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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions



Doug Brown, Editor

In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. **The Divine Milieu**. New York:Harper & Row, 1968, 160pp.

"The difference between me and my atheistic colleague working side by side is at the end of his shovel he sees dirt, at the end of mine I 'see' God."

Thus did the multi-gifted Christian, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1965), find a devotionally compelling way to maintain God-consciousness as a paleontologist when secularization's potential for secularism dominated philosophical and scientific discussion. Against the Vatican I judgment and the eventual censorship of his Church, this Jesuit walked away from the Great War (in which he had served at the front lines as a stretcher-bearer) convinced that salvation was no longer to be sought in "abandoning the world" but in active "participation" in building it up (p. 22).

Young people, whose university enrollment required crossing a few miles of terrain but centuries of thought, found themselves awed by advances in the scientific mastery of nature. The transposition shook their faith. Where did their allegiances lie? Could pride be avoided? Is religious language intellectually

credible? What is prayer? Is a contemplative lifestyle possible? Teilhard wrote **The Divine Milieu** (1957) for those

alarmed by the agitation or the attraction invincibly produced in them by this new rising star. Is the Christ of the Gospels, imagined and loved within the dimensions of a Mediterranean world, capable of still embracing and still forming the center of our prodigiously expanded universe? Is the world not in the process of becoming more vast, more close, more dazzling than Jehovah? Will it not burst our religion asunder? Eclipse our God? . . . It is for those that I am writing.

Teilhard explored "The Divinization of Our Activities" (Part One) and "The Divinization of Our Passivities" (Part Two). ("Activities" refers to ways in which we impose our will on the natural environment. "Passivities" refers to the immeasurably wider and deeper facet of our existence in which we are acted upon). With Acts 17, 1 Corinthians 15, Ephesians 1, and Colossians 1 his normative texts, he offered a compelling alternative to pining for pre-modern Christendom or restricting God's place to the (decreasing numbers of) gaps in our control over nature.

Having heard/read hints of a cultural sectarianism that would sanction either retreating from a secular society or settling for a partially relevant deity, I feel strongly that thought leaders among Churches of Christ need to (re)read the line of devotional literature

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from Meister Eckhart to Teilhard as they probe afresh such core beliefs as creation, incarnation, and resurrection (all of which stamp the term "secular" with theological and devotional significance). These writers remind their readers that "secularism," not "secular" or "secularization," stands opposite "transcendence." The consequence of "secular" may for some be resignation, as Koheleth and today's existentialist tell us; it is not invariably atheism.

Teilhard realized that an all-encompassing God-consciousness would enable the believer to sanctify diminishment and death. Pondering the possibility of a difficult transition from this present milieu to the next, he prayed:

It was a joy to me, O God, in the midst of the struggle, to feel that in developing myself I was increasing the hold that you have upon me; it was a joy to me, too, under the inward thrust of life or amid the favorable play of events, to abandon myself to your providence. Now that I have found the joy of utilizing all forms of growth to make you, or to let you, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess you by diminishing

in you.

After having perceived you as he who is 'a greater myself,' grant, when my hour comes, that I may recognize you under the species of each alien or hostile force that seems bent upon destroying or uprooting me. When the signs of age begin to mark my body (and still more when they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old; and above all at that last moment when I feel I am losing hold of myself and am absolutely passive within the hands of the great unknown forces that have formed me; in all those dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand that it is you (provided only my faith is strong enough) who are painfully parting the fibers of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself. Vouchsafe, therefore, something more precious still than the grace for which all the faithful pray. It is not enough that I should die while communicating. Teach me to treat my death as an act of communion (pp. 89-90).

*The Church is a colony, an island of
one culture in the middle of another.
In baptism our citizenship is trans-
ferred from one dominion to another,
and we become, in whatever culture we
find ourselves, resident aliens.*

*William Willimon
Stanley Hauerwas*
