**One Baptism, One Life, and One Love: Spiritual Convergence between the East and West**

Before the Easter of 1922, the French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who just secured a teaching position in geology at the Institut Catholique two years prior,[[1]](#footnote-1) drafted a brief explanatory paper titled “Note on Some possible Historical Representations of Original Sin” at the request of his colleague for qualified theologians.[[2]](#footnote-2) He demonstrated the difficulties in the traditional dogmatic representation of original sin in light of scientific discoveries and proposed that the view on original sin be broadened so the integrity of Christianity can be maintained. Teilhard wrote that “we must so expand our ideas that we shall find it impossible to locate original sin at any one point in our whole environment, and will realize simply that it is everywhere, as closely woven into the being of the world as the God who creates us and the Incarnate Word who redeems us.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Without Teilhard’s knowledge, the paper was sent to the Superior General of the Jesuits and the Holy Office in Rome, eventually leading to the permanent revocation of his license to teach at the Institute Catholique in 1925.

Twenty-five years later, Teilhard’s conviction that the time for renewal was at hand did not dampen but only grew. He returned to the subject of original sin in the 1947 essay “Reflection on Original Sin.” If one may say that Teilhard’s writing of the earlier note was necessarily hesitant,[[4]](#footnote-4) this later one reflected his mature thought on the topic, embracing his earlier direction with an unmistaken certainty. Teilhard explained with a lucid clarity that our usual representations of the Fall and original sin is “a simple error” and his unwavering conviction that “once that correction has been made, the conflict between original sin and modern thought disappears so completely that a dogma, at present such an intellectual brake, is suddenly seen to allow us an inner freedom of flight.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Rejecting the conventional understanding of original sin which indicates two independent and distinct operations of creation and redemption, Teilhard advanced that “Creation, Incarnation and Redemption are seen to be no more than the three complementary aspects of one and the same process: Creation…”[[6]](#footnote-6) In this renewed theology of salvation opened to the most basic structure of the universe in process of creation, Teilhard announced that “individual baptism retains, and in an even more emphatic form, its full justification.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Looked in this way, the theological necessity of baptism as each soul’s “awakening into life[[8]](#footnote-8)” is explained by “the genetic solidarity of all [hu]mankind, in which the collective ties which binds individuals are seen to be even more real and more deeply rooted than any strictly and ‘lineally’ hereditary type of linkage.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Such necessity, Teilhard emphasized, is the principle which “gives us a simple and fruitful interpretation of original sin.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

What gave birth to Teilhard’s profound conviction, as Teilhard himself admitted, was his experience of “a life spent simultaneously in the heart of the Gentile world and in that of the Church.”[[11]](#footnote-11) That Gentile world was the immense continent of Asia, which revealed to Teilhard the size of the Earth,[[12]](#footnote-12) enkindling his nascent love for the World. Especially, it was China, where Teilhard spent over two-decades conducting geological, archaeological, and paleontological work. Burying himself in masses of fossils, Teilhard implacably fed his inner flame at all the great sources of inspiration of the Earth. Of China, he has seen “the hard life, the desolation, the immense layer of dust over people and things.” Yet, he was ever inspired by the discovery of a new spirit that was struggling to emerge from the ruins of old crenelated towns and ancient pagodas.[[13]](#footnote-13) It was there, he recognized and revealed “that specific and essential element which the East must bring to the West so the Earth will be complete.”[[14]](#footnote-14) It was also there, he was to perceive “the transparence of God in the universe”[[15]](#footnote-15) and the full mystery of baptism as no longer to cleanse but to plunge into the fire of living the sweat and toil of the Cross.[[16]](#footnote-16) There is but one Baptism, as “there is, in reality, only *one* humanity in the world, *one* loving-kindness, *one* sacrifice, *one* passion, *one* laying in the tomb, *one* resurrection.”[[17]](#footnote-17) It is the baptism in the general history of matter, where Christ immerses himself in the waters of Jordan, the forces of the earth, and as he emerges with the water which runs off his body, he elevates the whole world.[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, all baptism is but one - the baptism of the sap of humanity[[19]](#footnote-19) with Christ in the waters of the world[[20]](#footnote-20) that explicates the “total divine act of raising up the world”[[21]](#footnote-21) and reveals itself to be the sacrament of life.[[22]](#footnote-22)

It is quite profound how Teilhard’s first-hand experience living in the war-torn China of the early twentieth century would give birth to an intense vision of an evolutionary universe that converges upon divine love. It is also quite astonishing how after being denounced by his Order and his Church and removed from his home country, Teilhard was to speak of himself as “a citizen of the Earth,”[[23]](#footnote-23) putting into words in the tranquility of Tianjin the vision of a *divine milieu*[[24]](#footnote-24)in the midst of what he perceived as the awakening of “a whole world of affinities and interrelated sympathies, as old as the human soul.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In China, Teilhard’s sentiment and insights were well received, attesting to the validity of his observation that “we are approaching the moment when new affinities - the true panhuman affinities - will break down nationalistic boundaries, in politics as in religion.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

One Chinese thinker I would like to direct our attention to is Fang Dongmei (or Thome H. Fang), one of the most renowned Chinese philosophers of the twentieth century, who brought Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity into a creative synthesis, while invoking many Teilhard’s concepts. During the spring of 1937, two months before the Japanese invasion of Nanjing, Fang delivered a series of broadcast lectures in Nanjing, addressing to the Chinese nation in moment of extraordinary crisis. As the threatening sign of holocaust approached his city, what would later be known as the Nanjing Massacre, Fang issued a cry of human conscience, expressing his unwavering conviction that “all fiery prejudice to contradict, all false pretension to sever, all ugly gesture to kill, all pitiful feeling to die, and all willful forces of destruction will be subdued and dissolved into one symphony of peace.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Later, these lectures would grow into a creative vision of what Fang calls as “comprehensive harmony,” expounding the Chinese view of life and offered to “the English-speaking world for a sympathetic understanding of the Chinese mentality.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Such “comprehensive harmony,” ensuring the beatific continuance of human existence,[[29]](#footnote-29) was conceived by a thinker suffering “the sweep of troublous desolations” yet still venturing to “lay a good hope for the triumph of human spirit far beyond the sway of furious tempests.” [[30]](#footnote-30) It is “a protest against the false ideology of fatal contradiction, which is so prevalent in the world and so detrimental to the happiness of [hu]mankind.”[[31]](#footnote-31) It is also a protest against human alienation, according to Fang, as “an invention of Western minds, historically based on the method of bifurcation.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Similar to Teilhard, who stated unreservedly that the conventional understanding of original sin is “an intellectual and emotional strait-jacket,”[[33]](#footnote-33) Fang spoke fervently against the doctrine of original sin, stressing that this theory regarding human nature is “the philosophical [trap] to be avoided sagaciously.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Both Teilhard and Fang agreed that the concept of original sin, in its conventional and static rendering, can no longer address the modern world, offer hope to confront the divide exacerbated by the brutal force of war, nor bear witness to “the beauty of human nature as well as the beauty of the world.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

For Fang, to attack the vicious bifurcation of the integral human nature so prevalent in Western thought and to elevate Chinese thought, where one cannot find “a single trace of the doctrine of original sin…nor any elaborate program of escape from the actual world we live in,”[[36]](#footnote-36) was not to find fault with Christianity, which he took to be “a most precious truth.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Rather, what Fang learned to deprecate was “a questionable philosophy which goes against [human dignity] fully intelligible in the natural light of humanism.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Humanism, in Fang’s mind, is the only sound mode of philosophizing for Chinese thinkers, given that it is nothing more, nor less, than “an attempt to give a reasonable account of our own personal attitude towards the most serious business of life.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Sharing a profound affinity with Teilhard’s “cosmic humanism,” as noted by Thomas Merton[[40]](#footnote-40), Fang conceived the human in the life of the universe, in which human beings, considered in their essence, is nothing, no more and no less, but “an adventure of living.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Fang pointed out that “[t]he term ‘nature,’ and especially ‘human nature,’ is always used by the Chinese philosophers to stand for ‘life.’”[[42]](#footnote-42) Nature, for the Chinese mind, is “that infinite realm wherein the universal flux of life is revealing itself and fulfilling everything with its intrinsic worth.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Invoking the title of Teilhard’s 1916 essay “Cosmic Life,” Fang announced that between Nature and human nature, there is not at all any gulf, “inasmuch as human life is interpenetrating with the cosmic life as a whole.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Our aim of life, swayed by the universal life that permeates the universe, consists in the attainment of a higher form of perfection not to be attached merely to the other world, but in learning “what is most precious in life through the very living of it in this actual world.”[[45]](#footnote-45) It is such understanding of life that resonates so well with Teilhard’s reinterpretation of baptism. For Teilhard, the person is essentially cosmic.[[46]](#footnote-46) To live the cosmic life is to live a concrete life, to live with one’s whole heart in union with the totality of the world, to plunge boldly into the vast current of things, and to open oneself, generously and tenderly, to “cosmic compassion.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Similarly, Chinese philosophers have told us, in the words of Fang, to live is to strive after our utmost, to identify with the divine will to live, to understand thoroughly all that there is and all that there can be, partaking in the magnificent creative spirit of life and the noble sentiments of compassion, benevolence, and love.[[48]](#footnote-48)

Thus, for Fang as well as Teilhard, there is but one life — the “vital impetus” — as “an immense wave which, starting from a center, spreads outwards.”[[49]](#footnote-49) It dwells at the depth of an individual soul, as a living center, giving shape to a *divine milieu —* the *Omega point* — upon which all realities converge.[[50]](#footnote-50) It is the spirit of comprehensive harmony, in which each individual soul as a center of creation takes the cosmic spirit for itself as “a generating power of creative advance.”[[51]](#footnote-51) In this sense, the source of Teilhard and Fang’s inspiration can be found in one of the most influential French philosophers of the late 19th and early 20th century Henri Bergson, who first coined the term “vital impetus” in his 1907 book *Creative Evolution.* Ursula King had pointed out that Teilhard’s full evolutionary awakening occurred after he had read Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* in 1911,[[52]](#footnote-52) leading to a radical transformation of his own understanding and vision which affected all his future thinking and writing.[[53]](#footnote-53) Similarly, Fang developed a passionate love for Bergson during his graduate studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in the early 1920s and titled his Master thesis “A Critical Exposition of the Bergsonian Philosophy of Life.”[[54]](#footnote-54) It was Bergson who first enlightened us that the whole of life, stretching over the entire duration of the universe, is “an evolution, that is an unceasing transformation.”[[55]](#footnote-55) It was also Bergson who first helped us see vital impetus as “impetus of love,” a “mystic impetus,” that drives souls “to lift humanity up to God and complete the divine creation” with a convergent effort, whose unity is imparted by God.[[56]](#footnote-56) Bergson’s insight was echoed in Teilhard, who spoke of the duty of human perfection common to the ethics of both the lay and the religious that is “to grow” and to look upon the world as maturing “a specific power of knowing and loving whose transfigured term is charity, but whose roots and elemental sap lie in the discovery and the love of everything that is true and beautiful in creation.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Finding in Bergson the same utterance of “creative life” as in Chinese wisdom, Fang tells that the Chinese way of being human is “to bring all phases of human perfection into an energetic unity” and to embrace in our own enterprise of living “the concurrent universal life and, withal, to extend and to contribute their own vital impetus to the augmentation of life in the entire universe.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

That is, our vision of life and its unity is at once spiritual and moral, accumulating ultimately in universal love, its forces of unification and perfection. It is precisely this force that gives rise to the great convergence of East and West, or better, the total amorization of the Universe. For Teilhard, such process is a definitive event, for “in every domain of thought, whether religious or scientific, it is only in union with all other [souls] that each individual [soul] can hope to reach what is most ultimate and profound in [its] own being.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Love alone is capable of completing our beings in themselves as it unites them and its forces alone drive the fragments of the world to seek one another, so the world may come to be.[[60]](#footnote-60) Acknowledging the centrality of love, Fang teaches that love is the embodiment of the felicity of life and its perpetual creativity and the practice of which is the great spiritual mission our individual perfection is rounded with.[[61]](#footnote-61) The spirit of love, through which “life of all forms is fulfilled and the value of all kind is achieved”[[62]](#footnote-62) is just as immortal as the spirit of life,[[63]](#footnote-63) which is itself a sacrament, a baptism, a communion with God through the world.[[64]](#footnote-64) Returned to the immensity of universal life and love, humanity, envisioned by Teilhard, is to become a sacramental species that is “formed by the totality of the world, and the duration of the creation is the time needed for its consecration.”[[65]](#footnote-65) Thus, baptism is to plunge into life, the one life that is a divine immensity manifesting itself to humankind, charged with a sanctifying grace, under the form of universal love. Love is the only stable principle of nature and powers and is fundamentally similar to the wonderful and substantial divine will, whose marrow is everywhere present and constitutes the true food of our lives.[[66]](#footnote-66) Baptism as an awakening into life and love is the conscious beginning of a prodigious journey to identify with, in Teilhard’s words, “the Son of Man.”[[67]](#footnote-67) As Fang affirms, apart from the idea of hereditary sin, the invaluable spiritual achievement of Christianity lies in its way of realizing the divine essence in the inborn greatness of human nature.[[68]](#footnote-68) According to Fang, “We are all sons of man,” [[69]](#footnote-69) or as the Scriptures say “You are gods, children of the most high.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Thus, each one of us is already immersed in God, progressing in the divine life and on the very path to sanctity[[71]](#footnote-71) through love, which is the beginning and end of all spiritual relationship.[[72]](#footnote-72) With God’s help, when the human potency is fully actualized, our conduct of life will be “in union with the cosmic rhythm of creativity,”[[73]](#footnote-73) our own spirit will be imbued with the divine spirit, our love will become one with the “living flame” of divine love, and our actions will exemplify the principles of justice.[[74]](#footnote-74) Then, we shall “see heaven wide open” and realize in all conscience “what is sacred in every walk of our exalted life.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

1. Ursla King, *Spirit of Fire: The Life and Vision of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. King, *Spirit of Fire*, 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Note on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin,” in *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague(Ordando: A Harvest Book, 1971), 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Teilhard, “Note on Some Possible Historical Representations of Original Sin,” 55n. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Teilhard, “Reflection on Original Sin,” in *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague(Ordando: A Harvest Book, 1971), 188-189 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Teilhard, “Reflection on Original Sin,” 198 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Teilhard, “Reflection on Original Sin,” 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Teilhard, “Reflection on Original Sin,” 196-197 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Teilhard, “My Fundamental Vision,” in *Toward the Future*, trans. Rene Hague (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1975), 198n [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Teilhard, “My Fundamental Vision,” in *Toward the Future*, 198n [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Teilhard, “Christology and Evolution,” in *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague(Ordando: A Harvest Book, 1971), 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Teilhard, “The Scientific Career of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,” in *The Heart of Matter*,trans. Rene Hague, (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1978), 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Two Friends*, ed. Ruth Nanda Anshen (New York: The New American Library, 1968), 43-45 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Teilhard, *Letters to Two Friends*, 43-45 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1960), 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Teilhard, “Christology and Evolution,” 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Teilhard, “Pantheism and Christianity,” in *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague(Ordando: A Harvest Book, 1971), 73 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 134 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Teilhard, “Christ the Evolver,” in *Christianity and Evolution: Reflections on Science and Religion*, trans. Rene Hague(Ordando: A Harvest Book, 1971), 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Teilhard, *Letters to Two Friends*, 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Teilhard, *Letters to Two Friends*, 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Teilhard, *Letters to Two Friends*, 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thome H. Fang, *Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony*, (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltds, 1981), ii [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), iii [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), ii [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), ii [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), ii [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Thome H. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature: A Collection of Philosophical Essays* (Taipei: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1980), 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Teilhard, “Christology and Evolution,” 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Thomas Merton, “Teilhard’s Gamble,” in *Love and Living* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 63 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, “Cosmic Life,” *The Library of Consciousness*, April 24, 1914, [organism.earth/library/document/cosmic-life](http://www.organism.earth/library/document/cosmic-life) [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Teilhard, “Cosmic Life” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Fang, *Chinese View of Life: The Philosophy of Comprehensive Harmony* (Hong Kong: Union Press, 1957), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 266 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 83 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. “Timeline of Teilhard’s Life,” *Center for Christogenesis*, [christogenesis.org/about/teilhard/#:~:text=1910%2D12,was%20greatly%20influenced%20by%20it](https://christogenesis.org/about/teilhard/#:~:text=1910%2D12,was%20greatly%20influenced%20by%20it) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. King, *Spirit of Fire*, 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Thomé H. Fang, *Chinese Philosophy: Its Spirit and Its Development* (Taipei, Taiwan: Linking Publishing Co. Ltd., 1981), 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 230 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra, Cloudesley Brereton, and W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 236-237 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 65 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 93 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Teilhard, “The Spiritual Contribution of the Far East: Some Personal Reflections,” in *Toward the Future*, trans. Rene Hague (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1975), 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber, 2nd edition (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 188-189 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1957), 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1957), 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Fang, *Chinese View of Life*, (1957), 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 100 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. See Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. See Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. John 10:34; Psalm 82:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 30-31 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Teilhard, *Divine Milieu*, 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See John of the Cross’s “Living Flame of Love,” *in The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross,* trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: ICS, 1991) [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See Fang, *Chinese View of Life* (1981), 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Fang, *Creativity in Man and Nature*, 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)