

# Towards a Politics of Communion and the Common Good:

## Some Reflections on Chardinian Thought, International Relations and Global Politics

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### Summary

The following essay investigates Teilhard de Chardin's idea of a fraternal, Christic society by connecting it with timely and relevant issues in my research fields of global politics and international relations (IR): the South China Sea dispute and the politics of the global COVID-19 response. The essay proceeds with a four-part structure: it begins with an introduction which gives the thesis and overview followed by a theoretical framework which tries to sketch out de Chardin's political theory based on his theological and philosophical works. Next, the third part tries to apply his political theory of idealist fraternalism to the issues in global politics and IR mentioned, and then the analyses are capped off with a concluding section which culminates the discussion by connecting Teilhard's influential ideas with the recent Papal Encyclicals of "Laudato Si" and "Fratelli Tutti."

This essay attempts to discuss and apply Teilhard's ideas thematically by retracing back to the ideas presented in the theoretical framework section, most especially the enduring influence of de Chardin's devotion to the Sacred Heart together with his underlying idea of progressive human evolution throughout his works. Critically, the essay finds that it is precisely these present, real-world examples of costly fraternal failures (the irresolution of the South China Sea dispute and the fragmented global COVID-19 response) that sabotage our collective human efforts to have an institutionalist approach towards modern politics—an important reform to fulfill de Chardin's thought which, in turn, critiques contemporary pessimism and preoccupation with the idea of power or the *realpolitik* as the primary political objective rather than communion and the common good. In connection, by reflecting on our failures today in ushering a fraternal, Christic global society of tomorrow, Teilhard de Chardin's theological and sociopolitical ideas enjoy their standing relevance as a prophetic call towards transformative action: *i.e.* the need for us human beings to fulfill our ideal humanity precisely by emulating the divine humanity of Jesus Christ: His life of love and service for others that were reflected through His altruism and radical self-giving.

“We have been put into the world not to die, but to live,  
— to *exit* from this World, to *emerge* from it.”

—Teilhard de Chardin *as quoted in* Faricy (1988: 273)

## INTRODUCTION

It should come to be a peculiar surprise to find myself meditating on the possible connections between the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, my research field of international relations, and the current COVID-19 pandemic which we all collectively face as a global crisis of unprecedented proportions. Yet why should not there be any connections? Every day, today, we are reminded that exclusivist thought which forces us to think in terms of only one category or discipline is severely limited and shortsighted. In the Philippines, my home country and where I currently reside, we have faced not just the pandemic this year but a concoction of other crises such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and two consecutive super typhoons that have led to hundreds of lives lost and billions of pesos worth of damages. These events, our experts reflect, require the knowledge and skills of a *multidisciplinary* approach: one that is able to integrate insights in public administration and governance with those in engineering, disaster risk reduction and public health to be able to craft responses that are able to address the needs of especially our poorest and most vulnerable.

The thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the ravaging global pandemic, and the problems addressed by my research field of international relations all converge on the fact that synthesis and communion are important in both epistemic and ethical terms. More particularly, this paper is a reflection on how de Chardin’s optimistic philosophy can interpellate international relations which is characteristically pessimist by being dominated by the paradigm of realism. Thus, as a response, I would like to contend that liberal institutionalist international relations, intersecting with the humanistic philosophy of Teilhard de Chardin, is one of the ways in which natural human evolution actively manifests to bring about our collective synthesis into one fraternal, Christic Body. In particular, I expound and analyze this by looking into two popular subjects in international relations today: [1] the South China Sea dispute and the [2] global response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

## FRAMEWORK: CHARDINIAN THEOPOLITICAL THEORY

The meditations of Teilhard de Chardin crossed from the scientific to the metaphysic, as he contemplated the theo-philosophical implications of scientific findings such as that of evolution (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012). This is poignantly observed by Faricy (1988) who contends that

the main structure and essence of Chardin's thought may be observed from his deep faith in the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ. His theology, as academics would notice, was *incarnational* precisely because he saw that the synthesis of the Christian faith was the *humanity* of Jesus which served as a model for what the humanity of the world should be (*ibid.*). Thus, as opposed to theologians who separated the sacred from the profane, the spiritual from the physical and the scientific from the divine, de Chardin sought to reconcile religious faith with science, with Jesus Christ as the penultimate synthesis (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012; Faricy, 1988). As Faricy (1988: 264) adequately summarizes, de Chardin had a deep faith in God *and* the world and this was synthesized by the Divine that *became flesh*: Jesus Christ, and in particular, His Sacred Heart.

The Incarnational premise from which de Chardin proceeded since his childhood marks a philosophy that undoubtedly has social, ethical, and political implications. Curtis (1962: 328), for one, connects de Chardin's idea and sense of 'plenitude' with Emile Durkheim's idea of integration and George Mead and Charles Cooley's arguments that link individual and social consciousness. In particular, the thought of de Chardin is able to proceed towards these sociopolitical concerns precisely because his main idea, derived from the scientific theory of evolution and his observations that matter tends to organize itself, is that the physical universe including the human species is undergoing a process of Christogenesis in which all are going towards—and being integrated in—Christ who is the Omega or the teleological point of existence and being. This, of course, radically converges with the Pauline idea of renewal and resurrection in Jesus (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012).

De Chardin's Christogenesis, in turn, has both anthropological and sociological translations. Coming from an era in which burgeoning science and communication technology coincided with the ideological battles between Democracy, Communism, and Fascism, de Chardin (1959) sought to open up the generally pessimistic modern consciousness—which was plagued by anxiety wrought by information nausea—to a hopeful disposition to this eventual synthesis in Christ to which we are all actively working towards through our human lives' efforts to emulate the Sacred Heart. A general four-step outline for the de Chardin's thoughts is thus in order: [1] first is his scientific observation regarding the natural tendency of matter to self-organize (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 571, 573); [2] second is this tendency's progression towards the natural process of evolution which, as a general condition, is a phenomenon "to which all theories must bow" (Neilson, 1960: 105); [3] third is his *a posteriori* argument that the evolution of biological reality into human consciousness is the intention of the progressive universe (Curtis, 1962: 327); and finally, [4] is his conclusion that socialization, whose underpinning is human consciousness, can then be safely surmised as a by-product of the principle of evolution (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 575).

It is, thus, not far-fetched at this point to see how de Chardin's (1976 *through* Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 567) teleological construction of the universe and story of the human species is driving towards a theist point: *i.e.* that one can make the argument that we are living in "a universe that is Person." In particular, this is, as Faricy (1988: 265) notes, de Chardin's deep meditation on a "Cosmic Christ" who manifests both through a Christic cosmos but at the same time is omnipresently rooted in human particularity or—in other words—*incarnate*.

The incarnational theology of de Chardin enables him to take a pastoral and practical approach to his Catholic faith. Once again in the observation of Faricy (1988: 266), Teilhard was a theologian who took a "voluntarist perspective" which emphasized love, will, and acting rather than truth and understanding. For indeed, since to him the incarnate Christ was the penultimate point of the Christian faith and human existence, at once, the dichotomy between the human and the divine is undone because the divine *transforms* and *perfects* the human and makes it into something more than itself through Communion: *i.e.* much like how marriage enables individuals to be more than their individuality and precisely just like how the Trinity serves as the perfect symbol of constant love and self-giving (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 572).

On another level, de Chardin observes that Christ's elevation of humanity and creation does not just happen by God being a part of this universe and the human species as well but rather precisely because He also proactively undertakes the transformative sacrifice of the Cross, which, through Him, enables us to partake in the divine, eternal life (Mooney, 1965: 436-7). It is the task of Christ, Mooney (1965: 436) reflects, to animate the faithful and unite everyone to His body so that resurrection and redemption may be given to all; and *critically*, this does not, for de Chardin, mean that all will be oppressively subjugated under Christ with an imperialistic idea of the Kingdom of God. No. The terms of union is an enlightened one for Teilhard, and he emphasizes this on both epistemic and metaphysical grounds. First is that he predicts that religion will be the synthesis of the human arts and sciences most especially given that the cosmos is Christic; and second is that what will unite people under a "common credo" is not political power and coercion but *love* (de Chardin, 1959: 325, 328-30). Love is, for de Chardin (1959: 329-30), what makes us more human and so "we must believe without reservation in the possibility and necessary consequence of universal love." Indeed, in his more explicitly political and sociological reflections, de Chardin notes that it is only love which enables peoples' unity without fusion—a unity that enables human beings to cease to be self-contained individuals without eliminating their identity (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 572; de Chardin, 1959: 327). De Chardin (*as quoted in* Faricy, 1988: 274) thus wants to live "in an atmosphere of supreme abandonment and trust," an optimistic longing for what Neilson (1960: 103) recognizes as "a time when there will be no economic or social hindrance to *fraternal* associations of communities." In this respect, this may precisely be why

the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan marked the Jesuit priest as a thinker who was significantly ahead of his time (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 576) given that de Chardin (1959: 319-321) saw the shortcomings of his era's warring political ideologies: [1] democracy in its excessive liberalism had the tendency to make it hard for individuals to have a sense of—and consider—the common good; [2] communism in its excessive materialism can tend to be individually oppressive by viewing the human person as just a part of a “mechanical collectivity”; and finally [3] fascism which, through its nostalgia for an overly-glorified past, loses hope for our synthesis towards a human future and instead seeks to artificially fabricate the modern present in the standards it selfishly chooses for its own self. Far from these, why should modern politics, in its over-glorification of pessimistic realism/belief in the *realpolitik*—most exemplified by war—remain and be treated as an anthropological and sociohistorical “fact”? To remain in such thinking is, for de Chardin (1959: 320), tantamount to a defeatist attitude that does not dare ask why evolution happens, why it has led us to where we are today, and where we can be in a better future through both ours and God's active, creative intervention.

## CHARDINIAN THOUGHT AND IR: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

### DISPUTE AND THE GLOBAL COVID-19 RESPONSE

The path towards our eventual synthesis in a Christic, fraternal body is indeed complex and uneven because, as de Chardin (1959: 316) himself testifies, progress will not happen by itself most especially given that our consciousness opens up the possibility for us to refuse to put ourselves in the service of others (Curtis, 1962: 328; Mooney, 1965: 430). Mistakes and failures—pain—these are the costs of progress and evolution in themselves working through human agents that strive towards perfection (Mooney, 1965: 431). Unsurprisingly, this is also perhaps why de Chardin (1959: 316) views the human species optimistically as still young, fresh and with reserved potential; and also why he curiously looks forward to a better institutionalist international relations of tomorrow as he quipped to a frustrated diplomat friend that time will eventually help the human species solve the problem of bureaucracy (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 576).

This anecdote together with Teilhard's optimistic social outlook gives an insight as to what kind of international relations he would have supported, with this undoubtedly being the liberal institutionalist approaches to IR. Liberal institutionalist international relations pertain to an analytical approach to the said field which proceeds from the conviction that power—or the *realpolitik*—can be interpellated by institutions that [1] protect the rights of individuals and [2] limit the arbitrary actions of powerful states within a framework that constrains state actions to ones that are just, lawful and

legitimate. It is, as in the philosophy of de Chardin, a notably optimistic<sup>1</sup> worldview which believes that the anarchic condition of the international arena may be put into *order* and that an *integrated* form of pluralist global governance based on the consent of states, free trade [economic liberalism] and rule of law and human rights [political liberalism] is an undeniable social good towards a better tomorrow. This radically translates back again to de Chardin's (1959: 317, 329-30) beliefs on [1] the need for human beings to have a passionate sense for growth and [2] that one way we grow, politically, is to upend our longstanding pessimistic view of political reality being the sole subject of coercive power and force alone. Given this, what better way to evolve forward towards a Christic tomorrow other than to reflect on the short comings and deficiencies of today's global politics?

To the international relations scholar, two issues stand out the most today with respect to evaluating the success of liberal institutionalism thus far: first is the South China Sea Dispute and second is our current global response to COVID-19 which has been riddled with today's politics of mistrust and inequality.

*The South China Sea Dispute.* The South China Sea dispute is one of the world's most longstanding and complex territorial disputes. Spanning between Southeast Asian countries namely, the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei; including also the strategic interests of key regional powers such the United States, Japan, Australia and India (Simon, 2012: 995), the dispute is a multifaceted issue that is a core disagreement between the first group of countries mentioned in terms of [1] territorial sovereignty, [2] disputes over rightful jurisdiction over waters and sea bed, and [3] disputes over the proper balance of coastal-state and international rights to use the seas for military purposes (Dutton, 2011: 42). Critically, the dispute thus has implications over strategic control and hegemony over the South China Sea which is both a global shipping route hotspot and a marine region that is known for its biodiversity and natural resources (Simon, 2012: 996). Yet on another level, the dispute is also normative in that it is about fundamentally conflicting interpretations of the institution of international law, most specifically the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (Buszynski, 2015; deLisle, 2015; Reichler, 2017) and how it may be used to govern sovereign rights, entitlements, and the general right to open sea access in the region. As scholars following the dispute note, the biggest development in the region since China's post-2009 increasing militarization and 2012 stand-off with Philippine maritime security forces is the 2016 Arbitral Award by the Permanent Court of Arbitration which has, among others, found that China violated the sovereign rights and entitlements of the Philippines to its own Exclusive Economic Zone in the region by preventing fishing and exploratory access and also inflicting irreparable damage in the marine

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<sup>1</sup> An optimistic ethos is a primary characteristic of liberalism. As John Gray (1995) notes, liberalism has a positive view of the human person and social institutions in that it believes they can [and should] always be improved for a better future.

environment through its building of artificial islands. These islands, in turn, host military aircrafts and help China exert hegemony in the region (Buszynski, 2015: 126; Kojima, 2015: 169; Dutton, 2011: 59-61; Le Thu, 2018; Reichler, 2017: 8-9).

Given China's denial of acceptance of the Arbitral Ruling which has undoubtedly clarified states' maritime entitlements and taken away the legal justifications of the PRC and its continuing increase of its police power in the highly militarized and highly contested maritime region, what the South China Sea dispute thus demonstrates is what de Chardin saw as the capacity of human consciousness to refuse the common good and work against initiatives that drive the human species forward towards the ideal of Christic, fraternal relations. This is undeniably so given that continuing Chinese efforts in the South China Sea have been already evaluated as unlawful, with its extensive claims espoused through its 9-dash map constituting claims that are not rooted in the Law of the Sea which it interprets in Sinocentric terms to give the country significant exceptional grounds for its territorial objectives (Buszynski, 2015). As an ironically heavily maritime-trade and maritime-resource dependent country, what China does not realize, scholars note, is that by its continuing disregard for maritime international law it is setting up precedent for more countries to eschew the Law of the Sea which ensures fair, just, and equitable access to the ocean for all countries (Dutton, 2011; Buszynski, 2015; Reichler, 2017).

And indeed, it may well be that it is not just international law in itself that China is threatening but rather Southeast Asia's efforts to create an environment of mutual trust, peace and multilateralism that interpellates the threat and use of coercion with the rule of law and just dialogue between countries. As scholars note, China is [1] violating its duty to cooperate under UNCLOS to which most of the region is a signatory party (Kojima, 2015); that [2], it has, through its actions, managed to drive a wedge of discord between Southeast Asian states who have seen their efforts for regional cooperation fail given that the states are [a] now choosing between their support for China and its claims in exchange for Chinese economic benefits with much detriment to the rule of law. Moreover, [b] Southeast Asian countries and China itself are now set in a course of destabilizing militarization in an effort to protect their national interests (deLisle, 2015; Yang, 2015; Le Thu, 2018). What is thus happening is what Peter Dutton (2011) observes as an unsustainable win-lose approach in solving the dispute which has long-term implications for regional peace and stability. To de Chardin, this would have appeared as the human mistake to choose *not* to evolve and outgrow our belief in the *realpolitik* and replace it with the politics of trust, cooperation and peaceful compromise. Presciently, a Chardinian solution is also what strategists for the region have long surmised: *i.e.* that the way out of the complex dispute is a multilateral approach that makes regional sovereignty and joint management of the South China Sea possible through the creation of a regional institution that is tasked to manage disputes and protect the vast-but-endangered critical natural resources of the region that are being lost through

states' militarization and excessively exploitative practices (McManus, 1994; Chircop, 2010; Dutton, 2011).

*The Global Response to COVID-19.* The global response to COVID-19 is, on the other hand, another avenue in which a politics of fraternal relations has undoubtedly failed to manifest. Cardinal Luis Tagle (*as quoted in Suansing, 2020*) who serves as the Vatican's Prefect for the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples, for one, laments that

“The pandemic has become a fertile ground for partisanship rather than common action...[it] is not a local emergency. It is a general emergency, which hopefully would generate a general response. In some parts it has but the response has not taken into account the common humanity.”

Indeed, this is so because what the pandemic has revealed are longstanding social cleavages brought about by the world's politics of gross inequalities. It is not surprising, for one, that natural disasters hit the most vulnerable with the most damage given that vulnerability is the consequence of social policies that structurally exclude persons from social protection such as public policies that weaken a state's social safety-nets. In the Philippines, this was particularly a scandal recently, given the ongoing pandemic and the recent supertyphoons, as it was uncovered that almost 300M USD worth of funds have been stolen by fraud and corruption schemes from the country's national health insurance corporation (Jalea & Peralta, 2020). With public health funds supporting Filipino health workers crucially during this time running dry, what this reminds us is the gross capacity of human beings to not evolve and follow the altruistic example set by Christ as they choose themselves over the common good through acts of corruption. On another level, neoliberalism, which is the predominant global economic policy paradigm that privatizes public goods and leaves regulation in the “invisible hands” of the market, is affecting public health initiatives to mitigate and control the spread of the COVID-19 virus as data shows that countries with strong redistributive and public health systems tend to fair better than countries with severely privatized healthcare systems. As John Daley's (2020) illustrative report alone demonstrates, a lone rural doctor serving a town of 900 in Colorado who got sick with the virus was enough to cripple the fragile healthcare system of the community and significantly worsen the spread of the virus in that region of the United States.

Moreover, having privatized and crippled public healthcare systems in multiple countries is also the effect of a class-based politics of mistrust brought about by an authoritarian ethos that thrives especially under neoliberalism since the economic system emphasizes the expediency of gaining profit over the common good. Critically, this can be seen in [1] Trump's approach to the public health crisis which panders on an outright denial of the pandemic's severity (to revitalize US economy for the upper class at the cost of blue-collar workers' safety) and [2] Southeast Asia's ineffective strategies for COVID-

19 which foster the public's mistrust of important social institutions such as state health departments by employing a heavily militarized approach to governance (Paz, 2020; Yusingco & Pizarro, 2020; Chandran, 2020). Far from these, what de Chardin saw back then as [1] the unhealthy excesses of a sense of personal freedom that sacrifices a sense of care for the Other together with [2] what he also saw as the excesses of an overly materialist perspective that forces people to be obedient machines rather than responsible, free citizens who respect human dignity, is exactly what is happening today given the formation of #AntiMask movements in the United States and the implementation of unscientific public health approaches in the Philippines and Indonesia: approaches which are preoccupied with rules-based compliance rather than the informed, effective and rights-based public health policies advocated by—and enforced through the leadership of—epidemiologists and doctors instead of the military and police. It is very telling, for one, that the Philippines, despite instituting one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world, sees its prospects for return to normalcy in 2022 rather than any time soon (Manila Bulletin News, 2020). On a more global level, it finally does not help that liberal institutionalism for global public health has been challenged during the critical, early phases of the pandemic as allegations arose of the World Health Organization's complicity with China's attempts to downplay and silence Chinese scientists who first sounded the timely alarm regarding the spread of a new virus (The Associated Press, 2020).

## TOWARDS A POLITICS OF COMMUNION AND THE COMMON GOOD

The irresolution of the South China Sea dispute and the fragmented global response to COVID-19 constitute just two examples in my fields of global politics and international relations in which we human beings have failed to respond to our task of ushering a better, fraternal, Christic world. Indeed, 61 years ever since Teilhard de Chardin (1959: 316) wrote that “the Age of Nations is past...[that] the task before us now, if we would not perish, is to build the Earth,” it is precisely immeasurably costly failures such as these which serve as the continuing impetus of the increasing relevance of de Chardin's prophetic call to mission: that it is ever more important for us now to form a politics of communion and the common good that fulfills our purpose as God's children who emulate the self-giving and divine humanity of Jesus Christ.

What was perhaps remarkable about Teilhard de Chardin is that he foresaw two practical levels of application of his quest for the fraternal politics of communion and the common good: first is that this journey necessarily translates to the sustainable use of resources (Salmon & Schmitz-Moorman, 2012: 576); and second is again the need for sociopolitical change from a politics of the *realpolitik* to a politics of care and empathy. Accordingly, one may then say that Chardinian thought anticipates points

that Pope Francis has emphasized through his recent encyclicals *Laudato Si* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020): [1] the protection of the environment, [2] more justice in the universal distribution of goods, and finally, [3] the need to build a world of dialogue, social friendship and encounter. In the final conclusion, all these, as Teilhard aspired, is that envisioned world of—and *by*—the cosmic Sacred Heart struggling to be born out of our individual and collective human efforts.

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