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THE LIGHT OF NATURE

In this paper Canon Wright seeks to examine man's inner experiences in so far as they help him in his search for God. In his use of the word "nature" in what follows he includes both the natural world around us and also man's own nature. He looks for objective elements within the subjective realm which can help man in his search.

I. God in the natural world

a. Intellectual conclusions. In a sense the purely intellectual level is not relevant to our subject, but it needs to be mentioned. The natural order with all its intricacies implies a creative mind behind it. Nowadays the fact of creation is often confused with the method of creation, and it is assumed that one must choose between evolution and God.

Nonetheless Paul's judgment of idolatry is still valid. Idolatry is untenable because 'all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made'. (Rom. 1:19,20. NEB) A somewhat similar argument is the famous idol making passage in Isaiah 44:9-20.

This intellectual conclusion does not in itself lead us to the experience of God. It may start us on a search, or, if we are already believers, it may sound a chord in our hearts. 'The heavens declare the glory of God' (Ps. 19:1) is more likely on the lips of the believer than the unbeliever.

Nature taken alone as the way to God has sometimes led to strange results. Which is the reflection of God -- the spring sunshine or the tornado? So the Hindu pantheon includes Siva, the Destroyer. The nature religions, as typified by Canaanite

practices, involve a union between humans and anthropomorphic deities, so that the worshippers unite with the divine conflicts, deaths, resurrections, and sex experiences.

b. *Feelings about nature.* To many nature is just an inconsequential fact. We are reminded of the Peter Bell of whom Wordsworth wrote:

'In vain through every changeful year/Did nature lead him
as before./ A primrose by a river's brim/ A yellow primrose
was to him,/ And it was nothing more.'

One of the finest books on the perception of nature is Sherwood Taylor's *The Fourfold Vision*. (1945). He speaks of

- (1) Mere perception. The child finds itself in a world of shapes and colours. The adult may find no more than personal or practical significance in the world around. cf. Peter Bell's primrose.
- (2) The scientific view of integration by knowledge. Harmony, relationship, and significance. e.g. Classification of the primrose.
- (3) The comprehension of the artist. Aesthetic perception. Poets, painters, musicians.
- (4) The intuition of God in nature. Sherwood Taylor speaks of this as "essentially religious, though not essentially Christian." "Some have the gift or grace of perceiving the relation of nature to God as directly and inescapably as the artist perceives beauty, while others, not thus gifted, may acquire the habit of rationally contemplating nature under this guise."

Wordsworth probably penetrated no further than (3). Although he was a believer, I cannot recollect any poem in which he finds the Christian God in nature. His longer poem, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of early Childhood*, speaks of the growing boy who comes "trailing clouds of glory... from God who is our home". Gradually shades of the prison house close upon him, while he "daily farther from the east must travel". The glory (of God?) in nature is fighting a losing battle.

We have already noticed one of the problems associated with the finding of God in nature. How do we face nature's ambivalence? William Blake gave it up in his "Tiger, tiger... Did He who made the lamb make thee?" Yet he found some comfort through the revelation of Isaiah 11, and his beautiful poem NIGHT has the lion guarding the lamb.

God, accepted through revelation and experience, can certainly illuminate nature, as in His great answer to Job and in the glory of Psalm 104. The latter draws upon the old Egyptian hymn to Aten, but the sun as creative lord has given place to Yahweh the Creator and Upholder.

To sum up, the aesthetic perception of the natural order is a valid approach to the deeper grasp of the material universe. It is highly, if not totally, subjective, but it can be communicated to others who are tuned in.

II. The Search for God within.

We turn now to human nature as possibly containing within itself the way to God. There is a way of linking nature without and nature within by an experience that has been well named Cosmic Consciousness. Perhaps not more than one person in fifty has had it, but all who have had it recognise the description when another speaks of it. I had the experience two or three times when I was younger, and someone who was doing a thesis on the subject at Oxford told me in a letter that it is unusual for an older person to have it for the first time. The experience comes suddenly and unsought, and probably lasts for no more than a second or two -- time becomes irrelevant. Rosalind Heywood in her contribution to the book *Life After Death* describes it; "Like a bullet the awareness struck me: *physically* the flowers and I were one, *physically* they and I and the trees and the grass and the soil in the garden -- and everything on earth -- were made of the earth, were part of it. And the earth was part of the solar system, and so on, right up to the whole universe. All, however diverse, was one. I did not think it; I experienced it." The last sentence is vital; one cannot think oneself into the experience at will. I would add the further strange feeling, accompanying the other, of everything being beyond good and evil, so that one knows that all is utterly and completely well.

It is no sense a religious or moral experience. It has no converting power. Thus H.G. Wells and Richard Jefferies experienced it and yet remained unbelievers.

A few days after writing this, I heard one of the early morning talks on the radio, in which the speaker dwelt on the sudden feeling of underlying glory in nature, in mountains, rivers, fields, and in the speaker's flash of insight when he suddenly noticed holly leaves in the rain. As I listened I realised a difference between this and the experience of Cosmic Consciousness. Like the speaker, one has had the perception that the glory is there, but, as he said, there is so much behind into which one cannot break through. In Cosmic Consciousness one actually does break through.

We turn now to some of the deliberate attempts to penetrate the restrictions of the conscious mind so as to experience a wider field beyond. Hallucinatory and psychedelic drugs were at one time used in the search for ultimate reality, or even God, but most serious investigators have abandoned the drug trail. It would not be unkind to say that many potential and actual addicts have found a better alternative in one of the forms of meditation. It is rare for these to be specifically Christian, and hence we may class them as belonging to the natural and experiential search for fuller light.

Their order of emergence over here, generally from the east by way of America, would probably be Vedanta (Huxley, Isherwood, Gerald Heard) including Yoga, followed by Zen Buddhism, and then the more popularised Divine Light, Transcendental Meditation, and the strange Hare Krishna movement. An independent movement, influential in certain circles, came from Indonesia and is known as Subud.

Here at last we can link up with something objective. Down the ages both Christian and eastern mysticism have occasionally produced observable and hence objective, phenomena. Fr. Thurston has written of levitations and other supernormal phenomena in his books *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* and *Surprising Mystics*. These phenomena have been accepted as bye-products of the mystical experience, although some easterners have cultivated them as desirable ends in themselves. Wiser practitioners have taken them in their stride if the experiences have come.

Modern science has adopted a different approach, and various types of electrical apparatus have been used to record brain waves, blood pressure, and metabolic changes when a person is meditating, and more particularly when he passes into a state of trance or near-trance.

Tests have shown increased Alpha rhythms in the brain -- a mark of rest; lowering of the metabolic rate, which means a slowing up of the life processes; a reduction in oxygen consumption and in cardiac output; and a decrease in the concentration of sodium lactate in the arteries. All of these physical states are connected with a decrease in anxiety. (Una Kroll, *A Signpost for the World*, p.60ff). In general this holds good for all deeper forms of meditation, but there are occasional differences. Thus, if there is a sudden noise, the records show that the Zen master hears it each time, and his alpha waves show it for a fraction of a second. The master of Yoga, on the other hand, does not register any awareness when the noise comes, or a flashing light, or even pricking with a pin. (Wm. Johnston, *Silent Music*, p.38ff.)

However, an objective excursion of this kind is of interest rather than of assistance in discovering the nature of mysticism, unless, as with the brain/mind controversy, we conclude that the ultimate reality is physical. On the assumption that the ultimate is more than this, we look more closely at its exploration *via* the inner world of man. We go into the shadows, but is there light at the end of the tunnel?

Paul's attitude at Athens makes a sensible beginning (Acts 17). He holds that God has implanted in mankind an instinct to "feel after him and find him" (v.27). Where the feeling has produced polytheistic idolatry, Paul's "spirit was provoked within him" (v.16). Where the feeling has ended in "an unknown God" (v.23) Paul finds hope. God is at least a desirable proposition, whoever or whatever He may be. He can be seen as the ground of man's being (v.27,28), but, if He is to be known, He is to be known personally in and through Jesus Christ, the objective and revealed reality (v.23b).

Where God emerges in non-Christian mystical experience (i.e. in the light of nature), He is either removed into a remote unknowable transcendence, or, more commonly, is seen as a permeating power, or is identified with the inner core of oneself. There may be an equation of the Atman (you) with the supreme Brahman so that your individuality is seen as illusion (Maya). Thus "Brahman is ever pure, ever free, self-luminous, and that Brahman is one's very self" (Swami Abhutananda's chapter in *Vedanta for the Western World*, p.127). The experienter believes that he has a direct experience either of God or of his own expanded self. If God is there, He is not felt as the personal Father of the New Testament. Occasionally one meets a description which suggests a fuller revelation of God, and we dare not limit the grace of God in the search. Meanwhile we recognise an opening up of inner awareness towards a unifying of the self with an underlying reality. This has a side effect - some would judge the main effect - of an intense inner calm.

When we crash or slide through the gateway of normal consciousness, we may pass into the psychiatrist's daily bread of forgotten memories, repressions, and dynamic urges. As Jungians, we are entangled in the Collective Unconscious and its archetypes. We may release psychic powers, such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and astral projection. We may take the left hand path of the occult. Or we may keep to the road that leads to the mystic experience of restful oneness. This is what we want to assess.

Suppose we treat it as an awareness of the immanence of God. (Acts 17:28. "In him we live and move and have our being." Col. 1:17 "In him [Christ] all things hold together". Heb.1:3. "Uphold-

ing the universe by his word of power.") The relation of God to the created order is not identical with that of the carpenter to his table. Certainly the universe is not God (pantheism), and it is no illusion that it appears a distinct entity. But it continues in being through the permeating energy of God. This energy sustains everything equally, since it would be absurd to hold that a human being, for example, needs more energy/life to sustain him (her) in existence than does a stone. One cannot say how far this upholding energy/life of God is linked to the belief of the physicist that there is no ultimate inertness in matter.

Can we speak of this upholding as impersonal? I think we must. It is difficult to imagine God as personally manipulating every atom in the universe all the time. An analogy might be the human body, the microcosm of the universe. In all essentials our bodies look after themselves. There is an upholding life/force that operates impersonally, seeing to our digestion, blood supply, endocrine glands etc. A wound sets in motion defensive and healing mechanisms. Yet we may intervene personally where necessary.

The Bible nowhere suggests that the way to the Father is through this life force. The Fall has left us with natural existence, derived from God's supporting power, but for the enjoyment of God we need to be reborn with the new life of the Spirit, giving the experience of Abba, Father.

If a person becomes aware of this life force, he will perceive it and experience it as the core of his existence, and also as the force that sustains the universe. He passes easily from self to non-self and to immersion in the whole. He passes beyond good and evil, since all alike partake of the same energy. He has, in fact, come deliberately into my unsought Cosmic Consciousness. God may, or may not, be seen in this Nirvana. If He is, His personality is suspect.

When a Christian meditates, he may use the non-Christian methods for stilling the mind. There are books on Christian Yoga and Zen Catholicism. There is the repetition of the Jesus Prayer. Posture and breathing and the use of certain objects play their part. One finds these means in Christian mystics down the ages. The Christian may latch on to the immanent life force, but, because he has the new eternal life in him, and is seeking God beyond an experience, he links the personal with the impersonal. The TM disciple is given a Sanskrit word by his guru. The word is intended to remain meaningless, but it has to be taken up to start each session of meditation. The TM teacher criticises Christian meditation on a Biblical theme or text, on the ground that he is still under the dominance of his thinking conscious mind. In fact the Christian naturally uses his mind and his commentaries to understand

the text, which comes as the revelation from God, or of God. In the meditation that follows he seeks to absorb the text or theme, and to be absorbed by it. In this way he is not swimming all the time in the pool of his own inner world. He tastes the freedom and glory of the ocean beyond.

Maybe this immanent life/force is also related to the inspiration of the arts. Inspired works have the link that makes the ordinary person, with ears to hear, feel moved in an inexplicable way from the depths. Several years ago I had an interesting experience of visiting an exhibition of psychotic art. Some of the pictures had the real thrill of inspiration, several of them being by patients who could paint only when they were under treatment and had lost the anchor of the ordered mind.

Finally, something might be said about the charismatic movement. It is difficult to bring this under the head of natural religion. Yet an observer must wonder whether all the manifestations are of the Holy Spirit. Tongues and prophecy are not products of the ordered consciousness, but some cases may emerge from the natural dynamism of the unconscious, or be induced by autohypnotism, or be explicable in Pavlovian terms, as they are by Wm. Sargant in *The Mind Possessed*. It is only since the experience became suggested and popularised that so many crave for it and achieve something significant. Like TM the experience brings inward peace. The new thing about today's outbursts is the private use of tongues in the personal times of prayer. Is it coincidence that the TM meditator uses an unknown Sanskrit word to release him? If we were following through the charismatic movement we should want to include Subud, which is a non-religious charismatic experience, offering experiences of release for the body and the tongue.

To sum up; nature without and within may give an experience which can be traced to the immanent life-upholding of God, but this experience is at an impersonal level. Who can tell how wonderful it would have been without the Fall? In the meantime it falls short of the New Testament invitation to fellowship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While the deeper realms of mysticism are for some, the personal experience of God is for all, however simple.
