939–1955

While writing *Phenomenon*, Teilhard also wrote a piece in 1939 in which he expressed a scientific and theological explanation for the past and future of human racial stratification and evolution called “The Natural Units of Humanity.”⁷¹ Portions of the essay seem to be answers to his detractors on race, as he directs his thought to racial equality arguments more than once. First, he addresses the scientists themselves, anthropologists like W. E. B. DuBois, Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and others.

In recent times, interested and alarmed by the “revival of race,” anthropologists of all countries have tried to examine with some care the nature of these races of which everyone is speaking. And a good number of them have reached and accepted the paradoxical conclusion that it is impossible to find any scientific criterion allowing the recognition and separation of natural groups within humanity.

He continues, disparaging geneticists as mistaking the trees for the forest:

For geneticists in particular, who are led by logic to define race by the constant and exclusive association of certain genes in the germinal cells, the difficulty has become insurmountable. The discovery in several subjects of a collection of identical genes appearing decidedly improbable, race vanishes: we are confronted only with individuals. *Advanced as scientific, this conclusion seems to me to be based rather on a sophism, which bears some analogy to those by which Zeno proved the non-existence of motion.* It is correct that, viewed with a microscope, the outlines of human families seem to grow dim. But is this not because a microscope is precisely the most suitable instrument to make them disappear from our sight?⁷²

This was not an uncommon argument in the 1930s, with many scientists denying racial equality by claiming phenotypical differences (what we see) were more important than anything genetics can offer.

After once again claiming his aforementioned order of racial evolution, he considers why the inequality of races exists and offers a few answers that are meant to salve:

Peoples are biologically equal, as “thought phyla” destined progressively to integrate in some final unity, which will be the only true humanity. But they are not yet equal to the totality of their physical gifts and mind. And is it not just this diversity that gives each one its value? . . . These inequalities,

⁷¹ See de Chardin, “The Natural Units of Humanity” (1939), in *The Vision of the Past*.

⁷² De Chardin, “The Natural Units of Humanity” (1939), in *The Vision of the Past*, 198, emphasis added.

which despite the evidence theorists sometimes try to deny, may appear damaging so long as the elements are regarded statically and in isolation. Observed, however, from the point of view of their essential complementarity, they become acceptable, honorable and even welcome. Will the eye say that it despises the hand, or red that it prefers not to appear on the same picture with green or blue?⁷³

As this quote shows, Teilhard's love of diversity and his devotion to the human unity bound by Christian love continues to be fully dependent upon his commitment to the divinely ordered "inequalities" of human races, which "become acceptable" when viewed from "their essential complementarity." Teilhard rejects any proposal to have unity without the inequality.

This commitment to racial inequality remains consistent throughout the next two decades, with many essays written in support of the idea, including "The Question of the Fossil Men" (1942), "The Directions and Conditions of the Future" (1948), "The Human Zoological Group" (1949), "The Phyletic Structure of the Human Group" (1951), and "Africa and Human Origins" (1954).⁷⁴ It is enough to examine the last essay, completed less than a year before his death, to see how his racial views did not change despite the scientific currents that flowed toward equity.

After admitting that the majority of anthropological evidence pointed to human origins in the continent of Africa, Teilhard takes great pains to note both how Africa as a continent is ill-fitted for higher forms of life and how more advanced humans quickly left Africa soon after they evolved. He titles this section of the essay "Black Africa" and begins with noting the "contradictory" nature of the continent, how it is vast and diverse but has only the "least progressive living forms":

By the fact of its position and configuration, Africa is the most contradictory of the continents as regards its bio-geography. Because of its vast extent and favorable climate on the one hand, it has possessed at least since the end of the Palaeozoic all the qualities required to play the role of active center in the genesis and dispersion of species. But, on the other hand, because of its triangular elongation into the southern hemisphere, it also presents an ideal place of refuge for the least progressive living forms.⁷⁵

⁷³ De Chardin, "The Natural Units of Humanity" (1939), in *The Vision of the Past*, 212.

⁷⁴ "The Question of the Fossil Men" (1942), "The Phyletic Structure of the Human Group" (1951), and "Africa and Human Origins" (1954) can be found in de Chardin, *The Appearance of Man*; "The Directions and Conditions of the Future" (1948), in *The Future of Man*; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Human Zoological Group" (1949), in *Man's Place in Nature: The Human Zoological Group* (London: Harper & Row, 1966).

⁷⁵ De Chardin, "Africa and Human Origins" (1954), in *The Appearance of Man*, 205.

He argues that once a version of *Homo sapiens* evolved in Africa, they quickly left. The emptied land was then filled with less developed versions of humans, in which Teilhard includes the Bantu people, who experienced no resistance in spreading out across an “empty” continent. I quote in length for the sake of being faithful to Teilhard’s own words:

One can only think that, by the very conditions imposed on him by the global distribution of continents, in order effectively and efficaciously to occupy the world man found himself one day inevitably led to abandon the majestic solitude of the African continent and carry the principal center of his operations higher.

“Higher”: that is to say as near as possible to those northern regions where the lands widen out and advance to meet one another—instead of diverging and disappearing, as they do in the south, into the vastness of the great oceans. . . . But exactly as within a flowing fluid, so this sudden northerly expansion of the human mass had to have its counterpart in the south. Everything suggests that Africa, having discharged its excess of human potential on Eurasia and America, and acting now as a refuge (and no longer a cradle) for man, had towards the end of the Quaternary been for a very long time inhabited only by a polymorphous collection of scattered populations.

And curiously enough, it is by means of this depletion that the whole course of events is to be explained. We are sometimes astonished that, flooded by new inhabitants, the vast country of the Pygmies and Bushmen so rapidly and apparently so recently became the “Black Continent” we see today. But we are forgetting the Quaternary human “explosion,” as a consequence of which this country remained demographically drained to the uttermost. Far from colliding with dangerous competitors, the Bantus or pre-Bantus, suddenly prolific and expansionist, were able to advance from the north into a thinly occupied territory, and to spread without difficulty. Only a few centuries of penetration and occupation were enough for an obscure people (but one that had found an empty continent before it!) to become one of the most important sections of humanity.⁷⁶

Besides his essays, Teilhard illustrates his continued commitment to this racist anthropology through his letters from this period, the most famous of which is his frustrated rejection of UNESCO’s racial equity statement, “The Equality of the Races,” from 1950.⁷⁷ Teilhard wrote a letter to the director of UNESCO over

⁷⁶ De Chardin, “Africa and Human Origins” (1954), in *The Appearance of Man*, 205–06.

⁷⁷ While most of Teilhard’s racist comments went ignored by his editors and biographers, this letter was so blatant as to require some comment. Jesuit Pierre Leroy (to whom

this statement and was one of many scientists demanding a retraction of the famous statement:

Yesterday, I couldn't restrain myself from sending two thick (but very amical) pages to Torres-Bodet pointing out to him the scientific uselessness as well as the practical danger of UNESCO's recent proclamation of the dogma on the equality of the races. As if any zoological group could appear and develop without branching constantly! Of course, it's not a question of "equality," but of "complementarity in convergence" (a "convergence" which does not exclude the momentary prominence of certain of its branches over others).⁷⁸

Teilhard publicly campaigned against UNESCO's statement on equality, giving speeches and presentations on the basic inequality of the human race to groups of students, sometimes by himself, and sometimes accompanied by his recently made friend, biologist, and noted eugenicist Julian Huxley.⁷⁹ Teilhard's injunctions, combined with arguments by Huxley and many others, convinced UNESCO to release another racial statement in 1951 attempting to clarify the question.⁸⁰

Teilhard's Continued and Expanded Appreciation of Eugenics, 1939–1953

After first explicitly espousing eugenic ideas in "Human Energy" and *Phenomenon*, Teilhard would not mention it again until after the war in the late 1940s. In "The Human Rebound of Evolution" (1947), he considers the downfall of the Nazi regime and the aftermath of the war. He seems to struggle with

Teilhard wrote this letter) excused Teilhard by arguing that "though no one appreciated the sanctity and worth of every human life better than did Teilhard, he objected to any definition that grouped all the branches of humanity in one homogeneous mass. Especially from a biological point of view, the error in the UNESCO proclamation was quite clear." Pierre Leroy, *Letters from My Friend: Correspondence Between Teilhard de Chardin and Pierre Leroy: 1948–1955* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 46.

⁷⁸ Leroy, "July 29, 1950," in *Letters from My Friend*, 59–60.

⁷⁹ Leroy, "January 1, 1951," in *Letters from My Friend*, 83.

⁸⁰ This 1951 letter was cosigned by Teilhard's friend, promoter, and eugenicist Julian Huxley. It dilutes the question of racial equality slightly while still maintaining the goal of the original document. UNESCO would codify a much stronger stance in 1964, and then, finally, their strongest and most lasting statement, in 1967. UNESCO, "Four Statements on the Race Question," 1969, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000122962?posInSet=1&queryId=290f1335-c3f4-44b2-b71e-567f44cd28f9>.

his previous appreciation for the spirit of nationalism and his hatred for how war fragments the earth:

Despite a regrettable recrudescence of racialism and nationalism [in the war] which, impressive though it may be, and disastrous in its effect upon our private postwar lives, seems to have no scientific importance in the overall process: for the reason that any human tendency to fragmentation, regardless of its extent and origin, is clearly of an order of magnitude inferior to the planetary forces (geographic, demographic, economic and psychic) whose constantly and naturally growing pressure must sooner or later compel us willy-nilly to unite in some form of human whole organized on the basis of human solidarity.⁸¹

Teilhard, however, moves ever forward in his hopes for humanity because he is convinced there is a way to progress beyond our current state. Less than a year later, he completes an essay entitled “My Fundamental Vision,” where he does not explicitly mention eugenics but fully includes the ideas in his description of humanity’s potential for “self-orientation” toward that “critical point of final convergence”.⁸²

If only we take the trouble to consider the full implications of the countless events and portents we are now witnessing in the domain of physics, biology and psychology, the evidence we find forces us to this conclusion: that as a result of mankind’s now standing upon its own feet, life is here and now entering into a new era of autonomous control and self-orientation. As a direct result of his socialization, man is beginning, with rational design, to take over the biological motive forces which determine his growth—in other words, he is becoming capable of modifying, or even of creating, his own self.⁸³

These words are vague and hinting, even though well aligned with the eugenic mindset, but his attached footnote is not. All of this progress, Teilhard argues, “presupposes, among other favorable conditions, . . . effective control, both in quantity and quality, of reproduction in order to avoid over-population of the earth or its invasion by a less satisfactory ethnic group.”⁸⁴

In an essay completed around the same time, Teilhard spends several pages reflecting upon the publication of a recent book, *Our Plundered Planet*, by Henry Fairfield Osborn Jr.⁸⁵ Osborn had done much work in eugenics, being

⁸¹ De Chardin, “The Human Rebound of Evolution” (1947), in *The Future of Man*, 195.

⁸² De Chardin, “My Fundamental Vision” (1948), in *Toward the Future*, 181–82.

⁸³ De Chardin, “My Fundamental Vision” (1948), in *Toward the Future*, 181.

⁸⁴ De Chardin, “My Fundamental Vision” (1948), in *Toward the Future*, 181n11.

⁸⁵ See de Chardin, “The Directions and Conditions of the Future” (1948), in *The Future of Man*; Fairfield Osborn, *Our Plundered Planet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948).

the son of Henry Fairfield Osborn Sr., the famous eugenicist and paleontologist. After the fall of eugenics as a proper point of discussion, Osborn Jr. was among several authors who called for a “Malthusian revival” of worldwide population control that was, in fact, eugenics by another name.⁸⁶ Teilhard argues that “we must pay serious attention to warnings such as that recently uttered by Mr. Fairfield Osborn” in this book.⁸⁷

Osborn is extremely careful to avoid the word “eugenics” in his book, but Teilhard holds no such reluctance, having not felt the same public pressure as the Osborn family. After several pages of support for Osborn’s central thesis, Teilhard presents his clear answer to Osborn’s warnings about population control: individual and racial eugenics, which “come up against apparently insuperable difficulties.”

Individual eugenics (breeding and education designed to produce only the best individual types) and racial eugenics (the grouping or intermixing of different ethnic types being not left to chance but effected as a controlled process in the proportions most beneficial to humanity as a whole), both . . . come up against apparently insuperable difficulties, from the point of view of technical organization and from that of psychological resistance.⁸⁸

But these difficulties do not change the fact “that the problem of building a healthy Mankind already stares us in the face and is growing more acute every day. With the help of science, and sustained by a renewed sense of our species, shall we be able to round this dangerous corner?”⁸⁹

Several pages later, Teilhard offers his succinct combination of eugenics and postmillennialist theological eschatology in a vision of the future “biological success of Man on Earth”:

For a Christian, provided his Christology accepts the fact that the collective consummation of earthly Mankind is not a meaningless and still less a hostile event but a precondition of the final, “parousiac” establishment

⁸⁶ Osborn’s efforts would see a large following after the publication of Anne and Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* in 1968, which would borrow many of Osborn’s arguments and spur a national debate around population control. This masquerade of eugenics would prove to be the largest resurgence of eugenic ideas since the 1940s. See Pierre Desrochers and Christine Hoffbauer, “The Post War Intellectual Roots of the Population Bomb: Fairfield Osborn’s ‘Our Plundered Planet’ and William Vogt’s ‘Road to Survival’ in Retrospect,” *Electronic Journal of Sustainable Development* 1, no. 3 (2009): 37–61.

⁸⁷ De Chardin, “The Directions and Conditions of the Future” (1948), in *The Future of Man*, 230.

⁸⁸ De Chardin, “The Directions and Conditions of the Future” (1948), in *The Future of Man*, 231–32.

⁸⁹ De Chardin, “The Directions and Conditions of the Future” (1948), in *The Future of Man*, 232.

of the Kingdom of God—for such a Christian the eventual biological success of Man on Earth is not merely a probability but a certainty: since Christ (and in Him virtually the World) is already risen. But this certainty, born as it is of a “supernatural” act of faith, is of its nature supraphenomenal: which means, in one sense, that it leaves all the anxieties attendant upon the human condition, on their own level, still in the heart of the believer.⁹⁰

Teilhard continues to engage with eugenic questions and ideas in many essays written over the next several years, sometimes obliquely, such as in a published essay from 1949 when he lamented that people “debate endlessly” on ideas of “peace, democracy, the rights of man, the conditions of racial and individual eugenics, the value and morality of scientific research pushed to the uttermost limit.” But “what good does it do to discuss the ripples on the surface,” he concluded, “while the undertow is still uncontrolled?”⁹¹

Sometimes he engages with explicit instructions, as in a different unpublished essay from the same year, when he begins to describe the “best arrangement with a view to a maximum hominization of the noosphere.” The first priority, he writes, must be to address “a fundamental concern to ensure (by correct nutrition, by education, and by selection) an ever more advanced *eugenics* of the human zoological type on the surface of the earth.”⁹² And sometimes he comes off sounding like Francis Galton, such as when he calls for racial and individual eugenic practices at the end of “The Convergence of the Universe” from 1951:

We must recognize, then, the vital importance of a collective quest of discovery and invention no longer inspired solely by a vague delight in knowledge and power, but by the duty and the clearly-defined hope of gaining control (and so making use) of the fundamental driving forces of evolution.

And with this, the urgent need for a generalized eugenics (racial no less than individual) directed, beyond all concern with economic or nutritional problems, towards a biological maturing of the human type and of the biosphere.⁹³

It is clear, however, that unlike Francis Galton, Teilhard never quite grasped *how* the practical aspect of eugenics might happen smoothly; later that year,

⁹⁰ De Chardin, “The Directions and Conditions of the Future” (1948), in *The Future of Man*, 235.

⁹¹ De Chardin, “Does Mankind Move Biologically Upon Itself? Galileo’s Question Restated” (1949), in *The Future of Man*, 255.

⁹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “The Sense of the Species in Man” (1949), in *The Activation of Energy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1971), 202; emphasis in original.

⁹³ De Chardin, “The Convergence of the Universe” (1951), in *The Activation of Energy*, 295.

this “urgent need” leads him to propose a small group of scientific men in order to “lay the foundations of a *technics* (both biophysical and psychological) of *ultra-evolution* from a two-fold point of view”:

- a. Both of the planetary arrangements that should be conceived (in general research, for example, and in eugenics) with a view to an ultra-arrangement of the noosphere
- b. And of the psychic energies that must be generated or concentrated in the light of a mankind which is in a state of collective super-reflection upon itself.⁹⁴

This continued impulse to further study scientific uses for eugenics in 1951 was echoed in a letter to Pierre Leroy that year, in which he writes:

We must recognize that this new ever-accelerating research demands—no matter what the price—that we dare to sketch the lines of the new ethic (and theology) to energize and control without hindering it. Christification of Research, Christification of Eugenics, and Christification of our thinking about the multiplicity of our thinking about inhabited planets—these are the three vital subjects which religion should begin to examine now, since they represent the three areas on which man will have to take a stand in the next hundred years.⁹⁵

Two years later he returns to the perceived population problem to which he gave so much energy in 1948 and expands upon the ideas of traveling to the stars. He still believes very much that humans are headed for “asphyxiation which threatens us” and for which there are only two perceived remedies: “either a drastic restriction of reproduction, or . . . a mass migration of human beings to some uninhabited star.”⁹⁶ Instead, we must look for release “not in a eugenic reduction nor in an extra-terrestrial expansion of the human mass, but rather in what one might call ‘an escape into time, through what lies ahead.’”⁹⁷ It is unclear exactly what he means, but it seems clear that he thinks a large-scale forced reduction of people (e.g., Nazi practices) is not a great idea, and it would be better for humanity to align their psychic energies and thus relieve the tension by reducing themselves naturally, in full harmony. It is not much of a capitulation, but it stands as the only time Teilhard mentions eugenics as something he does *not* want to happen.

⁹⁴ De Chardin, “A Major Problem for Anthropology” (1951), in *The Activation of Energy*, 318; emphasis in original.

⁹⁵ De Chardin, “June 19, 1951,” in *Letters from My Friend*, 92.

⁹⁶ De Chardin, “Reflections on the Compression of Mankind” (1953), in *The Activation of Energy*, 345.

⁹⁷ De Chardin, “Reflections on the Compression of Mankind” (1953), in *The Activation of Energy*, 345.

Teilhard's final explicit mention of eugenics comes six months later, in a letter written in May of 1953.⁹⁸ Teilhard is visibly frustrated and decides to vent his frustrations about people disbelieving him on the matter of eugenics, especially other theologians and Vatican personnel:

On this point, as on many others (eugenics, for example) the Theologians are serenely sitting on the top of a volcano or over an abyss which they do not see, because they refuse to admit that two and two make four (even in those favorable cases where they are capable of counting up to two, or in other words, of measuring the isolated evidence of these three points).—I'm completely done with Theologians!

Again I ask, why is it that in Rome, along with a "Biblical Commission" there is no "Scientific Commission" charged with pointing out to authorities the points on which one can be sure Humanity will take a stand tomorrow—points, I repeat, such as: 1.) the question of eugenics (aimed at the optimum rather than the maximum in reproduction, and joined to a gradual separation of sexuality from reproduction); and 2.) the absolute right (which must, of course, be regulated in its "timing" and its conditions!) to try everything right to the end—even in the matter of human biology; and 3.) the admitted existence (because statistically it's more probable) of Foyers of Thought in every galaxy.

All this descends directly on us—for general reasons of universal order and for basic reasons. And while all this is going on churchmen really think that they can still satisfy the world by promenading a statue of Fatima across the continents!—This kind of thinking manifests itself here in New York too, where Catholic organizations are noisily separating themselves from Trusts or Boards of charitable organizations which have agreed to associate with groups interested in methods of eugenics (even though these groups are just as interested in fecundity as they are in birth prevention). —O Pharisees!⁹⁹

After venting, Teilhard becomes surprised at his own level of candor and blames it on the state of the world and the fact that "it's Sunday and the morning is long":

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. It's without any bitterness, really. ("They" are already done for, and they know it!) Doubtless I'm going because it's Sunday and the morning is long. . . . Everywhere, the signs that the world must shed (and is in the process of shedding) its old skin are now present.—But under what sign will it make a new skin? It's here that

⁹⁸ De Chardin, "May 31, 1953," in *Letters from My Friend*, 170–73.

⁹⁹ De Chardin, "May 31, 1953," in *Letters from My Friend*, 172.

the question of rethinking the Meaning of the Sign of the Cross becomes important.¹⁰⁰

It is the last word we receive on eugenics from Teilhard, betraying a combination of commitment to a racialized eugenics, frustration at his deniers, and resignation to a world that refuses, as it has so many times, to heed his advice. Teilhard died less than two years later, on April 10, 1955. *The Phenomenon of Man* was published in 1959.

Teilhardian Scholarship on Racism and Eugenics

Among contemporary Teilhard scholarship, I find four approaches worth noting with regard to Teilhard's racist and eugenic comments. First, there is the active engagement with Teilhard's eugenic and racist statements, such as is exemplified in this article and in my previous work. The few substantial engagements with my work thus far have been discussed above. Beyond my own work, I was only able to identify two others who actively engaged with this aspect of Teilhard. John Cowburn mentions Teilhard's connection to eugenics in a brief section in a concise biography from 2013.¹⁰¹ After reviewing some of Teilhard's eugenic statements, Cowburn concludes that "we ought not to put him among the main promoters of eugenics but it must be admitted that he was in favour of it."¹⁰² Second and more substantially, Amy Limpitlaw substantially engages both the racist and eugenic statements in her unpublished 2000 dissertation. Limpitlaw discusses both Teilhard's racism as well as eugenics, placing both in tension with his overall vision for human unity.

Teilhard insisted that racial and ethnic inequality is a basic fact of human existence, but he also argued that racial superiority is not attained through the maintenance of racial purity; rather, the strongest racial and ethnic groups are those which are formed out of the synthetic unity of diverse elements.¹⁰³

Limpitlaw argues that these statements must be understood, though not excused, through his theology of suffering and human unity because "a hierarchical social order in which the sufferings of those at the bottom is necessary for the sake of the overall good was considered by Teilhard to be

¹⁰⁰ De Chardin, "May 31, 1953," in *Letters from My Friend*, 173.

¹⁰¹ See Cowburn, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, 73–75.

¹⁰² Cowburn, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*, 75.

¹⁰³ Amy Limpitlaw, "The Kingdom of God as a Unity of Persons: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Organic Model and John MacMurray's Form of the Personal" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000), 119–24.

a perfectly valid state of affairs.”¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, “rather than encouraging action to redress such inequalities and bring those who suffer forward to receive a fuller share of life, Teilhard’s organic vision instead suggests that they should simply accept the necessity of their sacrifice, like good soldiers who willingly give up their own lives for the sake of the battalion’s success.”¹⁰⁵

Similarly, concerning his writings on eugenics:

Teilhard went so far as to question the value of such care for the weak and suffering when it threatens the well-being of the social organism. While Teilhard advocated an ethic of risk and self-sacrifice, it is again a call for self-sacrifice for the sake of the organic whole, and not for the sake of other persons. These very problematic implications undermine Teilhard’s intention to affirm the absolute value of personality and his belief in a personal universe, and they also conflict with a Christianity which insists on the unity of the two commandments to love God and to love one’s neighbor.¹⁰⁶

At this point, however, Limpitlaw argues that these parts of Teilhard’s theology must be seen as secondary to “his vision of organic unity . . . which does not threaten personal being, but instead enhances and completes it.”¹⁰⁷ By the time she has completed this argument twenty pages later, Teilhard’s racism and eugenics are nowhere to be seen, subsumed within a broader vision for human unity and human growth toward the divine, Christ-Omega, a blending of physical and spiritual evolution.

Limpitlaw borrows this act of folding Teilhard’s account of necessary suffering for evolutionary and spiritual growth explicitly from Philip Hefner’s 1970 *The Promise of Teilhard*. Hefner does not deal directly with Teilhard’s racism or eugenics, but he does lament Teilhard’s subversion of human suffering for the sake of a divine unity and argues that this maneuver “has in fact been used in the past by some religious groups as a reason to withdraw from active concern for changing the world, as a reason for retreating into contemplation and asceticism that are far removed from the principles of actability and activance.”¹⁰⁸ One can see a more contemporary version of this approach to Teilhard and suffering in other contemporary scholars such as John Haught, who argues that Teilhard’s evolutionary and emergent vision of suffering offers a welcome counterpoint to theodicies of expiation or antecedent perfection,

¹⁰⁴ Limpitlaw, “The Kingdom of God as a Unity of Persons,” 135.

¹⁰⁵ Limpitlaw, “The Kingdom of God as a Unity of Persons,” 136.

¹⁰⁶ Limpitlaw, “The Kingdom of God as a Unity of Persons,” 140.

¹⁰⁷ Limpitlaw, “The Kingdom of God as a Unity of Persons,” 140.

¹⁰⁸ Philip Hefner, *The Promise of Teilhard: The Meaning of the Twentieth Century in Christian Perspective* (New York, Lippincott, 1970), 105.

presenting an emergent vision where all suffering gains meaning “on the cosmic journey into an uncertain future that will ultimately be taken up into the eternal love of God.”¹⁰⁹ Haught’s vision of suffering as redemptive through emergent perfection is perhaps the best version of Teilhard’s own vision, and yet the lack of mention of either Teilhard’s affinity for eugenic measures or his discussions of the potential eradication of inferior human races leaves sizeable gaps in its applicability beyond a personal theology of suffering. How can Teilhard be trusted to proclaim a theology of suffering on behalf of all humans?

A second and much older approach to Teilhard and racism is to accept and agree with his discussion of races or eugenics, casting it as an important part of his theological vision. This was the approach of some of Teilhard’s first biographers, Claude Cuénot and Robert Speaight, and the famous biologist and eugenicist (and close friend of Teilhard), Julian Huxley. Cuénot defends Teilhard on race, noting that “totalization . . . necessarily entails a particular role for every race, for the various races are not equal, but complementary.”¹¹⁰ He continues, noting Teilhard’s arguments against hateful racism while defending his scientific racism as enlightened:

On the racial question, for example, the source of so much muddled thinking and partisan views, his calm approach is reassuring. Races are not, and never will be, biologically equal. To believe that they are is to shut one’s eyes to biological fact. Are all the children of one family equally strong or equally intelligent? A Chinaman is not a Frenchman.¹¹¹

Speaight similarly argues on Teilhard’s behalf:

He was sometimes mistaken for a racialist because he stated the obvious fact that not all races were biologically and culturally equal . . . It was natural that, in the general advance of mankind, certain groups should emerge as leaders; there should be nothing here to shock racial sensibilities. . . . The varying capacities of ethnic groups were part of the phenomenon of man, and Teilhard was too scrupulous a phenomenologist to pretend the contrary.¹¹²

Despite defending Teilhard strenuously in his racial categories of evolution, neither Cuénot nor Speaight makes mention of Teilhard’s discussion of

¹⁰⁹ John Haught, “Teilhard and the Question of Life’s Suffering,” in *Rediscovering Teilhard’s Fire*, ed. Kathleen Duffy SSJ (Philadelphia: St. Joseph’s University Press, 2010), 64.

¹¹⁰ Claude Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 302.

¹¹¹ Cuénot, *Teilhard de Chardin*, 300–02, 390.

¹¹² Speaight, *The Life of Teilhard de Chardin*, 296. See Speaight’s other mentions of Teilhard’s discussion of races on pages 159, 249, 296, and 316.

eugenics. Given the closeness of their own time to the Holocaust and the Nazi eugenics movement, perhaps they felt this affinity should not be touched.

One can liken Cuénot's and Speaight's approach to that of Julian Huxley, the famous biologist, eugenicist, and good friend of Teilhard, who wrote introductions to the first English printing of *The Phenomenon of Man* in 1959 and the 1962 *Letters from a Traveller* collection.¹¹³ Huxley himself carries a complicated legacy of being antifascist and yet strongly in support of scientific colonialist racism and eugenics, including forced sterilization, well into the 1960s.¹¹⁴ Teilhard praises Huxley and his works multiple times in his letters, and talks of dinners and conversations with him, especially with regard to Huxley encouraging him to write UNESCO to reverse their position on races.¹¹⁵ In a defining moment, Teilhard mocks a reviewer of Huxley's eugenics:

I got angry at the reviewer when he criticized Huxley's warning that in the near future we shall be able to control genetically the products of human generation; because, the reviewer says, it is impossible or dangerous to decide what should be the "best" human type. A very stupid criticism . . . underestimating the fact that, if Man really succeeds in controlling his own heredity, no force in the world will prevent him from using his new power. I recognize that planning is always dangerous. But the question is not there. The question is to decide whether Man can avoid being forced to plan, by the very process of cosmic evolution. And the answer is that he *cannot*: because planning is the essence of Life.¹¹⁶

In turn, Huxley heaps many praises on Teilhard both as man and scholar, referring to a "firm friendship" between them in his introduction to *Letters*.¹¹⁷ In Huxley's 1964 book, *Essays of a Humanist*, he waxes eloquently about Teilhard's vision for the future, including his eugenic ideas, lamenting only that Teilhard "paid insufficient attention to genetics" in *The Phenomenon of Man*, before noting that "in his Institute for Human Studies he envisaged a section of Eugenics."¹¹⁸ Huxley saw a clear alignment between his own vision for humanity and Teilhard's spiritual vision, fueled as they both were by a nascent type of scientific humanism as well as by a similar affinity for eugenics and

¹¹³ See Julian Huxley, "Introduction," in de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 11–28; Huxley, "The Thinker," in de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveller*, 13–15.

¹¹⁴ For an excellent recent book on this complicated legacy, see Alison Bashford, *The Huxleys: an Intimate History of Evolution* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022); for Bashford's treatment of Huxley's friendship with Teilhard, see 397–403.

¹¹⁵ See de Chardin, "March 19, 1947," in *Letters to Two Friends*, 170.

¹¹⁶ De Chardin, "September 18, 1948," in *Letters to Two Friends*, 186–187; emphasis in original.

¹¹⁷ Huxley, "The Thinker," in de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveller*, 13.

¹¹⁸ Julian Huxley, *Essays of a Humanist* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964): 210, 210n1.

scientific racism. While Speaight's and Huxley's approaches may have been popular in the 1960s and 1970s, I know of no contemporary Teilhard scholar who follows their approaches in defense of Teilhard's scientific racism and eugenics.

A third approach to Teilhard and racism is to cast him as an antiracist hero, citing only his statement against hateful racism and positioning him as a defender of a unified world. David Grumett takes this approach in *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity, and Cosmos* from 2005, arguing that "Teilhard is especially critical of the inclusion and exclusion of persons from political community on grounds of race."¹¹⁹ He continues for several pages, analyzing the ways in which Teilhard approaches Marx and how Gustavo Gutiérrez discusses Teilhard's politics. Grumett fails to take into account Teilhard's own colonialist racism or penchant for eugenics, both of which should weigh heavily on any discussion of Teilhard's political motivations and usefulness in discussions of racism today. Susan Kassman Sack also approaches Teilhard this way in her 2019 *America's Teilhard*, in which she weaves a compelling narrative of a progressive, antiracist movement from the 1950s to the late 1960s, and the reception of Teilhard's ideas during that time.¹²⁰ Sack considers the many tensions in the United States during this time and analyzes the breath of fresh air that Teilhard's approach brought into many challenging conversations. Sack's Teilhard, however, is only progressive, and his approach to eugenics is nowhere to be found, despite the fact that she discusses Huxley's significant role in Teilhard's fame.¹²¹ As Sack's account makes clear, this approach to Teilhard is not new, although Sack's and Grumett's erasure of his scientific racism and eugenics is new given Cuénot, Speaight, and Huxley all cited Teilhard's quotes against hateful racism while simultaneously supporting his scientific racism and, in Huxley's case, his eugenics.

The fourth and final approach, and by far the most popular today, is to avoid discussion of Teilhard's racism and eugenics entirely, even in books that attempt to capture Teilhard's entire vision. Examples of this can be seen in Ursula King's *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (1998/2015), Ilia Delio's *Christ in Evolution* (2008), and the two recent edited volumes *Teilhard in the 21st Century* (2003) and *Rediscovering Teilhard's Fire*

¹¹⁹ David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity, and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 242–48.

¹²⁰ See Susan Kassman Sack, *America's Teilhard: Christ and Hope in the 1960s* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).

¹²¹ See Sack, *America's Teilhard*, 48–49, 71n35.

(2010).¹²² I also found this approach present in a 2023 interaction with a Teilhard scholar in the pages of *America Magazine*. After Juan V. Fernández de la Gala wrote a moving piece on Teilhard without mentioning his complicated legacy, I wrote a letter that was published, arguing that, at the least, this legacy must be mentioned. The author responded with arguments about a “respectful” and “bloodless” eugenics, echoing Haught’s arguments about speculation, and mentioning Teilhard’s disabled sister. He concludes with the following statement: “I have not found evidence at all of any Teilhardian support of biological eugenics, supremacist ideas or racial discrimination.”¹²³

This fourth approach can even be found in transhumanist discussions, where eugenic content is otherwise frequently debated. A recent edited volume on Christian transhumanism, for example, contains more than 150 unique mentions of Teilhard, an entire chapter devoted to Teilhard, and several separate discussions of eugenics, but none of the authors mentions either Teilhard’s own discussions of eugenics or how his racist beliefs might affect this eugenic vision or the idea of transhumanism itself.¹²⁴

Conclusion

This article represents the culmination of my work to date on Teilhard’s connection to eugenics since I published my thesis on the significance of such elements in 2017. Given the controversy around my first entrance into this discussion, this article presented a systematic study of Teilhard’s entire corpus in order to investigate his full attitude toward race, racism, and eugenics. It also provided contextual support for the scientific, eugenical, and philosophical milieu of the early twentieth century in order to properly couch Teilhard’s work. This article has shown, among other things, that Teilhard held a life-long commitment to a colonialist racist attitude, developed a scientific racist anthropology by the 1920s, and committed fully to eugenic ideas by the late 1930s. He professed strong beliefs in all three ideas until his passing in 1955.

¹²² See Ursula King, *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015 [1998]); Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008); Arthur Fabel and Donald St. John, eds., *Teilhard in the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003); Kathleen Duffy, *Rediscovering Teilhard’s Fire* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

¹²³ John Slattery and Juan V. Fenández de la Gala, “Teilhard de Chardin, Racism and Eugenics: An Exchange,” *America Magazine*, August 9, 2023, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2023/08/09/teilhard-slattery-fernandez-gala-eugenics-245757>.

¹²⁴ See Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Transhumanism and Transcendence: Christian Hope in an Age of Technological Enhancement* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).

As I have tried to make clear, I have done this work not out of a desire to defame or cancel Teilhard, but to understand him more fully. Given these strains of thought in Teilhard, it is perhaps even more remarkable that a man raised in such a racist climate would opine so desperately for the unification of all humanity. But Teilhard's scientific and spiritual visions of the inherent yet complementary inequalities of human races led to a eugenic belief that biological evolution was just as important to humanity's future as spiritual evolution. If he was raised on a vision of racial equality, would he ever have fallen into the eugenic traps? Similarly, if some of the leading minds of biology in the 1930s and 1940s were not eugenicists themselves, like Julian Huxley, would Teilhard have made the leap alone? Both seem unlikely.

In addition to better understanding Teilhard himself, the secondary goal of this article was to offer some justice to those who were mistreated, abused, sterilized, or killed due to actions stemming from ideas that were professed by Teilhard, even though Teilhard himself was never a part of a eugenic enforcement program. Eugenic sterilization practices continued throughout the United States and Europe long after the Holocaust.¹²⁵ Who knows what effect Teilhard's eugenic arguments may have had on his readers? His ideas certainly bolstered Huxley's confidence in his own eugenic aspirations. Modern science, just like modern theology, should afford no space for any form of racism today, be it hateful, colonialist, or otherwise. Similarly, modern science and modern theology should afford no space for eugenics, the close cousin of racist thought, and all of its relatives, including overpopulation myths, the necessity of genetic manipulation, types of transhumanism, and the creation of genetically perfect children.

Given the scientific truths of our evolutionary development, perhaps we are not meant to control evolution as Teilhard wished, but instead should aim to show that grace, love, and faith provoke a rebuttal to the painful laws that evolution demands of the world. Perhaps a cosmic theology need not be one that calls for a divinely ordered evolutionary future, but one that accepts our divine placement and looks for grace amid the pain. I think we can find beauty, hope, and love in Teilhard amid this grace, and he would have been the first to argue that all humanity must find their unity and fullness in God. But we should not make Teilhard into someone he is not, and we should no longer gloss over his misconceptions and errors for the sake of a modern rebranding.

¹²⁵ See Alison Bashford, "Epilogue: Where Did Eugenics Go?" in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Eugenics*, 539–52.