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God's People in the World by Anthony Egan SJ

It is a strange thing to hear many religious people – particularly Christians – claim that the world is not really 'our' place, and that our focus should be on heaven. A variation of this, that we should focus our attention primarily on God, is also a little strange. Why do we think this? What should we think?

Why many think this way is rooted in a worldview and where we think God is. Many think the world is a bad place, a place of suffering. Partly it is. At very least, it is imperfect. Another more positive way at looking at it is to say that the world is a work in progress. The world – and the universe – is evolving into something we know not what. Nor can we know: any human life is but a split second in a long cosmic history, and we can only experience the world as it is in that 'split second'. And I think (with a nod to Augustine and Calvin) that our natural instinct is to accentuate the negative: poverty, injustice, violence, natural disasters and the ceaseless scrabbling of people to defend their interests and personal space. This may lead us to long for the perfection of utopias and, for religious people, the perfection we call in many names God. We want to escape into God.

Conversely, those who benefit from the imperfect, manifested in injustice and inequality, often encourage the rest of us to seek such escape by focusing our attention on God. Live good lives (with the subtext often of 'don't rock the boat') and you will gain eternal reward.

This is a mistake.

Our thinking about the world is above all rooted in a mistaken understanding – of God. By setting God outside the world, outside the universe, we do God, ourselves and the world a grave injustice. From an early age, I was drawn to the thought of the Jesuit scientist and mystic Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. For Teilhard, the whole cosmos was in God, and God in the cosmos. Following this reasoning, all matter – including humanity – is in God, evolving towards a perfect union with God, not simply after death in some heavenly realm 'outside', but within our cosmos.

Imperfection is the freedom given to matter by God, a freedom that must be directed towards the perfection that is God. By striving towards perfection, what God desires for God's world (which is the physical expression of God's creative nature), we strive towards the completion of God's work in progress, the cosmos and everything that constitutes it, including the world.

Pursuing personal holiness is good, but it is only part of it. It falls short. It is a bit like an artist or a writer who dreams of creating a great work, prepares him/herself to do it, but ultimately produces nothing. Personal holiness must produce wholeness in the world. It is an act of thanks to the creator.

We serve God best, and we express our being in God, by engagement in renewing God's world.



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