

4. Speeches

Nature and spirituality

Jesús García-Varela

*"It is not birds that speak,
but men learn silence".*

Kathleen Raine

At first sight, the title 'Nature and Spirituality' would appear somewhat contradictory, since at times it seems as if it were no longer possible to view the natural world from a spiritual standpoint. In today's world, nature is thought of as a purely material concept that the human race takes advantage of for economic purposes or simply for pleasure. Nature is absorbed into a machine to be used, thereby becoming a simple resource to be exploited. This concept is the result of a dominant materialistic ideology or mentality based on the idea that only that which can be empirically or scientifically proven actually exists. Scientific knowledge becomes 'orthodox' knowledge, which in turn becomes exclusive and totalitarian. This 'scientificist' mentality that believes that scientific reason is

the only way of approaching reality has gradually imposed its hegemony since the seventeenth century¹, hand in hand with a belief in the concept of material 'progress' –poorly defined and born out of our increasing dependence on technological advances– that continues to use and abuse the world's natural energy sources. Nature is exploited and then squeezed dry. This misuse of science and the concomitant 'progress' are the two external pillars of the modern materialist mentality and two important factors in the world's current ecological crisis (which is nothing but a manifestation of the current predicament in values caused by a disregard for the spiritual dimension of life). This ideology has led, logically, to a general lack of respect for the immaterial values found within the natural world in the dimension of what might be called the 'invisible'². Today the dominant vision of the world provides a stark contrast to the more traditional world views or visions found in the Bible and other sacred texts:³ "The World is no longer seen as the work of God."⁴

1 An early view of this process in the western world can be found in the work of René Guénon, published in 1927, *La crise du monde moderne*. See also: Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends*, above all chapters 5 and 10, and Jacque Ellul, *The Technological Society*. For the origins of the scientific mentality and its founding tenets in the seventeenth and following centuries (Descartes, Boyle, Bacon ...), see Mary Midgley "Putting Nature in Her Place". *Science as Salvation*, pp. 75-83, reproduced in Harry Oldmeadow, *The Betrayal of Tradition*.

2 See the complete dossier on sacred sites and threats to their conservation that has been drawn up by the World Wildlife Fund, *Beyond Belief* (2005).

3 Seyyed Hossein Nasr *Man and Nature*, p.17-50, for a lucid vision of the destruction of sacred and spiritual values in nature. See also by the same author *Religion and the Order of Nature*, pp. 29-79 y 191-234 and "The Cosmos as Theophany" in *Knowledge and the Sacred*", pp. 189-220.

4 Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.179.

Scientific knowledge, quantitative and centrifugal, is diluted in a myriad of applications, each a poorly defined fragment of reality.⁵ On the other hand, knowledge based on an authentic spirituality is qualitative and centripetal and proceeds via synthesis and symbols. The traditional mindsets that form the basis of the world's many different religions and spiritual beliefs appear at times to be but a distant memory of an all but forgotten dimension. Traditional knowledge recognises the presence of invisible spiritual values within the natural world that demand respect and deep veneration, the latter one of the main tenets of the oldest traditional religions (as explained a couple of years ago at the Europarc Congress).⁶ All spiritual traditions look on nature as a theophany, that is, as a divine manifestation: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:2).⁷ This is a sacred world with its symbolism and, given the opacity of materialism, spiritual beings have to contemplate the world via manifestations of phenomena and via the metaphysical transparency of the Cosmos.⁸ Nature is a mirror of the divine world and as such is sacred: the desanctification

of nature is one of the chief characteristics of modern times.

Looking from an authentically traditional perspective, the first misunderstanding to resolve is that there is in fact no conflict between nature and God. Without the concept of a divinity we cannot talk of sacredness.⁹ Nature cannot be worshipped in isolation or be attributed spiritual values beyond those conferred on it by a divine Creator. This anomaly occurs in the modern pseudo-spiritualist (or New Age) thought that sprung up in the twentieth century as part of the uncontrollable psychism that has taken advantage of the growing spiritual vacuum present in modern society. It cannot be denied, nevertheless, that many shades and subtleties exist in these modern forms of thought, which range from those that pay homage to nature as the source of all life, to those centred on psychic forces that are more akin to magic than anything else.¹⁰ However, from a traditional point of view nature is the reflection and symbol of the manifestations of the divinity. Nature is not 'independent' of God, but rather one of the most obvious of all divine manifesta-

⁵ Marco Pallis. *The Way and The Mountain*, p. 71.

⁶ *Naturaleza y Mundos Tradicionales*, Europarc Congress 2004, Roses.

⁷ Many biblical references can be found that express the same idea, including: *Psalms* (24:1, 148), *Isaiah* (40:26), *Leviticus* (25:23) and *Wisdom* (7:22-23).

⁸ See Nasr, *Man and Nature*, op. cit., Chap. 3 'Some Metaphysical Principles Pertaining to Nature', pp. 81-113, rev. ed.

⁹ See also the work of one of the most significant voices of Orthodox Christianity: Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art and The Rape of Man and Nature*, above all chapter 4 of the latter: 'The Desanctification of Nature', pp. 90-112.

¹⁰ For conceptions of nature from the post-medieval world to the present day, see: Harry Oldmeadow, 'The Firmament Sheweth His Handiwork' in *Seeing God Everywhere*.

tions. "All of Nature speaks of God"¹¹, the entire Universe is a sign, a reflection of a invisible Reality.¹²

A spiritual vision of the natural world is one of the essential traits of all authentic spiritual traditions. Man lives in harmony with the Cosmos, venerating and respecting it. The men and women of traditional cultures are an integrated part of the natural environment; it is their temple, their place of worship. They are not the owners of the natural world; rather they are its custodians and guardians: "This we know; the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the Earth".¹³

The second point to take into account in this context is the necessary distinction between the spiritual world and the psychic or supernatural world. We have already mentioned the modern neo-spiritualism whose main characteristic is precisely its choice of the physic dimension as an alternative to the spiritual dimension. This is an important distinction because the physic dimension, restricted only to the human dimension, shuns and

even tries to substitute the divine experience.¹⁴ We live in a modern world characterised by both materialism and psychism. Both are distant from the spiritual world and therefore, from what constitutes the essence of humankind and the world's different spiritual traditions. As Frithjof Schuon has explained so clearly, modern man has 'usurped' religious feeling and replaced it with other idols, one of which is science.¹⁵ The qualitative vision of the world has been lost along the way; we have lost the criteria of spiritual orientation and are stumbling progressively closer to internal self-destruction. This is one of the obvious signs of the crisis of our civilisation that has been remarked upon so often in recent decades.

The ability to penetrate nature's symbols and reach into the essence of its spiritual dimension requires *contemplation*, an archetypal activity that, above all else and as we have mentioned already, explores the divine origins of phenomena. If we contemplate the natural world via authentically spiritual criteria we will see the universal values that are present. A

11 Hugo de San Victor. 'Omnis natura Deo loquitur', *Eruditio Didascalica*, 6,5 p. 176, 1805, quoted in Nasr, *Man and Nature*, p.10.

12 See chap. 1 of *The Way and the Mountain* by Marco Pallis for an approximation to the sacred character of nature from a genuinely traditional point of view, pp.13-35.

13 The indigenous peoples of the North American Great Plains possess the most existential conception of the natural world. This quote comes from the famous speech by Chief Seattle, of which numerous versions exist in many languages, pp. 31-32.

14 Jung is mistaken when he tries to place the spiritual dimension within the "collective subconsciousness". A profound criticism of Jung's thesis can be found in Titus Burckhardt, *Modern Science and Traditional Wisdom*, in the chapter "Modern Psychology and traditional wisdom", pp. 88-103

15 Frithjof Schuon 'Usurpations of religious feeling' in *The Transfiguration of Man*, pp. 39-48.

flower is not merely an association of certain physical elements that together create a material object, but something that transmits a permanent state of which the flower is a symbol. The beauty of the flower is a manifestation of an invisible quality — Beauty as a divine Quality. Beauty becomes a representation of the infinite within the finite. “To see the infinite in the finite is to see that the flower we see before us is eternal, because an eternal spring reaffirms itself in its fragile smile”.¹⁶ Likewise, the mountain will be the reflection of divine Majesty, and the ray of light

the symbol of the divine Power. By contemplating the flower, the mountain, the ray or the current of a river we can feel the Presence of God and his distinct Qualities. Beauty becomes then a manifestation of the infinite in the finite and evokes the metaphysical transparency of the phenomena mentioned above. He or she who contemplates sees beyond the dual external vision that separates the subject from the object and can interiorise positive phenomena into his or her soul. To continue with this metaphor, the external beauty of a flower will help whoever

16 Schuon, *Gnosis; Divine Wisdom*, p. 100

Ramon Llull's cave, Serra de Tramuntana, Mallorca, Balearic Islands.



contemplates it to undergo a spiritual transformation that will allow its beauty to be assimilated and recognised. This external beauty will thus be an aid and support for achieving greater internal beauty.¹⁷ The beauty of Nature will therefore have a direct influence on the transformation of the soul.

The contemplative vision of the natural world can be reinforced via two universal spiritual exercises, *pilgrimage and eremitism*. Both practices have been performed here in Montserrat for centuries and are wonderful ways of cultivating a deep spiritual relationship with nature.

Pilgrimages are dynamic events. A trail takes the pilgrim to a sacred site that is both a physical place and a representation of the Centre or Origin: the *pilgrimage* is clearly a symbol for human existence: life viewed traditionally as a *peregrinatio*. We come from the Origin and return to it. On route to holy sites where a sacred presence is manifest, pilgrims travel through the natural world and enjoy the opportunity to perceive the spiritual dimension of nature and be a part of it. Some of the great pilgrimage routes of the western world such as the medieval ways to Saint James of Compostela are still

alive and are –or, at least, should be– at heart journeys of transformation for the soul based on prayer and the contemplation of one’s natural surroundings. Likewise, a pilgrimage implies certain values and spiritual attitudes such as solitude, silence, sobriety, strength and perseverance that will coalesce in a unique fashion during the journey. The pilgrim will never be the same at the end of the journey if he has undertaken the pilgrimage in the appropriate frame of mind.¹⁸

If a pilgrimage is a *dynamic* manifestation of spirituality, then a more *static* manifestation of direct contact with the natural world can be found in eremitism. Hermits close themselves off from the outside world, be it temporarily or permanently, and live a life dedicated to prayer and contemplation¹⁹ amidst their own personal temple of nature. The hermit lives the natural world as a theophanic manifestation of everyday life. Nature becomes the perfect support for the hermit’s inner life and helps to achieve the vocation of all hermits –the discovery of God. As is well known, eremitism has always been a part of both eastern and western Christianity, from the first century after Christ and on through Saint Mary of Egypt and the Desert Fathers. Within the eastern branch

¹⁷ In this sense, see the marvellous chapter entitled ‘Flowers’ in Lord Northbourne’s *Looking Back in Progress*, pp. 90-106.

¹⁸ The recommendations to pilgrims contained in the annual pamphlets published by the Abbey of Montserrat are of great use.

¹⁹ As a comparison of eremitism with monastic life, few lines as inspired as those of Frithjof Schuon have ever been written: ‘Universality and actuality of monkhood’ in *Light on the ancient worlds* pp. 137-155.

of Christianity it is worth making special mention of Mount Athos (one of the case studies in the Delos Initiative) and, in the west, of the mountain of Montserrat, which was once and one day will be again –it is to be hoped- an important centre of eremitism. The modern world lies at the antipodes of eremitism and does nothing to either understand or encourage it. Nevertheless, we should not forget that in all traditional worlds the most spiritual of people who isolate themselves in the natural world and dedicate their life to prayer and contemplation have always been considered a blessing and an essential element in the well-being of communities.

Achieving the essence of the natural world, however, should not be a possibility reserved only for hermits or pilgrims; rather, it must be a possibility open for all provided that certain profound spiritual criteria are taken into account.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Sioux author Charles Eastman ‘Ohiyesa’ wrote that silence was the “voice of the Great Mystery”²⁰, the voice of God, and it is highly significant that silence is one the great absentees from today’s society. To listen, first you have to be silent. All spiritual disciplines highlight

the importance of silence as one of the attitudes that is most needed if any attempts at reapproaching the natural world are to be fruitful.²¹ First we must listen in order to be able to hear the birds, the wind, the rushing water of the streams ... This silence must be more than just a lack of spoken words for if we are lost in the tide of our thoughts, memories, hopes for the future –distracted by mental activity- then we will still not hear. One of the greatest spiritual calamities of our age is this loss of the silence that enables us to establish full contact with nature and our inner selves, a loss that has had many consequences.

Another of the important attitudes that enable us to enjoy fruitful contact with nature is the *power of observation*, that is, the ability to concentrate and appreciate what is occurring around us. We have lost this ability in a world in which we are constantly being disturbed by the intensity of everyday life. Living as if we had no spiritual centre, we are now governed by other, false centres that deprive us of the possibility of achieving the calmness and serenity needed for moments of introspection and self-awareness. Modern society is dependent on qualities that are completely

²⁰ Charles Eastman ‘Ohiyesa’. *The Soul of an Indian*, p. 4.

²¹ We had the opportunity to discuss this point further in our presentation entitled ‘*The immaterial values of the natural world*’ given at the Esparc Congress 2005 held in Cangas de Narcea, Spain.

opposed to observation and thus to contemplation. This inevitably leads to the entrenched tendencies of dispersion, superficiality and trivialness that surround us today.

The periodical need for *solitude* is another of the important attitudes needed in any attempt to renew contact with our spiritual dimensions. The opportunity to retire to nature must be made available to everyone and protected areas should reserve spaces where this practice can be carried out.

Silence, contemplation and solitude are vital for the perception of the invisible spiritual dimension of nature and without their presence it is very difficult to appreciate the sanctity of the natural world as a manifestation or as an open book in which the work of God can be read.

Sacredness can be perceived by minds that are accustomed to discerning expressions of spirituality in the negative and positive phenomena that occur in the world. Via daily contemplation of the natural world we can regain the possibility of perceiving the divine qualities present in the manifestation: Beauty, Power, Peace, Purity and Mercy. All form the transcendental and immanent dimen-

sions of the Cosmos. Here it is worth recalling that the root of the word 'cosmos' is 'order' and as such it can be understood as a symbol full of the possibilities frequently described in spiritual texts of the 'omnipresence of God'. '*Seeing God everywhere*' and '*seeing everything in God*' are two complementary attitudes and the latter is a necessary consequence of the former. Both in their deepest senses imply an awareness of the essential unity of the divine creation of the world. In the words of Schuon: "Seeing God everywhere ... is just that: seeing that we are not, and that only He is".²² Seeing everything in God is also a way of embodying in our souls the reflections of the divine qualities that are virtues. This was mentioned above when we discussed how the transformation of the soul leads to contemplation.

Once upon a time in the now distant past people were accustomed to performing regular spiritual exercises. They would retire every year for a number of days to the wilds, away from the world, and pray in silence and solitude. It is no exaggeration to say that today such spiritual exercises in the western world are now principally the province of monastic communities, although they have not disappeared altogether.

²² *Gnosis; Divine Wisdom*, p. 124 and the whole chapter: "Seeing God everywhere", pp.109-126.

All in all, opportunities to retrieve one's inner self have been all but lost or are reserved for a small minority: however, the possibility of reaching deep into our beings can be enhanced by a spirituality that is fully in tune with the natural world. Given that we are here today in Montserrat, we feel it is appropriate to add that the Church can play an important role in this process. By this we do not only mean the importance of a "theology of the natural world"²³, a topic much discussed in Protestant Christian circles in the United States, but the vital need for a message or a 'pastoral' for nature to enable believers to fully appre-

ciate the profound spiritual dimension of the natural world. In recent years there has been a significant convergence of ideas on the subject and we hope that they will continue. Good examples of this *rapprochement* are the joint declaration by Pope John Paul II and the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I²⁴ and a recent message from Pope Benedict XVI²⁵, made during the symposium organised by the orthodox churches in the Amazon, that underlined the importance of both an attitude of veneration towards creation and an awareness amongst believers of the need for a spiritual response to the current ecological crisis.

Adam's Peak, Shhri Lanka, sacred mountain for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians.



The rediscovery of nature that we are proposing would be incomplete if the spiritual consequences of all of the banal actions of everyday life were not also taken into account. We must move towards a change in mentality -that in turn will bring about a change in lifestyle- via the assumption of new habits and customs. Greater awareness of the natural world without any inner change or change in our souls and ways of life will necessarily only be superficial. The forgotten values of the modern mindset such as sobriety, the control of the continual desire for more material objects and discipline are all linked to this change in mentality and a rediscovery of nature can help bring it about. These values are inherent in the natural world and form part of the harmony of the universe. Living in harmony means a life with a correct balance between our internal and external selves.

This harmonious dimension of life has been lost as we increasingly confuse effects and causes. We live shallow lives, distanced

from the primordial mission of man: to act as a 'pontifex', the bridge between Heaven and Earth, to represent God, to preserve our principles and to remember their importance. In order to achieve this difficult task we must live in harmony with the natural world and if we lose our inner balance, our external aspect will suffer immediately: "Man's inner self is reflected in his external order ... When our interiors are full of darkness and chaos, the beauty and harmony of nature in turn also becomes unbalanced and disordered".²⁶ If we want to change the world or, at least, to ensure that some of the worst manifestations of the current crisis abate, then we must first change our inner selves. We can change ourselves and this is the essential meaning of any type of spirituality. This is a universal need that goes beyond the external differences between religions. Only in this way will a coherent and effective integration of the spiritual values of protected natural areas into current ways of thinking be possible.

²³ There are many references to this in the collective work *Christianity and Ecology*, Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. Neither should we forget the existence in Christianity of the powerful Franciscan current of thought directly connected to a spiritual vision of the nature. See also J. Antonio Guerra for an edition of the work of Saint Francis in *Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos* and the connection to Saint Francis in the Christian mystic of nature that goes back to the Desert Fathers (see Edward A. Armstrong). Let us not forget either that Pope John Paul II proclaimed Saint Francis the "patron of the ecologists" in the papal bull *Bula Inter Sanctos*, 29 November 1979.

²⁴ "Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics" by Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Rome-Venice, 10 June 2002.

²⁵ On 6 June 2006 during the symposium "Religion, Science and the Environment Symposium VI: The Amazon River". See also the address by Metropolitan John of Pergamon during the same symposium: *Humanity and Nature: Learning from the Indigenous* and the declaration on the environment by the Australian bishops: *Australian Catholic Bishops Statement on the Environment (2002)*..

²⁶ Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *Man and Nature*, op. cit., p. 96.

Bibliography

- Armstrong, E. (1976) *Saint Francis: Nature, Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Histories in the Franciscan Legend*, London, UK.
- Burckhardt, T. (1979) *Ciencia Moderna y Sabiduría Tradicional*, Madrid, Taurus Ediciones, Biblioteca de Estudios Tradicionales.
- Eastman "Ohiyesa", C. (1993) *The Soul of an Indian*, Kent Nerburn ed. California, New World Library, USA.
- Eliade, M. (1959) *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., USA.
- Ellul, J. (1964) *The Technological Society*, New York, Knopf, USA.
- Dudley, N., Higgings-Zogib, L. & Mansourian, S. (2005) *Beyond Belief: Linking faiths and protected areas to support biodiversity conservation*. World Wildlife Fund, Equilibrium and Alliance of Religions and Conservation.
- García Varela, J. (2004) *Nature and Traditional Worlds*. Congres Europarc 2004, Rosas, Spain.
- García Varela, J. (2005) *Los valores in-*
materiales de la naturaleza, Congreso Esparc 2005, Cangas de Narcea, 8-12 junio. *Actas*, Fundación González Bernáldez, 2006, España.
- Guerra, J. A. (1978) *San Francisco de Asís. Escritos, biografías y documentos de la época*, Madrid, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos nº 399.
- Hessel, D. T. & Ruether, R.R., ed. (2000) *Christianity and Ecology*, Nueva York, Harvard, USA.
- Guénon, R. (1946) *La crise du monde moderne*, París, Gallimard. France
- Midgley, M. (1992) *Science as Salvation*, New York, Routledge, USA.
- Nasr, S. H. (1989) *Man and Nature*, London, Harper Collins, UK. [Ed. revised: (1997) ABC International Group, Inc.].
- Nasr, S. H. (1989) *Knowledge and the Sacred*, New York, State University of New York Press, USA.
- Nasr, S. H. (1996) *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York, Oxford UP, USA.
- Northbourne, Lord (1970) *Looking Back in Progress*, Middlesex, Perennial Books, UK.

- Oldmeadow, H. (2005) *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity*, Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom Books, USA.
- Oldmeadow, H. (2003) "The Firmament Sheweth His Handiwork: Re-awakening a Religious Sense of the Natural Order" en *Seeing God Everywhere: Essays On Nature and the Sacred*, Barry McDonald ed., Bloomington, Indiana, World Wisdom Books, USA.
- Pallis, M. (1991) *The Way and The Mountain*, London, Peter Owen, UK.
- Roszak, T. (1972) *Where the Wasteland Ends*, London, Faber and Faber, UK.
- Sherrard, P. (1990) *The Sacred in Life and Art*. New York, Golgonooza Press, USA.
- Sherrard, P. (1987) *The Rape of Man and Nature*, Ipswich, Suffolk, Golgonooza Press, UK.
- Seattle, Chief (1884) <http://www.kyphilom.com/www/seattle.html> Translated from the Suquamish dialect of central Puget Sound.
- Schuon, F. (1995) *The Transfiguration of Man*. World Wisdom Books. Bloomington, Indiana, USA.
- Schuon, F. (1959) *Gnosis. Divine Wisdom*. New edition in 1990 by World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, USA.
- Schuon, F. (1966) *Light on the Ancient Worlds*. New edition in 1984 by World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, USA.

