



Prof. Job Kozhamthadam

Today, be it in physics, chemistry, life sciences, nanotechnology, computer sciences, or information technology, an average inquisitive mindset with some philosophical taste can easily identify an irrefutable proximity between the technical and the conceptual, the physical and the metaphysical, the decoded and the yet to be decoded, and the natural and the supernatural. In tune with the interdisciplinary academic trend of our times, the essays of this volume attempt at exploring how the mastery of nature by science does spell out certain nuances of the mystery so vehemently wrestled with by philosophers and theologians. This volume identifies a few strands of such an unsolicited movement of the mastery of science to the mystery of religion in fields such as physical science, mathematical science, life science, neuroscience, etc. The domains of mystery in the Indian tradition and the present-day culture as the platform for this emerging fusion between mastery and mystery are also recognised herein.

Mastery Meets Mystery is fondly dedicated to Prof. Job Kozhamthadam, the pioneer of science-religion dialogue in India.

Mastery Meets Mystery

Intersecting Science, Philosophy, Religion and Culture

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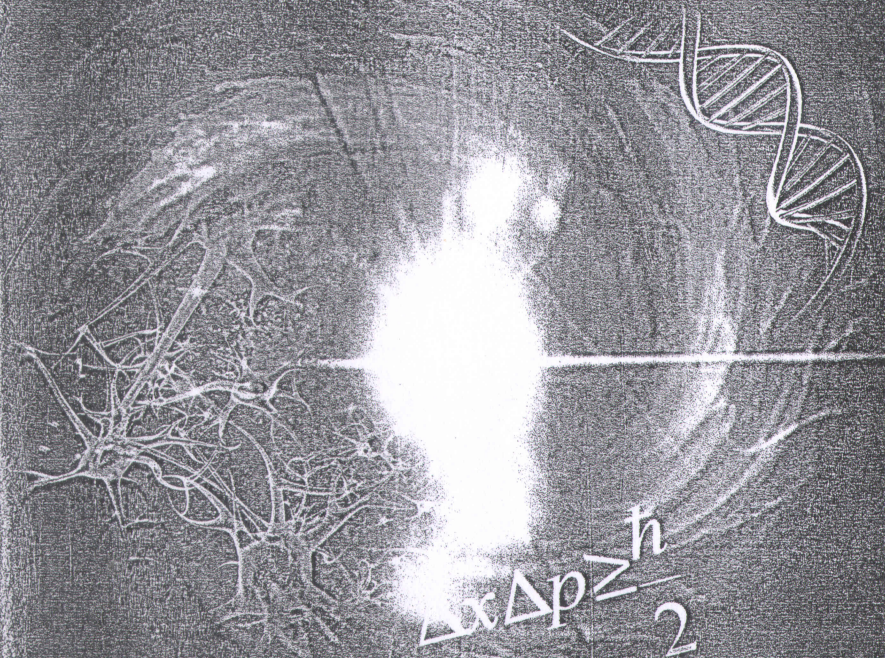
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Augustine Pamplany (Ed.)

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Interdisciplinary Essays in Honour of
Prof. Job Kozhamthadam



Editor
Augustine Pamplany

Mastery Meets Mystery:

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Religion and Culture

*Interdisciplinary Essays in Honour of
Prof. Job Kozhamthadam*

Editor

Augustine Pamplany



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SCIENCE, SPIRITUALITY AND THE
METAPHYSICS OF AUROBINDONIAN AND
TIELHARDIAN INSIGHTS ON EVOLUTION

KAMALADEVI R. KUNKOLIENKER

Introduction

An inquiry into the nature of spiritual evolution as a complementary one to biological evolution is attempted in this paper. The biological evolutionists discuss 'evolution' as a process, but they leave the ontological aspect of this process unexplained. Hence it becomes only a lopsided study. To overcome this, an attempt is made to highlight the contribution of Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin, who emphasized spiritual evolution. The former based on yogic experiments he conducted during his lifetime and his mystical experiences par excellence claimed the possibility of divine life on earth. The latter also had mystical experiences of reality, but also had firm faith in science. Throughout his life, Teilhard struggled to bring about a new Christian vision, through evolution, in which he believed as much as religion. This paper begins with chief

characteristics of Sri Aurobindo's theory of evolution, which is followed by main features of Teilhard's evolutionary theory. A comparison of Aurobindo's philosophy of evolution with Teilhard's account of evolution features next, followed by conclusion, which highlights their contribution to the humanity in general.

I

The problem of evolution has attracted the attention of scientists, philosophers and theologians along with the other intellectuals. There is a general belief that, it is the prerogative of the scientists to give a rational theory of evolution. A scientific explanation is sought for all aspects of human life as if it is the only paradigm that is accepted. However such reductionism leaves us in the lurch as science has its own limitations, by virtue of which some of its theories are inconclusive and highly controversial. Even before the formulation of scientific theories of evolution, the concept of evolution has found its place in the traditions of the East and the West. In the *Taitirīya Upaniṣad* it is mentioned that, "In the beginning all this Universe was non-existent and unmanifest from which this manifest existence was born. Itself created itself; none other created it. Therefore, they say of it the well and beautifully made.¹ Similarly *Samkhya*, one of the orthodox tradition of Indian philosophy also propounded a theory of evolution through the coming together of *purusha* and *prakṛti*. The ancient Greek philosophers in the West, thought of evolution in terms of change, although they were all abstract speculations without any concrete base.

Both science and religion, are quite 'grown up' and are mature enough to meet each other. This meeting is very much essential to bring about an integral understanding. Although,

science can give us a better body and better health, longer life and more comforts, it is the religion which provides us the centre, gives us a soul. The greatest scientists, like Einstein, Polkinghorne, John Barrow, Paul Davies, Richard Feynman, and David Bohm, people of the highest caliber in the world of science, became aware that, science alone is not enough. There is something, beyond our observation, which is more mysterious, which cannot be grasped only through scientific methodology and instruments, but which needs more meditative awareness and intuition. This Reality is closer to thoughts than to things and it is not only objective but also subjective. It is not only content but also consciousness and it cannot be weighed, measured or experimented upon. Although this is true, religion cannot exist anymore as it has existed up to now. Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin gave this message through their works on the role of religion and science to achieve cosmic consciousness through spiritual evolution.

Both of them never met each other to discuss or comment on their respective views on evolution process that they were enchanted with. Science came up with a strong challenge to religion in the form of evolution theory, with its mechanistic agenda that posed a serious threat to theological account of the origin of man. Many Western thinkers - Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Henry Bergson, Samuel Alexander, G.W. Hegel - presented variety of theories of evolution. However, they were not all mechanistic in nature. The pre-Socratic thinkers also deserve a mention, as the seeds of the evolution theory undeniably were sown by them. Darwin's theory gathered more support, although controversial but was highly influential, among the other versions.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a theologian, having unshakable faith in Christ and the Church. But he was convinced

of the truth of evolution beyond doubt. In his book, titled, *Christianity and Evolution*, he writes,

I need do no more than note that at the present moment human knowledge is developing exclusively under the aegis of evolution, recognized as a prime property of experiential reality. So true is this that nothing can any longer find place in our constructions which does not first satisfy the conditions of a universe in process of transformation. A Christ whose features do not adapt themselves to the requirements of a world that is evolutive in structure will tend to be more and more to be eliminated out of hand...if Christ is to be completely acceptable as an object of worship, he must be presented as the savior of the idea and reality of evolution."²

Teilhard devoted his entire life to bring about a reconciliation of religion and science, through the new philosophy and theology of evolution. According to him human progress is the goal of the universe. The whole evolutionary process operates with a purpose of bringing slowly and inexorably, up to a point, which he called Omega Point.

Sri Aurobindo was well acquainted with the Western culture and philosophy and also greatly influenced by Indian scriptures. According to him, theory of evolution has been the key-note of the 19th century thought. Aurobindo accepts the highest conception of reality which the genius of India could evolve and which finds a mention in our scriptures, the concept of *Sat-Cit-Ānanda*. However, he observes that, Indian philosophy and scriptures, both are mainly interested in the destiny of the individual and do not show much concern for the fate of the universe. Secondly, due to the predominance of cyclic view, evolution becomes only a passing phase, since it is followed inevitably by *laya* or dissolution, and that again by another evolution, and so on. With reference to cosmos, therefore, it becomes a maypole dance of evolution and dissolution, leading

nowhere. Even *Sāṅkhya* philosophy, which is supposed to take the process of evolution seriously, is not interested in it as a cosmic process. For Aurobindo, if evolution has to have any meaning then, it must be conceived as a steady march to a higher goal and this must have cosmic character. For him the goal of humanity is Divinity. Sri Aurobindo accepted the cosmic view of evolution of the West, but has rejected its mechanical aspect replacing it by spiritual evolution. Likewise, he rejected the cyclic view, which is very dear to Indian thinking and the individualistic aspect of evolution, and replaced it by the cosmic outlook of the West. He found the Heraclitian dictum, "one out of all and all out of one" very simulative, which was very insightful to Sri Aurobindo's conception of 'evolution' and 'involution.' He believed that this Heraclitian principle was in conformity with science.

According to Aurobindo, the principle of evolution towards Spirit, Light and Knowledge loses all its significance unless it is assumed that the Spirit itself is involved in matter, darkness and ignorance. That is, evolution necessarily involves involution, the ascent by descent. This is the most significant aspect of his theory of evolution.

Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin had two things in common, the profound belief in evolution and the repeated experience of cosmic consciousness. Both saw that the ultimate goal of this evolution was to be the divinization of man on earth. It is a fact that the academic world sanctioned a resemblance in the writings of both the thinkers, although there are differences within.

II

Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Evolution

Sri Aurobindo in his essay on Heraclites praises him for his invaluable insights. He finds Heraclites to be more dynamic than

Nietzsche, because Heraclites gives importance to both, being and becoming. But Nietzsche affirmed only becoming and excluded being from his ontological discourse. He also notes the deficiencies in Heraclites' thought. He observes that, Heraclites could not explain clearly as to why the energy remains unaltered even after change. He prefers here to accept the views offered by Indian scriptures, that *śakti* is consciousness, which preserves by its energy its original scheme of ideas and corresponding forms of things. Thus in formulating his innovative theory of evolution, he was open to the Indian as well as the Western influences. Darwin's theory impacted his views, but he found it unsatisfactory on many counts. In critical estimate of Darwinian theory of evolution, Aurobindo mentions that Darwin could not offer a satisfactory rationale of transformation from one stage to another, for example, from matter to life or from life to consciousness. Secondly, this mechanistic theory supposes a rigid chain of material necessity. But if matter, life, and consciousness are all thoroughly distinct from one another, then it is not proper to explain the higher manifestations on the basis of the order of lower principle. Hence, Sri Aurobindo in his spiritual evolution maintains that the conscious spirit is tacitly present in the inconscient. That is, without the descent of the spirit into the world, there cannot be an ascent into the spirit.

Aurobindo's theory of spiritual evolution is not identical with the scientific theory of form-evolution and physical life evolution. There are three stages in the process of becoming in the spiritual evolution. In the first stage, there is involution of spirit in the inconscience. During the second stage, an evolution in ignorance takes place, with its play of possibilities of a partial developing knowledge. Finally, there is a consummation in a deployment of the spirits self-knowledge and the self-power of its divine being and consciousness.

Characteristics of Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy of Evolution

Anthropocentrism: Evolution is conditioned by involution of the Absolute and man seems to be a transitional phenomenon. But Aurobindo writes, "Either man must fulfill himself by satisfying the Divine within or he must produce out of himself a new and greater being who will be more capable of satisfying it. He must either himself become a divine humanity or give place to Superman."³ In Aurobindo's philosophy of spiritual evolution, anthropocentrism is not opposed to theocentrism. "She (Nature) wills to work out the Superman, the god."⁴ For him, the Spirit itself is an equivalent of Superman. "evolution... towards that superior something, towards Spirit, towards Supermind, towards Supermanhood is inevitably predetermined."⁵

The chief business of individual is to evolve and exceed himself. Not only he has to realize his individuality but he has to enlarge into a cosmic self and undergo a process of a transformation, correction of all that is obscure, erroneous and ignorant in his mentality. This is possible only through self-evolution through what he partially and temporarily is actual and apparent nature to what he completely is in his secret self and spirit. Thus man occupies an important position in his philosophy, as the divine is realized both in and through man. This divinization integrates all aspects of human, his work, his body, his world. This is a very distinctive feature of his philosophy of evolution, that it is not speculative; its premises and conclusions are tested on the basis of experimentation. "The animal is a living laboratory in which nature has... worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious cooperation she wills to work out the superman, the god."⁶

Spiritual Character: Sri Aurobindo recognizes a difference in degree of consciousness in human and in plant, that it is

mental in human and vital in plant, but he maintains that sensation is sensation whether mentally conscious or vitally sensitive, and sensation is a form of consciousness. The mere difference in degree does not amount to a difference in nature. The same holds true in case of human and the so-called inanimate matter. There is an essential identity of consciousness in both, but only the mode differs. Mind, life and consciousness differ from matter on one hand and there is a mutual difference between each of these, on the other. This theory is finalistic in nature and it is a closed finality. According to him, the whole process is Divine *Lila*, Divine play. He looks upon the course of evolution, from a speculative point of view, with the supreme detachment of inalienable bliss. To overcome the 'unconcern' or 'indifference,' Aurobindo stresses the need for liberation which must yield happiness, to make the process of evolution meaningful.

Integration: Integration of the lower into the higher, and triple transformation are yet other important characteristics of future evolution in Aurobindo's evolution theory. If our terrestrial existence (material, vital and mental) should rise to a higher principle, then a radical and integral transformation in our present nature is a must. He observed that the rational mind has not yet risen to the supermind, and so there is a big gap between the two. To achieve this goal, Sri Aurobindo uses 'integral yoga' and the process of 'triple transformation' (psychic, spiritual and supramental). The two stages in triple transformation result in the transition from intellectual to spiritual mind. The third stage involves the passage from the spiritual to supramental mind. In this transformation there is gradual ascending of mental powers starting from the Higher Mind, to Illumined Mind, to Intuitive mind and to Overmind. This ascending movement has to be complemented by one of

descent, that is the overmind and supermind, as supernatural realities should set in our present nature. In order to achieve this, the individual intuitive consciousness must act only in subordination to the Universal Being. In this process of ascension, one experiences universal consciousness, thus making human being as a 'universal individual.' The newly formed nature is not mere substitution for a previous one, but integrates it while transforming it. Thus, Sri Aurobindo is very sure about establishment of a race of gnostic spiritual beings on earth.

Teilhard's Philosophy of Evolution

The theory of spiritual evolution may accept the scientific account of physical evolution as a support, but this support is not indispensable. We observe that Aurobindo makes very little use of scientific data in his theory, since his theory is founded on *yoga* and on mystical experiences. Teilhard de Chardin also developed his views on evolution on the basis of cosmic experience which he had, but Teilhard was very much interested in scientific details of evolution. As a scientist, he had as much faith in science as in religion. *The Phenomenon of Man* was his main work, in which he developed a theory of evolution that accommodated both his scientific knowledge and his deep religious faith. In the late 1930s, he developed this theory but his superiors in the Catholic Church were very much disturbed by the theological implications of his theory. He was essentially exiled from France for the last decades of his life and the Church prohibited him from publishing his theory during his lifetime. In his book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, Teilhard maintained that evolution is not only a theory, but rather, it is the most important force in the universe. According to him evolution was much more than a theory, a hypothesis, a system. For him, it is a general condition to which all theories, all systems and all hypotheses

must bow, if they are to be thinkable and true. He treated evolution as a light which illuminates all facts.

Characteristics of Teilhardian Evolution

For Teilhard, evolution is much more than biological evolution because it also includes the processes by which the stars, the elements and the earth are formed. He believed that evolution has proceeded in three great waves:

1. Evolution in physicochemical realm produced the geosphere.
2. Biological evolution produced what is called biosphere.
3. Evolution of human culture produced, what he called, noosphere.

So evolution is not restricted to biological organisms alone, but also affects the material and cultural world. It should be noted that this is a prescient concept because Teilhard expressed his thoughts in his book long before most of our modern knowledge of Earth's evolution had developed. The following quotation makes his views more explicit: "In the world, nothing could ever burst forth as final across the different thresholds successively traversed by evolution (however critical they be) which has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way."⁷

According to Teilhard, life comes from nowhere than earth itself. In his scientific explanation he says that, the original earth-mass already contained the elements of future life, when it first separated itself from the larger volume of stellar matter. This matter contained pre-life within it, which emerged as the 'elementary consciousness,' which in turn brought about the 'wonderful phenomenon of life, with its noble corollary, the phenomenon of man.' Although consciousness is "only completely evident only in man,"⁸ it does not mean that

consciousness is restricted to human alone. In other words, since human is himself a cosmic phenomenon, the consciousness too 'has a cosmic extension'. According to Teilhard, life is the flowering of matter. "Far from being an exception in the material realm, organic matter is a prolongation at a higher level of the potentialities of inanimate matter."⁹ He views consciousness as *transposition* at a higher level, of the phenomenon of life.

One of the key concept of Teilhardism is that evolution involves the crossing of thresholds, which is connected with spheres. The various layers correspond to so many phases in evolution, the passage between the two different phases in evolution represents a 'threshold' separating two levels of earth-existence. Also a discontinuity in the movement is marked by a break in the stratification. Teilhard distinguishes two such thresholds, the threshold between *matter and life* and between *life and thought*. A threshold, according to Teilhard, is a crisis of the first magnitude, the beginning of a new order. A threshold despite all discontinuity, does preserve a real unity between the two realms it separates. Teilhard brings in the fundamental laws of his evolution theory at this juncture: first, all forms of earth-existence have a *within*, by which he understands some form of consciousness in the widest sense of the word, and the second, is the degree of *interiority* corresponding to the degree of structural complexity. He recognizes some form of *interiority* in matter and therefore a real continuity between matter itself and life. He also maintains an equally real discontinuity between both. At the next threshold, Teilhard distinguishes between *thought* and mere *animal consciousness*. The *within* of human is specifically 'reflection,' i.e., "no longer merely to know, but to know oneself; no longer merely to know, but to know that one knows."¹⁰

Teilhard views consciousness as 'in the second degree' and maintains that reflection is that form of interiority, which

constitutes man into a centre, where *human consciousness* no longer diffuses itself over a multiplicity of exterior things, but it returns to the unity of its own interiority. This re-turn of human upon himself is called by Teilhard 'reflection', which distinguishes between the human and non-human consciousness. Further, he conceives of evolution as progressive deepening of the within of things, an increasing interiorization. With thought, an entirely new type of interiority appears.

Like Sri Aurobindo, Teilhard's theory is anthropocentric, since human is at the very centre of evolution. It is also finalistic and has spiritual character. He introduces 'a divine focus of mind' which according to Teilhard, is the center of humankind. Since it is divine, in his evolution theory, it is radically transcendent with regard to human. The most important concept in Teilhardian evolution, which is the supreme center of attraction, is an ultimate, 'Omega Point,' which he places beyond human and makes it the summit of phenomenal evolution. He also makes this concept as preexisting to evolution as the prime condition of its entire development. Next feature is that, it is not a product of evolution, but the source of evolutionary push, which it sustains throughout by attracting it towards itself. Thus, Omega is God, in whom man finds his fulfillment. It is God who realizes the fullness of 'human' by drawing him (human) to himself (God). Then Teilhard introduces the concept of 'planetization,' a process by which humankind achieves its unity as a collective reality: "projected forwards, this law of recurrence makes it possible for us to envisage a future state of the Earth in which human consciousness reaching the climax of its evolution, will have attained a maximum of complexity, and as a result, of concentration by total 'reflexion' (planetization) of itself upon itself."¹¹

Convergence and Divergence of Aurobindo and Teilhard

To begin with, there is a chronological coincidence regarding their coming into this world, as Aurobindo is born in 1872 and passed away in 1950. Teilhard was born in 1881 and passed away in 1950. Their common interest was the future evolution of human. Both the thinkers were convinced of the fact that mechanistic explanation of material or physical evolution, in order to be complete, requires its complementary aspect of transcendental consciousness or spiritual evolution. Founded on their mystical experiences of the divine and the conviction that evolution process still continues, they seek universal unity, which is identified as cosmic consciousness. Both, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard single out consciousness as the golden thread running through evolution.

Both the thinkers admit that the spiritual principle is the basis of universal genesis. The convergence of their thought lies in the primacy that is given to consciousness. Aurobindo asserts a unity in three distinct realms; matter, life and mind, that they are all manifestations of consciousness. Therefore, consciousness is the unifying element running through all forms of material existence. It is due to his yogic experiences that he detects consciousness at every stage in evolution and ascribes it to supreme Consciousness, which inheres the involuntary and voluntary force. Similarly, Teilhard too accepts 'life' as the unifying principle. He could 'see' the first movements of life, even in the dead matter, as he writes in *Phenomenon of Man*, "In a coherent perspective of the world life inevitably assumes a 'pre-life' for as far back before it as the eye can see."¹² At the other end of evolution he finds that the biological laws are at work in the complex structures of social relationships, economic interdependence and cultural exchange, though the laws of life are transposed to mode of thought. But like Aurobindo, he

asserts that it is consciousness, which organically links pre-life to life itself and to thought. Teilhard calls this universally present consciousness the 'within' of reality, which he distinguishes from without. Aurobindo asserts the essential identity of consciousness at all stages of evolution and for him it is a matter of change of degree. But for Teilhard, although consciousness is a unifying element, it is of a change of nature.

Both, Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard were mystics, and mystics as such, of their very nature, are concerned with eternity rather than time and both were staunch believers in evolution. However, it is true that evolution takes place within time. So, both of them had the wisdom to treat the great orthodoxies of the world and the attitude of these orthodoxies towards science as the best approximations of the truth or reality. They also considered this fact as simply a stage in the evolutionary process which must be transcended or even discarded in the light of new scientific age.

The divergence in their views either on religion or purpose of evolution is, due to the different religio-philosophical background. With reference to cosmic experience, Teilhard considered it as something to be transcended, whereas for Aurobindo, it was the final goal. For the former, it is 'diversifying union' and for the latter, it is 'union through identity.' For Teilhard, religion is not a transitional phenomenon, because if rationalism substituted reason for religion, religion emerges anew after reason becomes weak. Aurobindo considers religion as essentially evolutionary, that is, it is to be superseded by gnostic consciousness. In that case, the renewal, the resurgence of religion is a setback in the progress of consciousness. Like religion, morality also is an evolutionary phenomenon for Aurobindo, which is not the case for Teilhard.

Conclusion

It is the scientific theory of evolution which empowered Teilhard to revision Christianity. It was essentially his spiritual, experiential and mystical aspect of life which empowered him to discuss cosmicisation of Christ, culminating into one point, i.e., Omega. Although Teilhard suffered at the hands of the Church authorities till his death due to his ardent faith in science, his striving faith in God, the Christ, compelled the Papal authorities today, to declare that Christianity is not opposed to evolution. This is surely Teilhardian unshakable faith in scientific facts which empowered him and gave him courage to rethink about the 'Historic Christ.' This in turn empowered the Church towards the amalgamation of 'evolution' in the changing face of Christianity. Pope John Paul II stated in 1996: "...new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge..."¹³ Pope Francis backed the theory of evolution and the Big Bang: "The Big Bang, which today we hold to be the origin of the world, does not contradict the intervention of the Divine Creator but, rather, requires it. Evolution in nature is not inconsistent with the notion of creation because, the evolution requires the creation of beings that evolve."¹⁴

The fact that the evolutionary theory is not opposed to the creation and genesis of the universe is a great step forward towards Teilhard's remolding or reshaping the new theology. This phase is also, very prominently pushed by faith in science and the faith that Teilhard had in his mystical experiences.

As we come to the practical aspect of Sri Aurobindo's view, we find that he made an experiment upon his entire integral being, using it as evolutionary laboratory, so as to evolve and

manifest higher grades of consciousness reaching up to the supermind. When he left his body, his task of making a divine body was carried forward by the Mother, who later discovered the 'mind of the cells.' He gave a refreshing review of ancient Indian Scriptures, a dynamic reinterpretation, to highlight their relevance and applicability in the post-modern world. Sri Aurobindo not only excelled in this task, but also came to be known as the supreme yogi or sage of the post-modern world, through his new 'integral yoga'. Indian Philosophy, to some extent, was interpreted as idealistic and world negating. However, in his re-interpretation of the Vedas, he brought out their essential concern with this world, which was a necessary corrective to the dominant inwardness of later *Upanishads*. He had mystical experiences of the Oneness of Cosmic Consciousness as he practiced *yoga*. Through his lifelong yogic *sādhana*, and his mystical experiences, he introduced the concept of involution and evolution, linking science, spirituality and religion – further making his Integral *Yoga*, religiously neutral. Teilhard's as well as Sri Aurobindo's invaluable contribution to humanity thus was possible through their integration of science and religion. Rightly, While Sri Aurobindo's *Life Divine* can be called a post-modern *Upanishad*, Teilhard is a visionary of new Christianity.

Notes and References

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2. Teilhard Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution* (London: Williams Collins, 1971), p. 78.
3. Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), p. 193.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4
7. Teilhard Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, translated by Bernard Wall (London: William Collins, 1959), p. 71.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
9. J. Feys, *The Philosophy of Evolution in Sri Aurobindo and Teilhard de Chardin* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1973), p. 84.
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11. Teilhard Chardin, *The Future of Man*, translated by Norman Denny (London: Image Books, 2004), pp. 117-118.
12. Chardin Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man*, p. 57.
13. Kuruvilla Pandikattu, *Pope Francis on Creation and Evolution* (Pune: Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, 2014), p. 8.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.