

THE ETERNAL FEMININE: A Study on the Text of Teilhard de Chardin, by Henri de Lubac, S.J. Collins, London, 1971. 272 pp. £2.25.

EVOLUTION IN RELIGION: A Study in Sri Aurobindo and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, by R. C. Zaehner. O.U.P., Oxford, 1971. 121 pp. £1.90.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, by Thomas Corbishley, S.J. Collins (Fontana), London, 1971. 126 pp. 40p.

'What we are all more or less lacking at this moment is a new definition of holiness.' Thus Teilhard (quoted by Fr Corbishley), writing in 1937. His comment remains pertinent. Neither his own remarkable insights nor those, for instance, embodied in *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, have yet been properly assimilated into a Christian spirituality which remains sadly divided in the face of the world's brash and confident modernity. Teilhard was utterly convinced that a definition of holiness, in order to be 'authentic', must be simultaneously rooted in the past and in the present, as well as being exemplified in the lives of its propounders. The books under review are variously concerned with this perennial theme of Christian holiness and its relation to personal experience and historical culture. Fr Corbishley's excellent brief study of Teilhardian spirituality manages to be both general and particular, and amounts to a sort of extended commentary on selected texts. For such a short (and well-priced) book it is unusually stimulating and profound, and will be read with profit by neophyte and initiate alike. It should no longer be a surprise to discover Teilhard's originality emerging from the unswerving orthodoxy of his personal faith; but there will no doubt always be some who are too ready to identify the search for fullness of meaning with scepticism.

The Eternal Feminine, a short prose poem written on the theme which was later to be expressed more scientifically in *The Evolution of Chastity* and in a style broadly reminiscent of *The Hymn to Matter*, was written in 1918. As Père de Lubac demonstrates with an eye pleasantly fixed on unexpected source-material, it is a love poem in the great tradition of Christian Platonism, and there is much in his analysis which recalls Charles Williams' memorable investigation of Dante's 'way of affirmation' (in which the glory of Romantic Love is seen as the image and initiation of higher glories leading up to the Beatific Vision in *The Figure of Beatrice*). But Teilhard is in many respects an unconvincing Platonist, and the significant feature of the poem, and of his

life-long attitude to the theme of Chastity, is not the way in which it undoubtedly witnesses to an authentic tradition, but its unmistakable modernity. At first sight Teilhard's effusive poeticism may seem to belong to the simple and childlike side of him which remained so unclouded by the complexities of his speculative method. The impression is misleading. The manner may be that of Claudel, but the mind is already that of the author of *The Phenomenon of Man* (Teilhard himself dates his own 'intellectual revolution' as occurring around the year 1911). Chastity mattered intensely to him because it belonged to the order of Evolution: it was an essential step in the 'harnessing for God of the energies of love'.

The time of composition, 1918, is especially important in two respects. Teilhard made his final vows whilst on leave, in the May of that year, and his personal meditations about the role of the feminine in his own life have a concrete and compelling urgency: 'Is the Feminine to vanish entirely for me? . . . Is it not the Feminine that gives my being its sensitivity and its ardour?' He could not bear the thought that his life was to be rooted in 'a separation, a restriction', and needed to be convinced that his relationship with the Feminine would be transformed and enriched, rather than destroyed, by his vows. The joyous lucidity which marks all his subsequent writings on chastity suggests that the personal answer which he found was far more than a Freudian rationalization; it became, indeed, one of the deepest sources of his developing intuition that love was 'the energy proper to cosmogenesis', and it remains as one of his most influential contributions to a Christian world puzzled by the modern assault on the negative view of chastity. The idealism of Teilhard's poem is closely and unmistakably rooted in his own experience.

The second respect in which the date is important is more obvious. Teilhard had spent the war in the trenches, and his ambivalent attitude to war furnishes him with a powerful analogy in his attitude to chastity. Like many soldiers, he sensed that war has, in spite of

everything, a challenging and purifying effect on the human spirit, and his ideal of peace was not that of a state of quiescence but that of a 'sublimated form of war' in which men would 'fight together for a goal which unites our energies instead of dividing them'. Chastity is related to passionate love in a similar way. Père de Lubac draws attention to the part played throughout Teilhard's writings by the vocabulary drawn from the word 'passion'. Translation robs this vocabulary of some of its force: ever since the time of Corneille and Descartes, the French term, 'la passion', has had a great many overtones, and only a few years before Teilhard's poem Péguy had been writing of the transforming power of 'la passion de la gloire' in the plays of Corneille, by which 'L'héroïsme temporel (fut) promu en héroïsme de sainteté'. Teilhard's conception of purity as 'an inward tension of the mind towards God', sustained by an attitude of 'passionate indifference' and of an upwards convergence on God, thus belongs to an already established secular vocabulary of spirituality: his originality lies in his extension of this spirituality into an entire theory of the Universe.

Père de Lubac's commentary on *The Eternal Feminine* is masterly and detailed, and affords probably the best available assessment of Teilhard's literary method in his prose poems. The volume contains a second essay, entitled *Teilhard and the Problems of Today*, which is both more general and less interesting than the first, and which covers fairly predictable ground.

Teilhard's insensitivity towards the religions of the East, in spite of his long sojourn in China, is so well known that Professor Zaehner's title comes as something of a shock. Sri Aurobindo, who brought to the Hindu tradition a western experience of the impact of the theories of evolution and socialization, is akin to Teilhard in his mystical approach to both themes and in his preoccupation with the future of mankind. Professor Zaehner's book consists

of a series of lectures delivered to Christians in India, and its ecumenical value is plain: it amounts to an act of reparation for the West's centuries-old indifference to Eastern culture and an attempt to help Indian Catholicism to situate itself in the most positive way within its own cultural and religious ethos. Of four lectures, only the first two appear to be predominantly concerned with Aurobindo and Teilhard: the central theme is increasingly the general one of the underlying confrontation between mythologies hitherto considered alien but now shown to have close affinities as they each approach the same centre. This is an extremely articulate tour de force—in the best sense—in comparative theology. One has the impression that Teilhard's presence is fortuitous, and there might be those who would find it distracting; but equally this might be to miss one of Professor Zaehner's main points, which is that Christian and Hindu are drawn together precisely by the modern intuition of an evolution towards cosmic consciousness, and that Teilhard was, after all, much nearer the East than he thought. This is a pioneering work in dialogue; the territory will seem strange to most readers of Teilhard, but no less rewarding for that.

Teilhard's commentators are almost invariably too uncritical in one respect, that of language. There is a great deal in his writings that is turgid and even incomprehensible, and those who suspect that French is a language in which moderate writers can get away with murder are not entirely wrong. However, the marvel is that Teilhard, like his eminent compatriot Thérèse de Lisieux, remains very appealing in spite of everything, and the English reading public must be grateful not only to Renée Hague for his excellent rendering of Père de Lubac but to the publishers for the admirable level of presentation. Collins have served Teilhard as well as he deserved.

DOMINIC MILROY, O.S.B.

THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF RELIGION, by Thomas Fawcett. *SCM Press Ltd*, London, 1970. 288 pp. £2.75.

Mr Fawcett is, so his publishers tell us, Principal Lecturer and Head of the Divinity Department at Chester College of Education. From the evidence of this book it is clear that he is a Protestant Christian who combines a deep love of the Bible with a concern for any light on the human condition which can be found in non-Christian sources. In writing *The Symbolic Language of Religion* he has sought to provide an

introduction to comparative religion from an explicitly Christian position, by building a bridge between the 'comparative religionists' like Eliade and that tradition of Protestant Biblical scholarship which has emphasized the historical-mindedness and anti-mythological quality of biblical language.

Such an attempt might have had very interesting results, if the tension between the