

"The Firmament Sheweth His Handiwork"

Re-awakening a Religious Sense of the Natural Order

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Thou art the fire,
Thou art the sun,
Thou art the air,
Thou art the moon,
Thou art the starry firmament,
Thou art Brahman Supreme:
Thou art the waters,
The creator of all!

Thou art woman, thou art man,
Thou art the youth, thou art the maiden,
thou art the old man tottering with his staff;
Thou facest everywhere.
Thou art the dark butterfly,
thou art the green parrot with red eyes,
Thou art the thunder cloud, the seasons, the seas.
Without beginning art thou, beyond time, beyond space.
Thou art he from whom sprang the three worlds.

The Upanishads ¹

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament sheweth his handiwork.

Psalms ²

Crazy Horse dreamed and went out into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world.

Black Elk ³

For the sage each flower is metaphysically a proof of the Infinite.

Frithjof Schuon ⁴

The modern mentality characteristically looks for solutions to our most urgent problems in the wrong places; more often than not the proposed remedies aggravate the malady. Various responses to the so-called environmental crisis are of this type. Hardly anyone is now foolish enough to deny that there is something fundamentally wrong with our way of "being in the world". The evidence is too overwhelming for even the most sanguine apostles of "Progress" to ignore. Much of the debate about the "environment" (itself a rather problematical term)

¹ *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, IV.2-4.

² *Psalms*, XIX.1

³ Black Elk in John Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, London, 1974, p67.

⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London, 1969, p10.

continues to be conducted in terms derived from the secular-scientific-rationalist-humanist world-view bequeathed to us by that series of upheavals which subverted the medieval outlook—the Renaissance and Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has observed,

most Western intellectuals think about environmental issues as if everyone were an agnostic following a secular philosophy cultivated at Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard and so they seek to develop a rationalist, environmental ethics based upon agnosticism, as if this would have any major effect whatsoever upon the environmental crisis...the very strong prejudice against religious ethics...is itself one the greatest impediments to the solution of the environmental crisis.⁵

My purpose here is to turn our attention to some general principles which informed traditional religious understandings of the natural order and of the human place in it. No "solution" to the environmental crisis is proposed. However, it is perfectly evident to those with "eyes to see and ears to hear" that the desecration (one uses the word advisedly) of nature cannot be remedied without recourse to the principles which governed traditional understandings of the natural order. These might offer some hope where modern scientism (the ideology of modern science) has so spectacularly failed.

Traditional Cosmogonies

The first question which might present itself in any inquiry into religious perspectives on nature is this: how does this or that religion in particular, or how do religions in general, envisage the origin, the source of the universe? Generally speaking the different traditions, from both East and West, and from both primal and literate cultures, account for the beginnings of the universe through a mythological account, a cosmogony. In the Judeo-Christian tradition we find it in the *Genesis* story. While the narrative details vary, this is not essentially different from, let us say, the mythical accounts of the *Vedas*, or of the Aboriginal Dreaming.

These days "myth" is often a pejorative term meaning either a naive and childish fabrication or simply a story which is untrue. This kind of view is probably rooted in the 19th century where many scholars and theorists (anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists and the like) took this condescending and disabling view of mythology. Thus, Andrew Lang, for instance, took it that "primitive" mythologies were "a product of the childhood of the human race, arising out of the minds of a creature that has not yet learned to think in terms of strict cause and effect".⁶ Myths were thus to be understood as a kind of fumbling proto-science.

We must return to earlier outlooks if we are to understand religious myths (from wherever they come) aright—as allegorical or symbolic narratives which articulate, in dramatic form, a world-view whose elements will necessarily include a *metaphysic* (an account of the Real; the metacosmic), a *cosmology* (an account of the visible world, in the heavens and here on earth; the macrocosmic) and an *anthropology* (an account of the human situation; the microcosmic). In combating the impertinent reductionisms of the anthropologists Ananda Coomaraswamy eloquently reminds us that,

⁵ S.H. Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis*, London, 1999, pp7 & 9.

⁶ Eric Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, London, 1975, p61.

Myth is the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection. The mythical narrative is of timeless and placeless validity, true nowhere and everywhere ... Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words ...⁷

Cosmogonies can be located on a spectrum one end of which might be labelled *creationist/theistic* and the other *emanationist/monistic*: the former type envisages the universe as a creation of a divine power or deity while the latter conceives of the universe as a spatio-temporal manifestation of an ultimate, spiritual reality. The Abrahamic monotheisms are of the former type, while Platonism and some forms of Hinduism represent the latter. In the *Mundaka Upanishad*, for instance, we are told that,

As a spider sends forth and draws in its threads, as herbs grow on the earth, as hair grows on the head and the body of a living person, so from the Imperishable arises here the universe.⁸

Traditional cosmogonies necessarily deal with the relationship of spiritual and material realities, a relationship which lies at the heart of all religious understandings of nature. Philosophically speaking, religions posit the existence of two "worlds", one spiritual, immutable and absolute, the other material, mutable and relative, usually with an intermediary realm (which might variously be referred to as ethereal, subtle, astral and the like). Cosmogonies affirm the primacy of the spiritual: the material world derives from a divine creativity, or, at least, from a divine plenitude. In the religious context it is axiomatic that the material world did not and could not create itself; it is suspended, so to speak, within a reality which is immaterial and which is beyond time and space; the material world has no independent or autonomous existence. Consider a few quotes (one could easily assemble hundreds of such passages from all over the globe):

There is something obscure which is complete
before heaven and earth arose;
tranquil, quiet, standing alone without change,
moving around without peril.
It could be the Mother of everything.
I don't know its name,
and call it Tao.

(*Tao Te Ching*)⁹

The Imperishable is the Real. As sparks fly upward from a blazing fire, so from the depths of the Imperishable arise all things. To the depths of the Imperishable they again descend. Self-luminous is that Being, and formless. He dwells within all and without all...From him are born breath, mind, the organs of sense, ether, air, fire, water and the earth, and he binds all these together. (*The Upanishads*)¹⁰

⁷ Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New Delhi, 1996, p6 & p33, n21.

⁸ *Mundaka Upanishad* I.i.7. Of the major religious traditions the one which has least to say about the origins of the universe is Buddhism which is generally suspicious of metaphysical speculation and eschews what the Buddha called the Indeterminate Questions, which is to say questions which are either unanswerable, at least in terms accessible to the ordinary human mentality, or which are distractions from the business at hand. Sometimes it is said by Buddhists that the universe "always was"; this, perhaps, is to be understood as being *upaya*—a kind of sufficient expedient, so to speak. However, as the *Prajna-Paramita* states, "the belief in the unity or eternity of matter is incomprehensible..."; quoted in Whitall Perry, *The Widening Breach: Evolutionism in the Mirror of Cosmology*, Cambridge, 1995, p44.

⁹ *Tao Te Ching*, XXV.

¹⁰ *Mundaka Upanishad*, II.i.1-4.

This world, with all its stars, elements, and creatures, is come out of the invisible world; it has not the smallest thing or the smallest quality of anything but what is come forth from thence.
(William Law)¹¹

Cosmogonies tell of the coming into being of the *cosmos*, a living, organic unity displaying beauty, harmony, meaning, and intelligibility as against the chaotic and meaningless universe of modern science. ("Kosmos", in its original Greek and in archaic times meant Great Man as well as "world": in the light of various cosmogonies, particularly the Greek and the Indian, this is not without significance. In the *Vedas* we have but one of many accounts of the universe being created out of Purusa, a cosmic man, Primordial Man, a Divine Archetypal figure.) One of the most beautiful expressions of the idea of an underlying harmony in the universe is to be found in the Taoist tradition and in the symbol of the *Tao* itself wherein we see the forces of *yin* and *yang* intertwined, these being the two fundamental forces or principles or energies out of which the fabric of the material universe is woven. In Hinduism the harmony, order and intelligibility of the universe is signalled by the Vedic term *rta* which we find in the earliest Scriptures. The beneficent influences on humankind of the natural order, and the attunement of the sage to natural rhythms, are particularly strong leitmotifs in Taoism but are to be found in many Eastern Scriptures. By the same token, humans are enjoined to play their part in the maintenance of the cosmic order, largely through their ritual life. This idea, everywhere to be found in the archaic worlds, makes no sense from a materialistic point of view which now determines the prevailing outlook—one completely impervious to the fact that, in Nasr's memorable phrase, "nature is hungry for our prayers".¹²

Religious doctrines (which might be expressed in any number of forms, not necessarily verbal) about the relationship of the spiritual and material worlds necessarily deal with the *transcendence* and *immanence* of the Absolute (whether this be envisaged in theistic, monistic, panentheistic or apophatic terms—God, Allah, *Brahman*, *Tao*, *Wakan-Tanka*, *nirvana*, or whatever): the "interplay" of these two "dimensions" varies from religion to religion but both are always present. Whatever accent a particular spiritual economy might place on these aspects of the Real the underlying principle is always the same. It might best be summed up by an old Rabbinic dictum: "The universe is not the dwelling place of God; God is the dwelling place of the universe."¹³ In the light of such formulations we can also dispense with the sharp dualistic separation of the "two worlds": the world of phenomena is held together by a numinous spiritual presence—indeed, without it the world of "matter" would vanish instantly and completely. Eternity is ever-present within (so to speak) the phenomenal world. The mystic Jan van Ruysbroeck referred to this inner reality as "beyond Time; that is, without before or after, in an Eternal Now...the home and beginning of all life and all becoming. And so all creatures are therein, beyond themselves, one being and one Life...as in their eternal origin."¹⁴

A misunderstanding which bedevils many discussions of the beliefs of non-literate peoples is signalled by the term "pantheism", i.e., the worship of the natural order as co-terminous with "God". This, we are sometimes told (usually by anthropologists) was the practice of such and such a "primitive" people. In reality, pantheism, if ever it existed as anything other than an

¹¹ *Selected Mystical Writings*, quoted in Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p26.

¹² S.H. Nasr, *The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis*, p13.

¹³ Quoted in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Selected Writings on Philosophy, Religion and Culture*, New York, 1970, p146.

¹⁴ Quoted in P. Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, Brookline (Mass.), 1998, p208.

anthropological fiction, could never have been more than a degenerate form of what is properly called "panentheism", which is to say a belief in the overwhelming presence of the spiritual within the natural world—a quite different matter from the "pantheistic" fallacy that the natural world is somehow identical to (and thus exhausts) "God". Black Elk, the revered holy man of the Oglala Sioux, clearly articulated the panentheistic principle:

We should understand that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things; the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, all the four-legged animals and the winged peoples; and *even more important we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples.*¹⁵

There are those who seek to develop an "eco-spirituality" which actually amounts to no more than a kind of secular pantheism, if one may allowed such a term—a view of the natural order which retains some sort of "religiosity", surrendering to the view that it is possible to have an immanent "sacred" while dispensing with the transcendent, as if night and day can indeed be sundered from the sun, or as if there could be a circle with no center.¹⁶ Equally absurd is the notion of a "secular scientific spirituality" which has recently been proposed.¹⁷ Like all such concoctions this kind of naturism is a sentimental form of idolatry. As Philip Sherrard has so plainly put it, "an agnostic and materialistic science of nature is a contradiction in terms...its findings will necessarily correspond to the living reality of nature as little as a corpse corresponds to the living reality of a human being..."¹⁸

The Sacred and the Profane

A category without which we cannot proceed very far in the study of religion is the sacred. There are many ways of defining it. Here is one from a discussion of Sacred Books by the sovereign metaphysician of our own time, Frithjof Schuon:

That is sacred which in the first place is attached to the transcendent order, secondly possesses the character of absolute certainty, and thirdly, eludes the comprehension of the ordinary human mind ... The sacred is the presence of the centre in the periphery ... The sacred introduces a quality of the absolute into relativities and confers on perishable things a texture of eternity.¹⁹

Of course, the category can apply to all manner of things: events, texts, buildings, images, rituals. In the context of our present concerns we might isolate two applications of this category or principle: to space and time, and to life itself. The traditional mind, especially in primal, non-literate societies, perceives and experiences space and time as "sacred" and "profane", which is to say that they are not uniform and homogeneous as they are for the modern scientific mind, but are *qualitatively* differentiated. A good deal of ceremonial life is concerned with entry into or, better, *participation in* sacred time and space.²⁰ Through ritual one enters into sacred time, into *real* time, the "once upon a time", *illo tempore*, a time radically different from a "horizontal" duration. Likewise with sacred places, remembering that a natural

¹⁵ Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, Baltimore, 1971, pxx (my italics) .

¹⁶ For a specimen see N. Hettinger, "Ecospirituality: First Thoughts", *Dialogue & Alliance*, 9:2, Fall-Winter 1995, pp81-98.

¹⁷ See, for example, Holmes Ralston III, "Secular Scientific Spirituality" in P.H. Van Ness (ed), *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, New York, 1996, pp387-413.

¹⁸ Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*, p19.

¹⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, London, 1976, p48.

²⁰ One of the most useful expositions of archaic understandings of sacred and profane time and space is to be found in Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, New York, 1959.

site can be *made* sacred through various rituals and practices, or it can be *recognized* as sacred—a place where the membrane, so to speak, between the worlds of matter and of spirit are especially permeable. Rivers, mountains, particular types of trees and places related to the mythological events are sites of this sort. The sacrality of Mt Kailas or Uluru, for instance, is not *conferred* but *apprehended*.

The sanctity of life itself is expressed in different ways in the various religious vocabularies. In the Judeo-Christian tradition this principle or theme begins in the affirmation in *Genesis* that man is made in the image of God, that the human being carries an indelible imprint of the Divine. Thence we have what might be called the principle of the spiritual equality of all human beings no matter what their station in life or their natural attributes and shortcomings—"all equal before God", as the Christian formula has it. The Judeo-Christian tradition has primarily affirmed the sanctity of human life, sometimes to the neglect or abuse of other life forms. One of the lessons of the great Eastern and primal religions is the principle of the moral solidarity, if one may so express it, of all living forms: in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism this is embodied in the traditional Indian value of *ahimsa* (non-injuriousness). Here is what Gandhi had to say about the cow:

The central fact of Hinduism ... is 'Cow Protection'. Cow Protection to me is one of the most wonderful phenomena in all human evolution; for it takes the human being beyond his species. The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives ... Hindus will be judged not by their correct chanting of sacred texts, not by their pilgrimages, not by their most punctilious observance of Caste rules, but by their ability to protect the cow ... 'Cow protection' is the gift of Hinduism to the world; and Hinduism will live so long as there are Hindus to protect the cow.²¹

"Man's identity with all that lives"—this is the key phrase to what appears at first sight to be a rather startling claim from the Mahatma. William Blake affirmed the same notion: "all that lives is holy".

The Human Situation

The principle of the sanctity of life, and the "moral solidarity" of living forms should not blind us to the fact that all traditional wisdoms affirm, in their different ways, that the human being is especially privileged. The human is an axial or amphibious being who lives in both the material and spiritual worlds in a way which is not quite true of other living beings, and is thus a bridge between them. Seyyed Hossein Nasr reminds us that

Man's central position in the world is not due to his cleverness or inventive genius but because of the possibility of attaining sanctity and becoming a channel of grace for the world around him ... the very grandeur of the human condition is precisely that he has the possibility of reaching a state "higher than the angels" and at the same time of denying God.²²

This religious understanding is, of course, quite incompatible with the notion that man is simply another biological organism. By the same measure, it is utterly at odds with that most seductive and elegant (and certainly one of the most pernicious) of scientific hypotheses, Darwinian evolutionism. As Blake so well understood, "Man is either the ark of God or a phantom of the earth and of the water". As "the ark of God" man is the guardian and custodian

²¹ Gandhi, quoted in Eric Sharpe, "To Hinduism through Gandhi" in Arthur Basham et al., *Wisdom of the East*, Sydney, 1979, pp61-62.

²² Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London, 1966, pp24-25.

of the natural order, the pontifex, the caliph, "the viceregent of God on earth" in Qur'anic terms.²³

The peculiar position of the human being can also be illuminated by recourse to the traditional cosmological principle of the *microcosm/macrocosm*, expressed most succinctly perhaps in the Hermetic maxim, "as above, so below". In brief, man is not only in the universe but the universe is in man: "there is nothing in heaven or earth that is not also in man" (Paracelsus).²⁴ The Buddha put it this way: "In truth I say to you that within this fathom-high body ... lies the world and the rising of the world and the ceasing of the world."²⁵ Others have rendered the same truth poetically. Recall the beautiful lines of Thomas Traherne:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea
itself floweth in your veins, till you are
clothed with the heavens, and crowned with
the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole
heir of the whole world, and more than so,
because men are in it who are every one sole
heirs as well as you.²⁶

Similarly, from Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand,
And Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.²⁷

One of the keys to this principle resides in the traditional understanding of consciousness as being infinite, as surpassing the temporal and spatial limits of the material world—which, in fact, is nothing other than a tissue of fugitive relativities, a world of appearances, a fabric of illusions, *Maya* in the Hindu lexicon.²⁸ At the same time we need to remember that while *Maya* is indeed "cosmic illusion",

...she is also divine play. She is the great theophany, the unveiling of God "In Himself and by Himself" as the Sufis would say. *Maya* may be likened to a magic fabric woven from a warp that veils and a weft that unveils; she is the quasi-incomprehensible intermediary between the finite and the Infinite—at least from our point of view as creatures—and as such she has all the multi-coloured ambiguity appropriate to her part-cosmic, part-divine nature.²⁹

Thus,

...the term *maya* combines the meanings of "productive power" and "universal illusion"; it is the inexhaustible play of manifestations, deployments, combinations and reverberations, a

²³ See Jean-Louis Michon, "The Vocation of Man According to the Koran" in *Fragments of Infinity: Essays in Religion and Philosophy* ed. Arvind Sharma, Bridport, 1991, pp135-152. See also Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1973.

²⁴ Quoted in T.C. McLuhan *Cathedrals of the Spirit: The Message of Sacred Places*, Toronto, 1996, p270.

²⁵ Quoted in Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Primordial Tradition*, New York, 1976, p60.

²⁶ *Centuries of Meditations*, 1.29.

²⁷ "Auguries of Innocence".

²⁸ Furthermore, as Lama Anagarika Govinda reminds us, "If the structure of our consciousness did not correspond to that of the universe and its laws, we should not be aware either of the universe or the laws that govern it." *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*, Wheaton, 1976, p162.

²⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World*, London, 1966, p89. See also Ali Lakhani, "What Thirst is For", *Sacred Web*, 4, December 1999, pp13-14.

play with which *Atma* clothes itself even as the ocean clothes itself with a mantle of foam ever renewed and never the same.³⁰

These passages should immunize us to the preposterous but widely held view that the Eastern traditions are "negative", "pessimistic", "life-denying" and the like.³¹

This world of *maya* is "illusory", but not in the sense that it is a mirage or a fantasy, but in that its "reality" is only relative: it has no independence, no autonomy, no existence outside the Divine Principle Itself. The sages of both East and West have never been seduced by the idea that the material universe is a self-existing entity, which is to say that they have ever understood that there is no such thing as "pure matter". Their understanding of the cosmos derives from all the sources of knowledge—mystical intuition and the revealed Scriptures *as well as* the instruments of the mind and the senses. On the other hand, a profane, quantitative science (from whence the modern West derives its understanding of the universe), is

... a totalitarian rationalism that eliminates both Revelation and Intellect, and at the same time a totalitarian materialism that ignores the metaphysical relativity—and therewith the impermanence—of matter and the world. It does not know that the supra-sensible, situated as it is beyond space and time, is the concrete principle of the world, and consequently that it is also at the origin of that contingent and changeable coagulation we call "matter". A science that is called "exact" is in fact an "intelligence without wisdom", just as post-scholastic philosophy is inversely a "wisdom without intelligence".³²

The Symbolism of Natural Forms and the Cosmological Sciences

In "Frost at Midnight" Coleridge, addresses these lines to his baby son:

But *thou*, my babe! shalt wander like a breeze
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores
And mountain crags: so shalt thou se and hear
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible
of that eternal language, which thy God
Utters, who from eternity doth teach
Himself in all, and all things in himself.

The idea of the natural order as not only sacred but as a symbolic language strikes the modern mind as somewhat strange, perhaps as "poetic fancy". In reality it is the modern outlook which is idiosyncratic. Mircea Eliade, has noted how, for *homo religiosus*, everything in nature is capable of revealing itself as a "cosmic sacrality", as a hierophany. He also observes that for our secular age the cosmos has become "opaque, inert, mute; it transmits no message, it holds no cipher".³³ The traditional mind perceives the natural world as a hierophany, a theophany, a revelation—in short, as a teaching about the Divine Order. It is so by way of its analogical participation in the Divine qualities, which is to say that natural phenomena are themselves

³⁰ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, New York, 1975, p89n.

³¹ Without pursuing the matter here we can note that the charge of "world-denial" directed against Buddhism rests on a very partial understanding of *samsara* to the neglect of its complement, *dharma*, by which is meant not simply the teachings of the Awakened One (its most familiar sense, at least to Westerners) but a pre-existent and eternal order to which these teachings testified and of which they are one expression. On this crucial point See Philip Novak, "Universal Theology and the Idea of Universal Order", *Dialogue & Alliance*, 6:1, Spring 1992, pp82-92, 87-88)

³² Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World*, p117.

³³ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp12-13 & 178.

symbols of higher realities. A symbol, properly defined, is a reality of a lower order which participates analogically in a reality of a higher order of being. Therefore, a properly constituted symbolism rests on the inherent and objective qualities of phenomena and their relation to spiritual realities. The science of symbolism proceeds through a discernment of the qualitative significances of substances, colors, forms, spatial relationships and so on. As Schuon has observed,

...we are not here dealing with subjective appreciations, for the cosmic qualities are ordered both in relation to being and according to a hierarchy which is more real than the individual; they are, then, independent of our tastes...³⁴

This kind of symbolism is an altogether different matter from arbitrary sign systems and artificial representational vocabularies. Only when we understand the revelatory aspect of natural phenomena, their metaphysical transparency, can we fully appreciate the import of a claim such as this:

Wild Nature is at one with holy poverty and also with spiritual childlikeness; she is an open book containing an inexhaustible teaching of truth and beauty. It is in the midst of his own artifices that man most easily becomes corrupted, it is they who make him covetous and impious; close to virgin Nature, who knows neither agitation nor falsehood, he had the hope of remaining contemplative like Nature herself.³⁵

Or this, from the great 13th century Zen sage, Dogen:

They passed eons living alone in the mountains and forests; only then did they unite with the Way and use mountains and rivers for words, raise the wind and rain for a tongue, and explain the great void.³⁶

Here are a few other formulations which signal the principle of the metaphysical transparency of the natural order:

The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made. (St Paul)³⁷

If we look at the world...with the eyes of the spirit we shall discover that the simplest material object...is a symbol, a glyph of a higher reality and a deeper relationship of universal and individual forces... (Anagarika Govinda)³⁸

Stones, plants, animals, the earth, the sky, the stars, the elements, in fact everything in the universe reveals to us the knowledge, power and the will of its Originator (Al-Ghazzali)³⁹

³⁴ Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom*, London, 1979, p110. The most magisterial explication of the science of symbolism in recent times is to be found in René Guénon's *Fundamental Symbols*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995. For a brief but incisive discussion of symbolism-proper and its relation to intellectuality, see Ananda Coomaraswamy: "Primitive Mentality" in *Coomaraswamy I: Selected Papers, Traditional Art and Symbolism* ed. Roger Lipsey, Princeton, 1977, pp286-307. See also Adrian Snodgrass, *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, Delhi, 1992, pp1-10.

³⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, p84.

³⁶ From Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, quoted in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Alan H. Badiner, Berkeley, 1990, pxiii.

³⁷ *Romans* I.20.

³⁸ Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness*, Wheaton, 1976, p102.

³⁹ Al-Ghazzali quoted in *Cathedrals of the Spirit*, p107. For a study of the symbolism of animals within one particular spiritual economy see Joseph Epes Brown, *Animals of the Soul: Sacred Animals of the Oglala Sioux*, Rockport, 1997.

The creatures are, as it were, traces of God's passing, wherein he reveals his might, power, wisdom and other divine qualities. (John of the Cross)⁴⁰

The great, gashed, half-naked mountain is another of God's saints. There is no other like him. He is alone in his own character; nothing else in the world ever did or ever will imitate God in quite the same way. That is his sanctity. (Thomas Merton)⁴¹

Nature, then, is a *teaching*, a primordial Scripture. To "read" this Scripture, to *take it to heart*, is "to see God everywhere", to be aware of the transcendent dimension which is present in every cosmic situation, to see "the translucence of the Eternal through and in the temporal" (Coleridge).⁴² The great Hindu saint and sage, Ramakrishna, who could fall into ecstasy at the sight of a lion, a bird, a dancing girl, exemplified this gift though in his case, Schuon adds, it was not a matter of deciphering the symbolism but of "tasting the essences".⁴³

It is in the primal cultures (so often dismissed or patronized as "primitive" and "pre-literate"), such as those of the Australian Aborigines, the African Bushmen, or the American Indians, that we find the most highly developed sense of the transparency of natural phenomena and the most profound understanding of the "eternal language". As Joseph Epes Brown has remarked of the Lakota experience, "each form in the world around them bears such a host of precise values and meanings that taken all together they constitute what one would call their 'doctrine'".⁴⁴

In the traditional world the natural order was never understood or studied as an autonomous and independent reality; on the contrary, the natural order was only be understood within a larger context, drawing on theology and metaphysics as well as the cosmological sciences themselves. The material world was (and is) only intelligible through recourse to first principles which could not, and can not, be derived from empirical inquiry but from revelation, esoteric knowledge, gnosis, metaphysics:

The knowledge of the whole universe does not lie within the competence of science but of metaphysics. Moreover, the principles of metaphysics remain independent of the sciences and cannot in any way be disproved by them.⁴⁵

No one has stated the crucial principle here better than the great Vedantin sage Sankara who taught that the world of *maya* (i.e., the world of appearances, of time-space relativities) is not inexplicable, it is only not self-explanatory.⁴⁶ To describe the futility of a purely materialistic

⁴⁰ *The Spiritual Canticle*, V.iii, quoted in Elizabeth Hamilton, *The Voice of the Spirit: The Spirituality of St John of the Cross*, London, 1976, p89. Compare with the well-known *hadith qudsi*: (in which God Himself speaks): "I was a hidden treasure, I wanted to be known and I created the creatures"; or with St. Thomas Aquinas: "Each creature is a witness to God's power and omnipotence; and its beauty is a witness to the divine wisdom ... Every creature participates in some way in the likeness of the Divine Essence." Aquinas quoted in Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, Melbourne, 1989, p75.

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New York, 1961, p31.

⁴² Coleridge quoted in Kathleen Raine, *Defending Ancient Springs*, Cambridge, 1985, p109.

⁴³ Frithjof Schuon, "Foundations of an Integral Aesthetics", *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10:3, 1976, 135n. See also Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, Calcutta, 1974, 61ff.

⁴⁴ Joseph Epes Brown *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indians*, New York, 1982, p37. Two works, comparatively free of the evolutionist and modernistic prejudices which colour much of the "anthropological" literature, might be recommended as introductions to the Aboriginal and Bushmen cultures: James Cowan *Mysteries of the Dreaming* Bridport, 1989, and Laurens van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter*, Harmondsworth, 1965.

⁴⁵ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man*, London, 1976, p35.

⁴⁶ See my article, "Sankara's Doctrine of Maya" in *Asian Philosophy*, 2:2, 1992, pp131-146.

science (such as we now have in the West), Sankara compares it to an attempt to explain night and day without reference to the Sun. In other words, the study of the natural world is not primarily an empirical business, although it does, of course, have an empirical dimension: matter does not exist independently and its nature cannot be understood in purely material terms. This is the great dividing line between the sacred sciences of the traditional worlds and the Promethean science of our own time.

Beauty: Divine Rays

A few words on Beauty which we find everywhere in the natural order as well as in the human form itself, and in sacred art. Firstly, there is the intimate nexus between Truth, Goodness and Beauty. The inter-relationships of the three are more or less inexhaustible and there is no end to what might be said on this subject. Here we shall establish only a few general points, taking the nature of Beauty as our point of departure. Marsilio Ficino, the Renaissance Platonist, defined beauty as "that ray which parting from the visage of God, penetrates into all things".⁴⁷ Beauty, in most traditional canons, has this divine quality. Beauty is a manifestation of the Infinite on a finite plane and so introduces something of the Absolute into the world of relativities. Its sacred character "confers on perishable things a texture of eternity".⁴⁸ Schuon:

The archetype of Beauty, or its Divine model, is the superabundance and equilibrium of the Divine qualities, and at the same time the overflowing of the existential potentialities in pure Being... Thus beauty always manifests a reality of love, of deployment, of illimitation, of equilibrium, of beatitude, of generosity.⁴⁹

It is distinct but not separate from Truth and Virtue. As Aquinas affirmed, Beauty relates to the cognitive faculty and is thus connected with wisdom.⁵⁰ The rapport between Beauty and Virtue allows one to say that they are but two faces of the one reality: "goodness is internal beauty, and beauty is external goodness" or, similarly, "virtue is the beauty of the soul as beauty is the virtue of forms".⁵¹ To put it another way, Oscar Wilde notwithstanding, there are no beautiful vices just as there are no ugly virtues. The inter-relationships of Beauty, Truth and Goodness explain why, in the Oriental traditions, every *avatara* embodies a perfection of Beauty. It is said of the Buddhas they save not only by their doctrine but by their superhuman Beauty.⁵²

Schuon gathers together some of these principles in the following passage:

...the earthly function of beauty is to actualise in the intelligent creature the Platonic recollection of the archetypes... there is a *distinguo* to make, in the sensing of the beautiful, between the aesthetic sensation and the corresponding beauty of soul, namely such and such a virtue. Beyond every question of "sensible consolation" the message of beauty is both intellectual and moral: intellectual because it communicates to us, in the world of

⁴⁷ Quoted in R.J. Clements, *Michelangelo's Theory of Art*, New York, 1971, p5.

⁴⁸ Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p48.

⁴⁹ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, p241.

⁵⁰ See A.K. Coomaraswamy, "The Mediaeval Theory of Beauty" in *Selected Papers 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, pp211-20, and two essays, "Beauty and Truth" and "Why Exhibit Works of Art?" in *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, New York, 1956, pp7-22 (esp. 16-18) & pp102-109.

⁵¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Logic and Transcendence*, pp245-246. See also Frithjof Schuon, *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, London, 1981, p95.

⁵² As Schuon notes, the name "Shunyamurti" - manifestation of the void - applied to a Buddha, is full of significance; *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London, 1967, p25n. See also Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London, 1968, p121.

accidentality, aspects of Substance, without for all that having to address itself to abstract thought; and moral, because it reminds us of what we must love, and consequently be.⁵³

Beauty, whether natural or man-made, can be either an open or a closed door: when it is identified only with its earthly support it leaves man vulnerable to idolatry and to mere aestheticism; it brings us closer to God when "we perceive in it the vibrations of Beatitude and Infinity, which emanate from Divine Beauty".⁵⁴

The Western Desacralisation of Nature

Western attitudes to nature, before the onslaughts of a materialistic scientism, had been influenced by archaic pagan ideas (derived principally from Greece and from Northern Europe), Platonism and Islam, and, pre-eminently, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Many contemporary environmentalists point the finger at the so-called "dominion ethic" apparently sanctioned by the *Genesis* account. There is no gainsaying the fact that Christian institutions have for centuries been accomplices in an appalling environmental vandalism; one readily understands the reasons why many environmentalists resort to a clutch of clichés about the destructive influence of Christianity. Like most clichés, those bandied about by anti-religious propagandists in the environmental debate have some truth in them. However, if we look a little more closely we will find that the story is rather more complicated than is often supposed.⁵⁵ Here I can do no more than offer a few fragmentary remarks.

Like all cosmogonies, the *Genesis* myth deals with the relationship of the spiritual and material. The natural world is affirmed as God's handiwork. Throughout both Testaments of the Bible we are reminded that "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made."⁵⁶ Furthermore, we are to understand the Creation itself as both a psalm of praise to its Creator and as a revelation of the divine qualities. As one contemporary Christian put it, "Creation is nothing less than a manifestation of God's hidden Being."⁵⁷ In the *Psalms* we have many affirmations of this kind: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork." We find many similar passages in *The Qur'an*: "The seven heavens, and the earth, and all that is therein, magnify Him, and there is naught but magnifieth his praise; only ye understand not their worship";⁵⁸ and "All that is in the heavens and the earth glorifieth Allah".⁵⁹ In fact we can find like passages in many of the great Scriptures from around the globe: thus in the *Bhagavad Gita*, to choose one example, the universe is celebrated as the raiment of Krishna who contains within himself all the worlds of time and space.⁶⁰

In the *Genesis* account, the world of nature is *not* man's to do with as he pleases but rather a gift from God, one saturated with divine qualities, to be used for those purposes which sustain life and which give human life in particular, dignity, purpose and meaning. That this stewardship ethic could degenerate into a sanction for wholesale exploitation and criminal

⁵³ Frithjof Schuon, "Foundations of an Integral Aesthetics", pp131-132.

⁵⁴ Frithjof Schuon, "Foundations of an Integral Aesthetics", p135.

⁵⁵ See Wendell Berry's essay "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, New York, 1993, pp92-116.

⁵⁶ *John*, I.3.

⁵⁷ Philip Sherrard, *Human Image: World Image*, Cambridge, 1992, p152.

⁵⁸ *The Qur'an*, XVII.44.

⁵⁹ *The Qur'an*, LVII.2.

⁶⁰ Goethe had something of the sort in mind when he wrote, "Nature is the living, visible garment of God."; quoted in Victor Gollancz *From Darkness to Light* London, 1964, p246.

ruination is actually a betrayal of the lessons of *Genesis*. How did this come about? The cooperative factors at work in the Western desacralisation of nature are complex but we may here mention a few of the more salient: Christianity's emergence in a world of decadent pagan idolatry which necessitated a somewhat imbalanced emphasis on God's transcendence and on "other-worldliness"; the consequent neglect of those sacred sciences which might later have formed a bulwark against the ravages of a materialistic scientism; the unholy alliance of an anti-traditional Protestantism with the emergent ideologies of a new and profane world-view.⁶¹

Various other ideas about and understandings of nature have circulated through the post-medieval world: nature as *chaos, disorder, wild-ness*, in contrast to "civilisation", a threatening space which lay "outside" the social order (this motif has some pagan antecedents, especially in the Teutonic-Scandinavian religions rather than the Mediterranean and classical); nature as *matter* and as a *mechanistic system* governed by various "physical laws" amenable to investigation by a materialistic science (the legacy of the Scientific Revolution, of Newton, Bacon, Locke, Copernicus, Galileo, et al.); as *raw material*, an inexhaustible quarry to be plundered and, simultaneously, as "enemy" to be subdued, "tamed" or, even more ludicrously, "conquered" (industrialism, which provided a new field of applications for the "discoveries" of science); as an *Edenic paradise* peopled by "noble savages" (the romantic naturism of Rousseau and his many epigones); as uplifting *spectacle* (Wordsworth); as *the Darwinian jungle*, "red in tooth and claw"; as an *amenity*, a "resource" to be "managed" and protected for human recreation, tourism and the like; as *Gaia*, a single living organism ("deep ecology"); and as "*Wilderness*" (a pseudo-religious secularism, if one might so put it, which absolutizes "Nature" under a certain guise and thus becomes a form of idolatry—which is nothing other than the mistaking of the symbol for its higher referent).

None of the post-medieval understandings *in themselves* offer any very real hope of providing a way out of our predicament. Clearly some contemporary developments and movements ("deep ecology", "eco-feminism", the new physics) yield some insights and can be helpful in dismantling the modern mind-set which has brought us to the current situation. But too often these well-intentioned gropings towards a more holistic understanding are bereft of any properly-constituted metaphysical and cosmological framework. This is evident, for instance, in the fact that for all their radical aspirations the proponents of "a new ecological awareness" often fall prey to the materialistic and evolutionist assumptions which are at the root of the problem which they are trying to address. It must also be said that those who are properly sceptical about the pretensions of scientism are also often vulnerable to a kind of sentimental and warmed-over pantheism—sometimes on display in the effusions of the "New Age" enthusiasts. No, what is required is a reanimation of the principles and understandings which governed traditional understandings. The key, perhaps, is to be found in the word "sacramental"—and the catechistic formula is altogether precise and apposite: "an outward and visible sign of an inner and invisible grace".

One might schematize the contrast between traditional and modern world-views, and their respective "attitudes" to nature this way:

Traditional Cultures	Modern "Civilisation"
mythological cosmogonies	the geological/historical "record"

⁶¹ The most authoritative analysis of this process is to be found in Nasr's *Man and Nature*.

primacy of the spiritual; spiritual worldview	primacy of the material; materialistic worldview
qualitative, synthetic and holistic sacred sciences	quantitative, analytic and fragmentary science
natural forms symbolic and transparent	natural forms mute and opaque
sacramental outlook	profane outlook
reciprocal & cooperative relationship with nature	exploitative & combative relationship with nature
ecological and "natural" economies	industrial and artificial economies
religious culture	secular culture

Like all such schemas, this vastly oversimplifies the case—but it can perhaps serve as a signpost to those modes of understanding and of "being in the world" which we need to reawaken in the modern West. Before any such a healing process can proceed (a healing of ourselves, of the earth, of our "relationship" with the whole cosmos and with what lies beyond it) we must accept that, at root, the "environmental crisis" is actually the symptom of a spiritual malaise. To return to health we must get to the seat of the disease rather than merely palliating the symptoms. As a contemporary Sufi, Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, has so well expressed it:

The state of the outer world does not merely correspond to the general state of men's souls; it also in a sense depends on that state, since man himself is the pontiff of the outer world. Thus the corruption of man must necessarily affect the whole...⁶²

Similarly, Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

The Earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with Heaven and therefore in constant strife with the terrestrial environment.⁶³

In this context we might also feel the force of Emerson's claim that, "the views of nature held by any people determine all their institutions."⁶⁴

We are not able here to detail the ways in which we might escape the tyrannical grip of a profane scientism and its various accomplices (industrialism, consumerism, "development", "economic growth" and other such shibboleths) and so begin to free ourselves and our world from the catastrophic consequences of a collective blindness and a quite monstrous *hubris* (the two, of course, being intimately related). We must relinquish our Luciferian ideas about "conquering" nature, and allow Mother Nature not only to heal herself but to heal us. As Kenneth Cragg has so properly observed,

...nature is the first ground and constant test of the authentically religious temper—the temper which does not sacralize things in themselves nor desecrate them in soul-less using and consuming. Between the pagan and the secular, with their contrasted bondage and arrogance, lies the reverent ground of a right hallowing where things are well seen as being for men under God, seen for their poetry, mystery, order and serviceability in the cognizance of man, and for their quality in the glory of God.⁶⁵

⁶² Abu Bakr Siraj Ed-Din, *The Book of Certainty*, New York, 1974, p33.

⁶³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York, 1996, 3.

⁶⁴ Quoted in *Cathedrals of the Spirit*, p223.

⁶⁵ Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an*, p148.

The way forward must also be a way back. Suffice it to say that all those concerned about the current "ecological crisis" would do well to ponder the implications of the following passage from Schuon:

This dethronement of Nature, or this scission between man and the earth—a reflection of the scission between man and God— has borne such bitter fruits that it should not be difficult to admit that, in these days, the timeless message of Nature constitutes a spiritual viaticum of the first importance. ...It is not a matter of projecting a supersaturated and disillusioned individualism into a desecrated Nature—this would be a worldliness like any other—but, on the contrary, of rediscovering in Nature, on the basis of the traditional outlook, the divine substance which is inherent in it; in other words, to "see God everywhere"...⁶⁶

Here is the same truth expressed by Black Elk in the inimitable idiom of the Lakota Indians:

Peace...comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the Universe dwells *Wakan-Tanka* [the Great Spirit] and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us.⁶⁷

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⁶⁶ Frithjof Schuon, *The Feathered Sun*, Bloomington, 1990, p13.

⁶⁷ Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p115.

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