The Need For A Sacred Science

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56. Of course Muslims also believe in Mount Qaf, where the mythical Sitmarh, the symbol of the Divine Intellect, resides. Many Sufi treatises such as the *Muntiq al-tayr* of `Attûr are based on this symbolic geography. See Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (London, 1987), p. 98ff.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Spiritual Significance of Nature

There are not only traditional and sacred sciences cultivated within various traditional civilizations and concerned with the study of the cosmos in the light of metaphysical principles. There is also a dimension of sacred science which concerns nature as a whole in as much as the spiritual significance of nature is concerned. Nature possesses a spiritual meaning of the utmost importance with which every integral spiritual tradition is concerned in one way or another, although the emphasis on this dimension of reality has not been the same in various traditions over the centuries. There is a need to come to know of this spiritual significance, as there is a need to rediscover sacred science. In fact a sacred science of nature leads ineluctably to an understanding of the spiritual significance of nature and any treatment of sacred science must include a treatment of the spiritual message which nature provides through her rhythms and harmonies, forms and movements, through her symbols and the grace which emanates from the Origin through her variegated manifestations.

It needs to be asserted here that to the extent that the modern cancer of urban growth and the destruction of nature even beyond the boundaries of the ever-expanding city lay waste to what remains of the natural order on earth, to that extent does the spiritual message of virgin nature become more vital for the very survival of man. The spiritual significance of nature has begun to dawn upon modern man much like the importance of fresh air, which is appreciated only when unpolluted air becomes difficult of access and pollution begins to affect the very foundations of biological and terrestrial life for the sake of which heaven was so easily sacrificed by the Promethean man of the Renaissance and its aftermath. Today one can no longer be seriously concerned with the spiritual well-being of man without turning to the spiritual significance of nature, no matter how somewhat more diluted forms of present-day technologies seek to make a virtue of the suffocating ugliness that modern man has substituted for the harmony, beauty and peace of the natural environment within whose bosom man lived and breathed in bygone ages.

The spiritual significance of nature manifests itself on many levels and through many channels. Virgin nature possesses order and harmony. There exists within this vast domain of immediately perceptible reality of nonhuman origin an order, an interrelation of parts, a complementarity of functions and roles
and an interdependence which, for the mind not paralyzed by the reductionism inherent in the modern scientific worldview, cannot but lead to a sense of wonder and awareness of the spiritual character of that Light which turned chaos into cosmos and which still reveals itself in the natural order.

This order is, moreover, related to an incredible harmony which in the technically musical sense pervades all the realms of nature from the stars to subatomic particles. The proportions of the parts of animals and plants, of crystal structures or of the planetary movements, when studied mathematically from the point of view of traditional or Pythagorean mathematics, reveal the presence of a harmony pervading all orders of the universe. It is as if the whole cosmos were music congealed into the very substance of things, which not only have their existence according to the laws of harmony but also move and live according to the rhythm of that cosmic dance, symbolized by the dance of Śiva, which is the very embodiment of the dynamic power that makes possible the “cosmic play.” The whole of nature still echoes that Primordial Word which is both silence and the fullness of sound, containing within itself the harmony pervading all existence.

The life of nature not only displays harmony and order but also laws which make the harmony and order possible. To modern science such laws may appear as being “merely” mechanical or biological, but this reduction does not at all obliterate the spiritual significance of these laws, save for those who have become blinded by the all too pervasive reductionism of today and who have lost their sense of wonder. For what is the source of these laws and why do they exist? Why does calcium continue to behave as calcium or the apple tree to bear apples rather than pears? The “laws of nature” are but the laws of God for His creation, the Shari‘ah of each order of existence, to use an Islamic term. Or to turn to the nontheistic language of Buddhism, the “laws of nature” are the dharmas of things. To observe how each aspect of nature follows fully the laws that govern its existence is to become aware of the dharma which man must also follow. Moreover, the perfect submission of nature to its dharma is a lesson for man to submit himself perfectly to that norm which is his dharma, and which is none other than the quest for enlightenment. Virgin nature in a sense reflects sanctity, albeit in a passive mode, for, like the saint, the forms of nature remain in perfect submission to the Will of the Creator or to their dharma. They are perfect muslims in the sense of being completely submitted to the Divine Order. One of the greatest lessons which nature can teach the spiritual person is this perfection of submission to the laws governing things, to the principle that rules over creation, to the Tao. From this submission arises the harmony of all things which the Far Eastern sages have emphasized in their quest to integrate themselves into the at once natural and supernatural rhythms of the world of nature.

The spiritual significance of this submission is also reflected in the moral lessons which nature teaches man, provided he is willing to observe the overwhelming harmony, cooperation and complementarity that can be observed in nature far above and beyond the strife and discord that is so much emphasized by modern biologists and zoologists. Of course, strife also exists in nature, but even strife and struggle, which are real on their own level and which never destroy the harmony of the whole, are pregnant with meaning of an ethical nature. If sacred scriptures of the East and the West—ranging from the Sanskrit Pañca-tantra to medieval European bestiaries to the animal lore of the American Indians—draw so much from the world of animals and plants, from the movements of the heavens and the creatures of the earth, to point to moral lessons which man must master, it is because this moral quality of the natural order is an aspect of its spiritual significance, although not as central as those ontological realities in the realm of nature which reflect Divine Qualities. The observation of moral lessons in nature might appear excessively anthropomorphic in the eyes of those who have adopted the mechanistic point of view opposed to all purpose and entelechy in nature, but these themes are far from being confined to the theistic perspective with its anthropomorphic language. The vision of nature as man’s moral mentor is universal and appears in Hindu and Buddhist sources as well as in Jewish and Christian ones.

The ‘submission’ of nature to its dharma and the harmony which pervades the realm of virgin nature not only lead to the ‘moral quality’ pervading the natural order when this order is viewed from the traditional point of view; they also result in that incredible beauty that is to be observed everywhere in nature. It is remarkable how in virgin nature beauty dominates in a complete manner over ugliness. The ugly is passing accident, while the beauty is abiding substance. The beauty of nature at its highest level is a direct theophany of Divine Beauty and an echo of a paradise whose interiorizing and integrating beauty is still reflected in the natural order. Nearly all normal human beings have a sense of the wholesomeness of this beauty of nature and its healing function. In nature the function of healing is combined with wholesomeness and ultimately holiness.

It is not an accident that so many Westerners, wary of the debilitating ugliness of the modern world and the products of the machine, turn to natural foods, water and air as means of not only gaining bodily health but also spiritual wholeness. Although it is not possible to read the pages of the cosmic book without the aid of the grace issuing from revelation, the very attempt on behalf of so many contemporaries to combine the healing qualities and properties of nature with wholeness and even holiness testifies to a spiritual presence in nature manifested in a beauty which heals the soul as well as the
body. The yearning of human beings for the beauty, peace and tranquility of nature is in reality a yearning for the paradise which nature reflects, which it is in its essence and which man carries at the depth of his being.

The beauty of nature has, however, a more esoteric and directly spiritual function for the person who, through spiritual discipline or by the gift of Heaven, is able to discern beyond forms the presence of the Formless. The beauty of virgin nature is at once interiorizing and absorbing. It brings recollection of the spiritual Reality from which man has originated and in fact aids man in returning to that ever-present Reality. The beauty of nature at its highest level and in conjunction with methods of spiritual realization inebriates the soul with spiritual drunkenness, resurrects man’s inner being and finally aids in man’s sanctification by bearing witness to the immortal paradisal substance within him. The beauty of nature is the direct reflection of the beauty of God; it is therefore an interiorizing beauty which, although seemingly outward, does not disperse but brings man back to the Center wherein abides the ineffable beauty of the One.

The spiritual message of nature is not contained, however, only in the overall beauty of its forms, movements and qualities, but also in the symbols which are direct reflections of various Divine Qualities. The symbolist spirit shared by all traditional peoples and especially by those belonging to different primal and archaic traditions, see in certain forms of nature, ranging from the sun, the eagle and the lion to the river and the sea, direct symbols of Divine Qualities and even in a sense those Qualities themselves. The forms of nature are for them letters and words of a sacred language written by the creating power of the Divinity upon the tablet of cosmic existence. To read this cosmic book requires a special kind of literacy which is in fact very different from the literacy taught through modern education, the literacy that often causes many people to become impervious to the symbolic significance of nature and illiterate regarding the primordial message written upon the face of majestic mountains, withering autumn leaves or the shimmering waves of the sea.

The spiritual message of the symbols of nature is based on neither sentiment nor some kind of vague nature mysticism. It is based on a sacred science which is itself a science of cosmic correspondences and is concerned with the ontological reality of the natural forms in question. The reality of the sun as the symbol of the Divine Intellect is certainly not less than the reality of its mass measurable by methods of modern astrophysics. If this symbolic reality is no longer perceived by a particular segment of humanity, it is not because there is so such reality, but because the symbolist spirit has been lost as a result of a kind of education which trains the mind and the eye to perceive certain accidents while blinding them to the substance, leaving the inner faculties and even the other outer senses practically completely neglected. The spiritual message of the symbols found in nature do not become unreal because a particular society fails to take cognizance of it anymore than the existence of the aroma of a rose ceases to exist because it is lost in the biochemical analysis of the cells of the flower in a laboratory.

While in most traditions certain symbols are sanctified directly by revelation with the aid of which natural symbols in general are comprehended and viewed, there are some primal traditions, like that of the Plains Indians of North America and certain other branches of Shamanism, where natural symbols are the symbols sanctified by revelation. In such cases the various animals and plants become direct manifestations of Divine Powers and in a sense the bridge between man and the world of the Spirit whereas from the general metaphysical point of view, it is man who, as the central being in the terrestrial realm, acts as the bridge between Heaven and earth and the channel through which the light of the Spirit shines upon the earthly realm and its creatures.

The science of the symbols of the natural order has been developed in the bosom of numerous traditional cosmologies, ranging from those of the Australian aborigines to the cosmologies of an Ibn Sīnā or the medieval Jewish Kabbalists. In all these cases the spiritual significance of nature has been recapitulated in an intelligible language in such a manner as to enable traditional man, living in the sacred universe which gives rise to the cosmology in question, to discover a map with which he can orient himself in his spiritual journey beyond the cosmos and to contemplate the entire cosmos as an icon reflecting the power and wisdom of the Divine Artisan. Traditional cosmologies are many, even within a single tradition such as the Islamic or Buddhist, but their goal is one. It is to reveal multiplicity in the light of Unity, samsāra as nirvāṇa, māyā as the creative power of Ātman. Its goal is to help man save himself from the indefinite multiplicity of the cosmic labyrinth by integrating this unending and ever-changing realm of becoming into an intelligible pattern which has the power of freeing man from undue fascination and concern with the ever-flowing stream of change and the withering influence of time. To have read the pages of the cosmic book is to be able to close that book and put it aside. And once the cosmic scroll is folded up, to use the Sufi image, there remains but the Face of the One who never perisheth. The spiritual significance of the various traditional cosmological sciences lies in fact in leading man beyond the cosmos to that metacosmic Reality wherein alone is the spiritual significance of nature perceived on the highest level.

Virgin nature is also the workshop of the Divine Artisan, wherein are to be found the greatest masterpieces of sacred art. In the same way that sacred art as usually understood is produced by supra-individual inspiration emanating from revelation and based on a science of an ultimately Divine Origin of forms,
symbols and substances, the forms of nature are direct products of the work of that Demiurgic Power which draws from the treasury of Divine Possibility those archetypes that externalized become the forms of nature. Virgin nature is the counterpart of sacred art, conveying a Divine Presence and having a soteriological function. In certain traditions such as the Chinese and Japanese, in fact, a landscape painting or garden is sacred art playing the same role as an icon does in Christianity. For those Westerners sensitive to the saving grace and beauty of sacred art as found in a Chartres cathedral or a Byzantine Madonna and Child, the perception of nature as sacred art is a powerful means of bringing out its spiritual significance. Such a comparison might make it more comprehensible for us why the American Indians fought so valiantly for virgin nature which they saw as their sanctuary and cathedral. But for those who hail from the primal traditions, the primacy of nature as sacred art par excellence is so evident that no sacred art created by human hands, even if inspired, can be compared in their eyes with the beauty and perfection of natural forms. For them, nothing ever made by man is worth the destruction of nature and the profanation of virgin nature is more heinous than the destruction of the greatest works of human art.

It is in fact as sacred art that nature and its forms lend themselves to contemplation. The spiritual man, the contemplative, not only seeks shelter in nature against the trivialities of human life and frivolities of worldliness, but is also able to contemplate in the forms of nature the spiritual realities which these forms hide from the eyes of the profane but reveal to those who have gained intimacy with the world of the Spirit. The contemplative hears in the silence of virgin nature the call of the Spirit and the music of the heavenly abode, which is also the call of his Origin. The rhythms of night and day and the seasons, the contrast between the rigor and generosity of nature, the unending transformations which continue within all realms of nature, the perfection of the flower which reflects a paradisal reality and yet the rapid withering of the same flower because it is in fact the reflection of that reality in the world of transience and not that reality itself, the masculine immutability of the crystal and the feminine growing power of the plant, these and numerous other features of the natural order are contemplated by man of a spiritual nature. They reveal to him not only the transient and refractory character of terrestrial existence, but also the permanence of the spiritual realities which the forms of nature at once veil and reveal. For the contemplative every tree is a reflection of the tree of paradise and every flower a mirror of the paradisal innocence for which man yearns because he still carries that primordial nature in the deepest recesses of his being.

On the highest level virgin nature can be contemplated as a theophany which possesses its own metaphysical message and spiritual discipline. Nature reveals the One and Its multiple qualities. It prays and invokes. The air of the mountain top at the moment of dawn or the vast deserts and prairies at sunset are filled with that ether which is not only the substratum of the visible elements but also the substance of quintessential prayer or invocation. But to participate in nature’s prayer and to read the profound gnostic message which she conveys through her forms and qualities requires prior possession of a high degree of spiritual realization.

Nature, however, is generous even to those as yet not so accomplished in matters spiritual but who are sensitive to her beauty and spiritual presence. For them, as for the person who is able to read her metaphysical message and participate in her incantatory rhythms, nature offers a sanctuary of the greatest value at a moment when the storm caused by modern man, out to conquer nature, is wreaking havoc upon the surface of the earth. Strangely enough, while from the metaphysical point of view, to speak of the human is to speak of God, from the vantage point of the secularized world of modern man, to leave the world made by Prometheus man is to enter into the realm of spiritual presence. Virgin nature in fact gives the lie to that agnosticism, secularism, skepticism and the cult of ugliness and unintelligibility which characterize the modern world. It provides a vivid reminder of what is “really” real and what we are at our deepest level of being. The very word ‘nature,’ from the Latin root *natura*, meaning “to be born,” not only means that she is the progenitor of forms which are born from her. It also signifies her regenerating power for man’s spirit, for in her bosom and within the embrace of her spiritual presence, which is the reflection of the Spirit Itself, man’s spirit is rejuvenated and he is reborn.

For this reason the protection of virgin nature, against the onslaught of covetous and greedy men attached to only worldly ends, is indeed a spiritual duty. That is why, in fact, so many of those who have sought to revive the spiritual heritage of mankind to rekindle the light of tradition for contemporary man have loved nature so deeply and have written about it with such sympathy and insight. Such men have unveiled the grandeur and beauty of that cosmic mountain and that sublime peak which touches the Void and which reverberates with that spiritual presence that constitutes the goal of human life and the very substance of what constitutes the human state.