

An abstract painting featuring three prominent red, spiky flowers, possibly proteas, set against a background of vibrant green foliage and yellow-orange washes. The style is expressive, with visible brushstrokes and splatters of paint in various colors including blue, white, and black.

Creation, Evolution and Faith

***Reflections on the
presence of God
in creation***

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I have delivered a number of versions of this lecture on several occasions at different venues over the last number of years, and have tended to respond to requests for a written copy by saying that it would shortly be incorporated in work I was preparing for publication. However, since the work of incorporation has long ago stretched any reasonable meaning of 'shortly' to breaking point, and in any case the material in the lecture is likely to be swallowed up in the greater level of detail in the larger work, I thought it worthwhile to commit the lecture to paper in a form that amalgamates the different versions.

I have included as a Postscript a reflection on the spirituality of Robert Lloyd Praeger, prepared for the Dalgan Park (Columban Ecological Institute) Summer School on Clare Island in July 2015.

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Meeting the Infant of Prague

I am sure you must be wondering why we have gathered in the chapel for this presentation rather than in the lecture room as usual. Part of the reason is to remind ourselves that in going forward to follow the star of the New Story we haven't left *all this* behind, all this chapel means and enshrines, in itself and for each one of us. We haven't abandoned it; it remains underneath, the foundation out of which we have grown and in which our spirituality remains rooted. The New Story is not a turning away from the tradition. It has grown out of that tradition. The Star of the New Story leads to the same child in the manger, the same Christ executed on a cross, but we will see Him with new eyes.¹

We are privileged – and challenged – to find ourselves at a time of great paradigm shift (to use the philosophers' term): comparable to the kind of change that took place in astronomy with Copernicus and Kepler, in biology with Darwin and Wallace; where everything snaps into *a new focus that requires us to re-orient ourselves*.

Some years ago I found myself in Prague, en route to a meeting in Hungary. I knew nothing about the place except one thing, and hadn't done any homework about what sights a visitor to Prague is supposed to take in. The one thing I knew about Prague was that in the church of the Discalced Carmelites in Malá Strana I would find the Child of Prague: and so I set out to pay him a visit. Those of you who have a Catholic background will remember something of the extraordinary devotion there was in Ireland in pre-Vatican II times especially, but for those of you whose religious upbringing was lacking in this respect I had better pause to explain.

The Infant of Prague is a statue of Jesus as a child believed to have belonged originally to Teresa of Avila, and which was gifted in the late 16th century to the Carmelites here in the Bohemian capital. All you can see is the face, because it's swaddled in several layers of regal vestments of the most elaborate sartorial elegance you can imagine. Anyway, I found the church of Our Lady Victorious where the Infant of Prague lives, and I saw the Infant – just about, because it is the centerpiece of the most elaborate golden Baroque altar you ever saw – but what astonished me was not so much the little child in the robes so familiar to properly pious post-war Irish Catholics, but the museum upstairs, which is lined with glass cases filled with dozens and dozens of ersatz children of Prague, all dressed in the different costumes which the Real Child had worn down the centuries, changing as fashion changed: it was like a bizarre collection of Byzantine barbies. It is

¹ *Laudato si* (paragraph 121) acknowledges the need 'to develop a new synthesis capable of overcoming the false arguments of recent centuries.' Christianity is only true to itself when it 'continues to reflect on these issues in fruitful dialogue with changing historical circumstances. In doing so, it reveals its eternal newness.'

one of those memories that remain with you through life ever afterwards – whether you want them to or not. And actually, it is the only thing I remember about my visit to Prague!

But the Infant of Prague is really just a little wax doll, 48cm high. And all this ornate eye-catching sartorial panoply – by which we instantly recognise it – is just the package in which it is carried. Not the best metaphor perhaps, but it served to remind me how easy it is to miss the point: to see the ‘container’, the ‘costume’ as the important thing, and miss what lies at the heart of.

Our Pilgrim’s Progress in understanding

We are of course bound to the past out of which we have come and out of which we have grown: not only biologically, but culturally and spiritually. When we look for a metaphor to describe the necessary evolution of spiritual concepts demanded of us today, our model cannot be an incremental extension, because much of the foundation, having served its function and given birth and new life to new growth, has been outgrown. Our metaphor needs to be the metamorphosis so widespread in the world of insects: when the body of the caterpillar that had made all the running in its earlier life dissolves, and from that dissolution a new body, fit for a different life as the old is not, is re-formed from seeds nurtured all along within the young, growing and now decaying body.

Many of you will have read the extraordinary interview – his Last Testament – that Cardinal Martini gave before his death in 2012: ‘The Church is tired in affluent Europe and in America. Our culture has grown old, our churches are big, our religious houses are empty, the bureaucracy of our churches is growing out of proportion, our liturgies and our vestments are pompous.’ ‘The church is 200 years behind the times.’

In the face of all this perhaps we began to sense a new mixture of exhilaration and terror. You will find we are asking new questions, or old questions in a new way: but that is exactly the way it should be. In a real sense, we are in a place no different from where the Christian people of God were when the early church lost its connection with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (who were waiting for Jesus to come back soon ...): or who fought with each other over what they were to make of how Jesus could be God and man at the same time, or how there could be Three distinct Persons in One God.

Karl Rahner was fond of comparing the church to embers buried in the ashes. The fire may seem to have gone out. But under that pile of ash are the gently glowing embers. We are privileged to be among the embers. But if the embers cannot get oxygen they too will go out. Hopefully, occasions such as this one can help to start that process of

kindling: even if it feels uncomfortable to be lifted out of the comfort of the enclosing pile of cooling ash and have ourselves nurtured into flame ...

And who knows what lies ahead?! Towards the conclusion of the second volume of *Cosmos*, his magisterial sketch of the physical description of the universe, Alexander von Humboldt cautioned us as to the way in which ‘Excited by the brilliant manifestation of new discoveries, and nourishing hopes, the fallacy of which often continues long undetected, each age dreams that it has approximated closely to the culminating point of the recognition and comprehension of nature.’² The history of science, including the theology that Thomas Aquinas classified as queen among the sciences, proves otherwise.

The intellectual maturity of our human comprehension is grounded in the stage scientific understanding has reached at any particular time in the progress of human history – and our ability to articulate our spiritual grasp of things in its turn is grounded on that particular level of maturity. All theology does is polish a mirror with the best conceptual materials the age provides. Just as we have better materials to construct telescopes and microscopes, we also now have better conceptual tools through which to envision the Divine.

At this time of year, just about now, the little group of astrologers we know as the Three Wise Men were preparing for their journey to Bethlehem, following a new star that had appeared in the eastern sky.³ And the fact that they knew a new star had appeared shows us they were observers: they were the scientists of their day. A new star could appear every night for all the notice you or I would take. We don’t even look at the sky at night any more. It has, we think, nothing new to teach us. Our stars are confined to stage, screen and kitchen.

But for all their observing, all they could know of the stars is that they are lights fixed in position in the ceiling of the sky, never moving, except for the half dozen or so they called planets. It took us centuries – *we* being the hundreds of people looking and mapping and puzzling over it – to work out, from the evidence out there before us: that in fact the sun, not the earth, is at the centre, and the planets (of which the earth is one) revolve around it. In other words, when we first began the process of coming to intellectual grips with the Reality of the man Jesus, the son of God incarnate among us, our understanding of the stars was the understanding of the Three Wise Men: who knew, essentially, next to nothing about the reality they observed, however keen the intensity of their observation. Our human journey is a Pilgrim’s Progress of understanding

² Alexander Von Humboldt (1850). *Cosmos. A sketch of a physical description of the universe*. Volume 2, 354-355. John Hopkins University Press (1997).

³ I am writing this in September.

characterized by growing *apprehension* (and I am using the word now in the dictionary sense of taking hold of, grasping with the intellect). And this growing apprehension of the Ultimate at the Heart of All That Is, is itself (as we are ourselves physically) an evolutionary process, which develops, grows, changes, over time, both in me as an individual and in our human species.⁴

But always, the soil out of which that apprehension grows is the creation laid out before our eyes – creation itself – and as understanding grows, creation remains its fount, its wellhead. And what drives it forward is the *attention* we pay to creation: to the things of creation, from sun and stars to water and wind and stone, and especially perhaps to the living creatures with whom we share the planet. God's very first words to Adam, indeed, as he leads the animals before him to see what he would name them, can be thought of as an injunction *to pay attention*.

Our human journey of understanding is a pilgrimage in another sense also: opening the way for our mind and spirit to journey along dimensions other than those our feet can measure: backward in time over the evolutionary pathways along which we, in parallel with every creature in this forest, this stream, this flower-strewn mountain, each on its own journey, have travelled to be here together at this moment in earth's history.

And to whose presence in our lives – plant and animal in all their mesmerizing diversity – we are largely blind, largely unaware of what is being said through their being in the world.

At the start of the modern period (16th century) Sir Thomas Browne distinguished two books of revelation:

... two Books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of all: those that never saw Him in the one have discover'd Him in the other. This was the Scripture and Theology of the Heathens: the natural motion of the Sun made them more admire Him than its supernatural station did the Children of Israel; the ordinary effects of Nature wrought more admiration in them than in the other all his Miracles. Surely the Heathens knew better how to joyn and read these mystical Letters than we Christians, who cast a more careless Eye on these common Hieroglyphicks and disdain to suck Divinity from the flowers of Nature.⁵

⁴ If you want magisterial backing for this, dig out your copy of the Vatican II document *Dei Verbum*: how growth in faith and understanding are possible with the help of the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Sir Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (1643).

And there have been many variations on that theme in the several centuries since his time. William Paley, writing in 1802, believed that – as the true wonder of the living world was beginning to be uncovered through the more detailed exploration of natural history that was properly beginning in his day – that we had entered a new era of revelation. ‘The world henceforth becomes a temple,’ he wrote, ‘and life itself one continued act of adoration. The change is no less than this: that whereas God was formerly seldom in our thoughts, we can now scarcely look upon any thing without perceiving its relation to him.’⁶

But in Paley’s day human history was thought to go back no more than 5 or 6 thousand years, to 4004 BC according to the famous calculation of Archbishop Ussher of Armagh.⁷ We now know of course that human beings – people endowed with souls to save as truly as we are so endowed, have lived on earth for many hundreds of thousands of years, perhaps indeed for as much as 4 million years. It is inconceivable that they should count for less in the eyes of God than we do, privileged though we be to live two thousand years after Christ and born anew out of the recrystallisation of human understanding that his being on earth brought about.

When human consciousness first awoke to self-reflective awareness ... can you imagine the shock with which our First Parents saw the Creation about them come into focus? Without any of our distractions to deflect or dim or distort *the sensory experience*? – and they reached to try to touch what was behind it with their newly-awakened intellect. All they could know, all they could ever know, lay before them, was all around them, in the thrilling and terrifying creation out of whose womb they had emerged after a gestation of nearly 14 billion years. All they could ever *come* to know had to grow from that encounter. Their deepest intuition told them (as it tells us) that there was a Greatness behind it, an Ultimate Greatness that manifested itself in the beauty, the joy, the awesomeness, the terror indeed, and which – or was it Who? – must be the source, the font of all those experienced realities.

But for the overwhelmingly greater number of all of the generations of humankind our experience of God was the created marvel that had come into being through that awesome process of Unfolding that we in our time are the first to know about, to

⁶ William Paley, *Natural History* (1802), 420-421.

⁷ Ignorant of the limits imposed by living at an earlier stage of human comprehension of how the world works we are inclined to scoff at this today: unaware perhaps that Newton differed in *his* calculation by no more than a few years!

understand, and to stand in amazement before.⁸ Awakening to consciousness out of evolution's womb, we found ourselves enmeshed in a world populated by a bewildering diversity of living creatures, plants and animals, many like ourselves, many others variously different from us. And that encounter gave birth to The Great Question: who are these creatures, so alike us and yet so different; what is this all about; what are *they* all about: and of course, this is part of a broader question: asked of stars and colour and the beauty and terror of the world: what does Creation *mean*: and: *what response is expected of me*.

Until the emergence of what we call 'civilisation' we were immersed in creation for all of our waking hours and through the hours of our dreaming. Civilisation allows us to withdraw from nature as it were and create the space in our mind that allows us to think about it, and to try to formulate in words and music and ritual what we experience out there under the clouds and stars, and between the trees.

Up to this, all our First Parents and their early descendants could know about God lay before them, in Nature: in these others who share the earth with me: others the same as me in my family and clan and further afield, others who are alive but variously different: and in the seasons and elements in which we all play out our lives – the sun rising in the morning, the stars at night, the round of the year, wind, fire, water, air. What are they saying to me about who and what they are, and where they have come from?

There are no books.

For the longest time there is no language in which to frame our thoughts about it all with each other.

But no words can *stand in for* what such words merely *sign-ify*. It is in the *experience* of creation that God is revealed, is revealing himself: not in the words, the sentences, the treatises that attempt to describe it, to contain it, to hold it down. It cannot *be* described: its being cannot be caught in the description. To place uncritical, unexamined faith in the written word is, you could say, the ultimate idolatry: rather than in the embodied

⁸ The earliest humans (hominins) split from our common hominid-ape ancestors 6-8 million years ago (this is 3,000 times the length of time that has elapsed since the time of Jesus), but our genus (*Homo*: beings with the sort of consciousness we would describe as human) only emerged 4 million years later. In our 6 million year history there have been 15-20 human species. Tool use by one of them (*Homo habilis*) goes back 2.5 million years. Our species of humans (*Homo sapiens*) has been on earth for only 200,000 years, a mere 3% of the time since the first hominins.

word of God that is creation; and, in our case, in human history and in a very special way for most of us, in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.⁹

God's signature in creation

A doctrine that was very influential among Christians at an earlier time was what we call the Doctrine of Signatures: the idea that God, who had made all things for our use and enjoyment – would have left signs in the various plants and animals as to what they might be used for. So, for example, if a plant was intended by God as a cure for inflamed skin, it might have red stems or leaves.

But of course, the majority even of multicellular creatures are unknown to us, were never led before Adam 'to see what he would name them.' In a standard who's-who of life on earth – Professor Barnes's university textbook on biodiversity, *The Diversity of Living Organisms*, vertebrates – for many of us the only creatures we would consider to be 'real' animals: mammals and birds, reptiles, amphibians and fishes – vertebrates out of a total of 345 pages merit only 8, and mammals only get half a page.¹⁰ But all of the creatures on each of the other 337 pages, most of them with names strange to our ears, are made, each in its different way, made with the same loving care, each a unique mode of being alive on this earth.

All of which reinforces the realisation that *we* are not the primary purpose of their being in the world, and they carry no 'signatures' for us to read in that regard. We are irrelevant to their existence for the most part, except insofar as we have the power to not only alter the conditions of their existence, but to bring their very existence to an end.

These considerations are taken into another dimension entirely when we realize that the biodiversity of our age is but a still frame in a moving narrative. There has been comparable diversity during every period of geological time, always different, the glorious biodiversity of any one period of geological time – which few but palaeontologists are privileged to wonder at – the glorious biodiversity of any given period of geological time an efflorescence of hitherto unexpressed embryonic possibility.

But to return to the Doctrine of Signatures! I have spoken about the world into which we were born: the true Eden of our First Parents, inhabited before us for hundreds of

⁹ Incarnation is a process that snaps into focus as it were – that crystallizes – in the life of Jesus; a crystallization, not incidentally, that is mirrored in the formation of different but *harmonic* crystals in other cultures.

¹⁰ R.S.K. Barnes (ed.) 1998). *The Diversity of Living Organisms*. Blackwell Science.

millions of years by others including those down all the ages of geological time who were the parents of those first parents of our own.

There is a much deeper 'signature' encoded in the reality of the world.

The human spirit, undistracted, attentive in the midst of all these other creatures, is *aware* on a level deeper than conceptualization can adequately reach, is aware of a *presence* which, somehow knowing that any attempt to define it will cause it to retreat, it is reluctant to name, because indeed, as the deepest spirituality in all the religious traditions reminds us, it is not to be named, is beyond name.

In 7th century Ireland a group of reforming monks felt that the first fervour of the Christianity which had been introduced by St Patrick in the 5th century was waning, and so they decided to follow the example of the hermit St Antony of Egypt and others like him (Anthony's biography, if such we may call it, was written by St Athanasius in the middle of the 4th century). So they settled in the remotest places they could find, as far from the distractions of the human world as they could go, calling these places 'deserts' even though they were for the most part forests. Here they lived their ascetic lives of prayer and penance, in order to find God.

When I first began to take an interest in these things thirty or forty years ago I was a sort of landscape apprentice, assembling materials for a book on the environmental history of Laois, so that the focal point of my interest in people like the Céili Dé was their criteria for selection of the 'desert' places to which the hermits among them withdrew. What guided their steps in seeking out the places to which they would retire from 'the world' was the picture they had formed from such influential sources as Athanasius' *Life of Antony*. It is possible therefore, first of all, to identify from a careful reading of the *Life of Antony* what the key elements of such places had to be; and secondly, to recognise these elements even today in some of the places in Ireland that met the criteria.

The place to which Antony withdrew was not the kind of desert that springs to mind when you hear that word; it was what he referred to as the 'inner desert': a sort of oasis in the hills with water that was 'clear, sweet and very cold', and with land he could cultivate but which when he first arrived had just a few neglected date-palms. Importantly, it had to have a good view from which he could see the comings and goings of less saintly folk. At first he lived here on loaves brought to him by friendly Saracens, leavened with his dates, although these were 'little and paltry': but he refused to allow his friends (who were not long in finding out where he had gone to ground) to bring him bread because it put others to trouble and fatigue, so instead he asked for a hoe and a hatchet and some seed corn:

And when these were brought, having gone over the land round the mountain, he found a very narrow place which was suitable, and tilled it; and, having plenty of water to irrigate it, he sowed; and, doing this year by year, he got his bread from hence, rejoicing that he should be troublesome to no one on that account, and that he was keeping himself free from obligation in all things. But after this, seeing again some people coming, he planted also a very few pot-herbs, that he who came might have some small solace after the labour of that hard journey.¹¹

So this idealised ‘inner desert’ of the hermit was not barren; on the contrary it was green and fertile, so much so that when Antony made periodic forays to the ‘outer desert’ he went well provisioned with water and bread. But it was remote and uninhabited – the wilderness in other words – and accessed with some difficulty by others who knew very well where and what it was.¹²

Now if we can learn to remove from the landscape all the layers that have accreted to it over the centuries, making due allowance for the absence of Saracens and dates, and if we can restore those elements that have been lost, it is possible – against all expectation and not everywhere – to catch the echo of a whisper, if no more than a whisper, of what it was about this place all those centuries ago that matched the ideal ‘inner desert’ they identified in the Life of Antony as the essential criteria of the desert place.

I will briefly mention just two or places in Laois that have haunted me in this respect: Dysartenos associated with Aenghus the Culdee, and Dysart Gallen of Manchan the Wise. It is possible, even today, to use the Life of Antony as a sort of check list, and it is very striking the way both of these places tick every box: Dysartenos at the outer edge of the landscape of limestone pinnacles south of Portlaoise, Dysart Gallen sheltered in a wooded glen near the edge of the Coal Measures plateau, where the flora of the wildwood still finds a narrow shelter and where a tributary of the Owenbeg flows in a series of small cascades.

Canon O’Hanlon was captivated with the place, hearing a faint echo of what it was that drew Manchan to the spot. To judge from the lyricism with which he describes it he was almost intoxicated by it. ‘Never lingered popular lore in a more delightful spot,’ wrote Canon O’Hanlon of his visit in 1870, ‘than where [oral tradition] preserves the traces of this holy man’s religious establishment.’ His account of Dysart Gallen begins:

In a lovely and sheltered valley, through which a rushing and rapid mountain stream rolls, beside this river, the triangularly-shaped graveyard of Dysart Gallen rises on a knoll. The situation is a lonely one, but the surrounding scenery for

¹¹ Life of Antony, quoted in Charles Kingsley (n.d.), *The Hermits*, 53.

¹² Augustine described these places as ‘the fruitful deserts of the wilderness.’

romantic beauty cannot be surpassed. The richest verdure covered the hill slopes, traversed in all directions by high hawthorn hedges, which were covered with a profusion of snow-white blossoms, shedding exquisite odours around, at that season of the year when it was our good fortune to have first visited this spot.¹³ A few late showers had intensified the delicious fragrance. A day of unclouded sunshine lent an air of cheerfulness to the whole prospect, contrasting with shadows cast by tree and bush over the green pasture lands. Ash and other tall trees grew around the old graveyard, and sheltered the church ruins, which rose in its midst. So protected from nipping winds were the primroses, that they were yet in full bloom, and in numerous tufts under the hedge-rows and along the thorn-covered hillsides, even at so advanced a period in summer.¹⁴

Such detective work is the stuff of landscape history, but what of the Quest that drove this topographical selection process? Did it live up to their expectations? Did they find the God who, we presume, had eluded them in the places from which they fled?

What they found, alone in the wilderness, what is only to be found where freedom from the trivial distraction that otherwise fills our days – our days more than the days of any generation before us – permits that attention to the natural world in which *real encounter with it* is possible; and in its many-voiced silence it becomes possible to hear what Ezekiel listening in *his* desert for the coming of God could only describe as a small still voice, the small still voice for which there is otherwise no name, and which is only heard in the countless voices in which the symphony of living possibility expresses itself.

In these carefully-chosen places in the wilderness they lived their ascetic lives of prayer and penance, in order to find God. And find him they did, not in prayer and fasting but behind these things, seeping through from their surroundings into the unconscious of their attentive lives, and finding articulation not in theological treatises but in Europe's earliest nature poetry, in which God can be heard not in the dictionary definition of the words used, but in onomatopoea and alliteration, assonance and metaphor that transpose into harmony the same small, still voice Ezekiel heard in his desert all those centuries before Christ, in much the same way perhaps as the meaning of the Koran is carried in the music of its recitation rather than in words alone. They discovered how, as a memorable line in one of Francis Thompson's poems puts it,

from sky to sod,
The world's unfolded blossom smells of God.¹⁵

¹³ This was June 1st.

¹⁴ *Lives of the Irish Saints*, Volume 1 (1875?), 39-40.

¹⁵ *From the Night of Forebeing* II, 104-5.

Mysticism in the modern world

I have tried to put my finger, in the most superficial way, on a number of themes that begin to come into a mutually-enriching simultaneous focus with the modern progress in our scientific understanding of the world. My task, as I see it in this late stage of my life, is to show how that advance not only sheds light on, but quickens into a richer stage of development, our spiritual apprehension of the world. In this regard then, I want to say something about mysticism: which is, in essence, this deepest intuition of the Presence of God in His Creation, gifted to each one of us; that small, still, wordless voice from without, heard within; It is this deepest intuition which is the spark that catches flame in certain people at different times and places, as what we call mystical experience.

As our understanding develops, so too the manner in which our spirituality expresses itself develops and matures. Doctrines and practices that were appropriate at an earlier stage of that development become dysfunctional, outmoded. One of the defining phenomena of spirituality is mysticism, and we may wonder whether it has a place in the spirituality of our modern world: or more to the point perhaps, in *my* busy, engaged life – whatever its role in the life of contemplative religious or in an earlier spirituality. Is this perhaps something we have to grow away from? And what is it to me anyway? You might grudgingly admire the mystics you read and hear about, but this mystical union stuff is not for me.

Most of us have read or heard about, at one time or another I am sure, the lives of various mystics. The closer to us in time and culture they are the more exemplary they may be to varying extent, and the more they are held up as models for us to emulate. But sometimes the core of virtue in the practice of their lives is so bound up with attitudes and beliefs that belong to their particular time but are now outmoded, that we often find it difficult if not well-nigh impossible to separate the two, and are in danger, in setting aside those outmoded elements, of discarding that essential core. And if we have this problem, then for the majority of people, who simply don't bother to think about this sort of stuff at all, the whole thing is nonsense and irrelevant, belonging to the childhood of modern man, and another reason to put religion behind us.

We read of the lives of great mystics with a mixture of revulsion and admiration: admiration that they were prepared to give up so much, to discipline themselves so, out of their desire for God. We wonder how we can measure up to them? But much of what we read in those lives is window dressing, was intended as window dressing, to set off what is at the centre of the display: an extraordinary human person – but entirely of her

time of course in attitude and belief and all those things from which we have progressed.

But we should not measure ourselves against their practices; much of it is morbid to our way of thinking. To follow them in this is to go down a blind alley. God is not at the end. Where we go wrong is that we look in the wrong place. We should look at the call the mystic seeks to respond to *in itself*, not follow her interpretation of it in the light of an outmoded cosmology, biology, psychology and physiology. No less is asked of you, but you must interpret it in the light of what you know, better than she, of the way creation works. No less self-discipline is required of you. No less are you urged to give up your life so that you can find eternal life. No less are you driven to take up the challenge because of that *deepest something* calling you that none of the great theological thinkers ever managed to find the Right Word for.

With medieval mysticism we are dealing with the historically-limited and conditioned spiritual quest of a particular personality type (There is a range of human personality types, just as there is a range of personality disorders). Such mysticism is quite unsuited to me, and to our time. Even if we are one of that tiny minority to whom it may once have been suited, we are more likely to stray down one of a hundred blind alleys in attempting to follow it.

And if you are graced with visions like those of Teresa of Avila or John of the Cross remember that these are psychologically-mediated encounters. The spiritual talent of these gifted individuals is always of necessity grounded in their physical endowment. Don't think of them as ordinary individuals waiting for God to reveal himself to them from beyond in a way he won't reveal himself to you. For example, the 'visions' of the supremely wonderful Hildegard of Bingen: a woman of enormous intellect and sensitivity, were grounded in the pain her migraines caused her. But people of lesser spiritual sensitivity – such as you or I – if we had to bear that cross we would be more likely to focus our lives on our discomfort or pain – our lives and the lives of those whose cross it becomes to live with us – whereas she uses it as a prism through which to bring her otherwise more diffused sensitivity to the Ground of Being to a focus of intensity that could set a world on fire.

The mysticism we are all most familiar with was in fact the New Spirituality in its 13th-16th century heyday (a time almost unimaginably different from our own). And it was a popular movement, not confined to the Big Names we read about. The great majority of those drawn to it were ordinary people. It was a reaction to the academic scholastic theology of the day, which had a convoluted answer to everything, but was so remote from the emotion, pain, sensed experience of the everyday real world, and scant comfort to the soul. It was all head and no heart, and it was welded almost organically with politics, wealth and power. This New Spirituality said: you can reach God in your

own life, within yourself if you can go deep enough and if you can strip away everything that gets in the way. You don't need any church. So you can see why the institutional Christianity of the day had little time for it – and indeed still doesn't. Mystical union is not what the institutional church is about. Most of those who wrote about it at the time were theologians: which partially explains the verbose, futile-sounding attempts to describe the experience. And that explains how they got away with it: they knew what not to say. Meister Eckhart is a good example. There is much in his writings that echoes the writing of his contemporary, Margaret Porette – they were certainly talking about the same thing – but the authorities burned Margaret at the stake in 1310 (Eckhart lodged in the same building in Paris as her Inquisitor a year after she was condemned). Had Eckhart not been such a good theologian he might have ended like Margaret. Indeed, he did eventually come under inquisitorial scrutiny, but he was safely dead by that time. As an ironical footnote, when the first modern edition of her book, *Le miroir des simples ames* appeared in 1929 it received a papal *imprimatur*, which I suppose is as close as you were likely to get to a Vatican apology at that time.

The essence of medieval mystical movement, then, had three key elements:

God is at the core of my human experience.

He is beyond words or comprehension.

I can be a mystic.

But this aspect of mysticism that seeks the *unio mystica*: mystical union with a God *imagined* as beyond – is only one aspect of its spirituality, and may neglect the experience of its opposite, the experience of what God is about in the creative thrust that is evolution, and the acclaim called for in response to this. The aim in the unfolding of God's plan that we call 'evolution' is not to dissolve all difference, but its embodiment to the full: the embodiment of every possible mode of living.

Where we have to be especially careful with medieval mysticism is that it was fundamentally in error in that it came wrapped in a way of thinking about creation that was distorted. This is what Teresa of Avila had to say: 'The creatures are only the crumbs that fall from God's table, and none but dogs will turn to pick them up': which is as shocking for the supreme confidence of its tone as for its content. We must approach anybody who said that with the utmost caution in view of our profoundly deeper appreciation of God's creation. For all that creation needs to be 'transcended', as we enter into deeper 'familiarity' with the Ground of Creation, it is through creation and creation only that we relate to God.

To believe in the possibility of this communion of which the mystics speak is the first thing. Striving every moment to live in the presence of the God who is this communion, to allow God to be God in me, is as far as most of us can go.

Mysticism for me?

Perhaps we might define mysticism (initially) as something that is highly developed in those who are most deeply attuned to the harmony at the heart of things. This is not an all-or-nothing thing though. There is a spectrum of attunement that stretches all the way from the full-blown mysticism of such as John of the Cross or Rumi to those at the opposite end of the spectrum whom Mark Johnston categorises as spiritually tone deaf. We may be tempted to think we are less than fulfilled spiritually unless we reach the 'standard' set by John of the Cross or Julian or Norwich. But do we feel unfulfilled intellectually because we are not Einstein? You are not Einstein, but like him you are unique: *YOU ARE UNIQUE*. I am unique.

I have to be MYself. I have to find MY self. I have to find who I am meant to be. God wants *to be in me*, wants me to become who I am made to be, who I am given the potential to become. And this I can only become, this I can only find in the place of my living of every day, this place to which I can continuously attend ... from which immersion in social media and a preoccupation with material things removes me ...

This metaphor of mysticism as a spectrum has an important consequence: not only are there cultural-religious variants, but within an individual culture not one *size* fits all. And like many endowments, this is part genetic, part learned: and differently informed by the particular attainment of the culture (its *temporal wisdom*: the stage it has reached in history). We can work at attainment, and contemplation of nature is one of the most efficient means. This involves more than reading books or watching nature programmes on television or DVDs, although these can provide raw material to supplement that of direct experience; but it is in personal *encounter* that our attention is drawn to the real presence of those other lives in which our human world is contained and embraced: in whose presence we catch the faint touch of the breath of the Holy Ghost – the lingering perfume of the presence of the beloved in the garden in a memorable phrase of John of the Cross – the faint echo of that small, still, wordless voice.

The presence of God

Whatever we may make of the rest, the first thing we must take to our inmost heart from Meister Eckhart and the other great mystics is the immediacy of God's presence: whatever our achieved level of attunement to it may be.

The experience cannot be articulated or communicated by word (The mystic eschews theological language). Attempts to do so will of necessity be framed in the idiom of the particular religious culture to which the mystic belongs. In the Christian tradition it is

often in terms of an ecstatic relationship with a Beloved whose face is the Face of Jesus. Even for a 'proper' mystic this is a state attained only occasionally, an experience separated by intervals devoid of the Beloved's presence. For the rest of us it is an experience we may have rarely, perhaps never. Even though we can only touch It from time to time, we know it is there, and that knowing is part of the bedrock of what we call Faith.

But if indeed 'the incarnation of the Divine is ubiquitous' why is our life not a constant transport of joy? Because we are permitted glimpses only. Painters and poets, musicians and naturalists catch aesthetic or intellectual glimpses of it, as do mystics ontological glimpses (if I can use that phrase), but glimpses only. In between times there may be long periods of ennui, even despair, the mystic's 'dark nights'. 'I have wondered much at this one thing,' wrote John Bunyan in his Autobiography, 'that though God doth visit my soul with never so blessed a discovery of Himself, yet I have found again, that such hours have attended me afterwards, that I have been in my spirit so filled with darkness, that I could not so much as once conceive what that god and that comfort was, with which I have been refreshed.' We all have to wade through, or skirt, our Slough of Despond.

And yet the whole of creation is *suffused* with What the mystic is in search of. It is just below the surface all the time, barely out of reach, not so much hidden as simply unsensed, attuned/alert at every moment for the resonance of our reach, wanting our acclaim, because that acclaim, like love, is essential to its fulfillment.

Although mystical encounter is a sensory experience, devoid of intellectual content *per se*, my mystical attunement is enhanced by understanding. A growing understanding indeed is part of the essence of the human mystical experience: understanding whereby the lineaments of the Beloved are discerned with ever greater clarity: and the more clearly we grow in this way, the more beyond all we can experience or imagine or comprehend we see the whole thing to be. Every advance in our understanding of Creation – of how it works, of its mesmeric diversity, beauty, intricacy – is the Beloved unveiling something further of Himself. The advance of science is, therefore, not incidental to mysticism.

And the experience is *infinitely* partial. It can be partial in two ways: variable in the intensity with which it apprehended, or focused through a particular sector of experience. It may be my attentive encounter with a particular group of animals or plants that mediates it. It may be through the medium of music, art, poetry or ritual: or it may be through interpersonal human encounter.

A more *essential* mysticism ... that can be nurtured in all of us

Where the medieval mystic sought illumination in the deep wells of inner consciousness, the modern mystic may find it in seeking attunement to the Mystery of Things through encounter with the natural world. The former is based upon a discarded dichotomy between body and spirit, corporeal and incorporeal, and between this world and 'the next'. And ultimately, all that we find in those deep wells (in which so many have drowned) is a reflection of the outer reality apprehended through the senses.

For Thomas Aquinas living creatures are *incarnations of the divine*: they present something of God to us: '... *distinctio rerum et multitudo in esse*' is the wonderful phrase in Thomas' Latin for which the modern word is 'biodiversity'.¹⁶ *Produxit enim res in esse propter suam bonitatem communicandam creaturas, et per eas repraesentandam*. 'He has therefore – in order to share his goodness – brought into physical being creatures: and through them he reproduces in material reality aspects of his own goodness' is how I would translate those words. Each creature is a reflection in the mirror of the real, shaped by matter and energy, of an aspect of the beauty of the creator. Out of God's plan has unfolded the utterly amazing diversity of living things, each an embodiment of some facet of His goodness, so that what is lacking in one may found in another ('*per unam creaturam sufficienter repraesentari non potest*'): because Goodness, which is God is Alltogether Alltogether, is refracted into endless multiplicity in the beauty of the living creation ('*bonitas quae in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter, in creaturis est multipliciter et divisim*').¹⁷

This is shocking. It claims that some unique aspect, facet, of the goodness of God appears in every creature. God is, in some sense, *embodied* in each of them. God's perfection and beauty and truth are as the white light of the sun, streaming forth at a temperature of 10 million degrees: upon which no eye may gaze and live, until refracted through the prism that is evolution into the rainbow of hues upon which we gaze in wonder.¹⁸

¹⁶ '... *distinctio rerum et multitudo est ex intentione primi agentis, quod est Deus. Produxit enim res in esse propter suam bonitatem communicandam creaturas, et per eas repraesentandam. Et quia per unam creaturam sufficienter repraesentari non potest, produxit multas creaturas et diversas, ut quod deest uni ad repraesentandam divinam bonitatem, suppleatur ex alia: nam bonitas quae in Deo est simpliciter et uniformiter, in creaturis est multipliciter et divisim.*' Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a47.1.

¹⁷ 'The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things. Saint Bonaventure teaches us that "contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God's grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves."' (*Laudato si*, 233).

¹⁸ C.f. Exodus 33:20.

But contemplation draws us in more deeply than this. When we look at the beauty (in all or any of its dimensions: aesthetic or intellectual etc.) we do not see a reflection of a Creator that is Other, an absent artificer. We see – experience – something *of* God. We are in the physical presence of God. I *am with* God. I am *in* God. And God is in me: as He is in the rose or the butterfly my experience encounters and attempts to embrace.¹⁹

In a way it is best for us to pursue this insight, this step forward in our understanding of God in creation, without words (words will immediately begin to narrow it, to define it, to limit it, to prevent us going any deeper): but many mystics – and that is the pilgrim badge you begin to wear when you arrive at this point along the road – TRY – you sort of feel you have to talk about it. But remember, it is not enough to know, to remind ourselves, as we read the words of the Irish poet Joseph Mary Plunkett, in a wonderful poem entitled ‘The Presence of God’, which begins

I see his blood upon the rose,
And in the stars the glory of his eyes ...

It is not enough to remind ourselves that ‘his blood upon the rose’ is a metaphor, to say to myself it is not *really* his blood I see upon the rose, or the glory of his eyes in the stars: because it *is* more *really* than any other way I can express it: not really in the limited sense of my experience, but in the sense of the reality that enfolds everything.

Evolution takes us a step nearer to the meaning of it all. Now we see all that lives – and ultimately all that is – as the unfolding of One Reality, and that the distinction between every living thing is the distinction between cousins. Back in the 5th century Augustine was fascinated by the natural process by which the entirety of a mighty oak tree could unfold from a tiny acorn. How enthralled he would be if he could have known the sheer wonder of that process as modern plant science has enabled us to understand it! The unfolding of possibility wrapped up in a seed presages the incomparably greater mystery whereby all of life has unfolded not only from an acorn sown on this earth of ours, but from a mustard seed of nothingness that contained all possibility within itself, at the beginning of all things 13.8 billion years ago. How thrilled Nicholas of Cusa would have been had he been alive today instead of in the 15th century, when his imagination conjured with this image of all that is, all that (as we would say) evolution has achieved, as not just God’s revelation of himself: but as the very unfolding of Godself. No day should pass, whether our walking is in the forest or on the street, or carried on thought through a window from our bed, No day should pass without our reaching for that thrilling thought, that the tree my vision enfolds, and all that is growing upon it, and all the other species that people this moment of earth’s time with

¹⁹ This new perspective finds perhaps an echo in the rabbinic sense of the almost tangible presence of God in the smallest details of everyday life, a sense that one writer has described as a state of ‘normal mysticism’ (Louis Jacobs, *Faith* (1968), 7).

us, are in a sense beyond human comprehension, each in its unique way a living *explication* of an aspect of divinity.

I said that on one level our new appreciation can be understood as an updating of Thomas Aquinas' commentary on biological diversity. But remember that our knowledge of what life is was in Thomas' day the understanding of a child. Albert the Great had published his magisterial work on the Natural History of Animals shortly before Thomas put pen to paper: and that is truly a fantastic book, in both senses of that word, an encyclopaedia in which he gathered together everything that was known about plants, animals and minerals in his day. It's full of direct observation, in keeping with his dictum that man's knowledge must begin with an apprehension of reality obtained from direct encounters with nature itself.²⁰

The total number of species in Albert's catalogue of all God's creatures ran to a few thousand, overwhelmingly dominated by the ones we could see with our own eyes. And how much more might we expect to know? In one of his Sermons, St Columban wrote – (I suppose this would be around 600 AD) – of how little we should expect to know of God's creatures; 'Our small minds are not made for that' he wrote; 'Think of this world our familiar earth and sea: familiar indeed, and how much we know of them, and how little. What do we know of the teeming life beneath the waves, or even on much of the surface of the earth?' The answer is that today we know an absolutely incredible amount. We know of creatures he could never, ever, have imagined.²¹ And I like to think that Columban, were he alive today would – after an appropriate crash course in science – be the first to admit he was wrong.

In 1250 our direct encounter with the rest of creation was limited not only by the fact that it was effectively confined to Europe and the lands just beyond its borders. As for what we knew of the life of the ocean, it scarcely extended beyond paddling depth; and limited not only by that, but by the limits of vision of the un-extended human eye: just as until the early 17th century our experience of celestial creation above the atmosphere was limited to what the eye could see without the fabulous extension provided by the

²⁰ Albert the Great (c.1260). *Man and the Beasts (De Animalibus, Books 22-26)*. Trans. James J. Scanlan (1987). New York, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.

²¹ 'My Brothers, we begin with the most important thing of all to us, our faith in God. About God we believe what he himself has revealed to us: that he is one, existing as the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, infinite and eternal, utterly vast, yet present to even the smallest creature; he is both immeasurably far off and inconceivably close. Believing this gives us enough to live the life of Faith. How arrogant it would be to seek to know God's inner secrets, mysteries of his life power and way of existence. And how futile! Our small minds are not made for that. Think of this world our familiar earth and sea: familiar indeed, and how much we know of them, and how little. What do we know of the teeming life beneath the waves, or even on much of the surface of the earth? Sermons of St Columban in *Sancti Columbani Opera*, edited by G.S.M. Walker. *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Volume II. School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

telescope: and our speculations about what ultimately lay Behind and Beyond and Beneath it All could only be the lisp of a child in its conception of what That could possibly mean, spelt out in the syllables of intelligent apes, conjured out of human ideas of Might and Majesty (with the imaginative addition of such novel features as human creatures with long dresses and wings and a life after death spent beyond the clouds).

And perhaps the simple, beautiful words of the Angelic Doctor *were* adequate articulation of our 13th century understanding of what God is about in creation. But nothing less than an endless symphony, sounded with all the harmony the advance of musical sensibility makes possible, will do in response to what the advance of modern biology allows us to see of the nature and genesis – and familial kinship – of life on earth, of which we are the chosen one species in whose hands is placed the responsibility for its preservation and continuance.

All this takes our appreciation of the awesomeness of the blueprint that unfolds through evolution onto a succession of other levels entirely, *making denial of ultimate purpose ever less convincing rationally*. The ever-greater penetration of science into the nature of reality, ever further elucidating the unfolding of creation through evolution, *carries us into God*: but increasingly over time, as our understanding grows, into a God ever more beyond while increasingly intimate.

This understanding of creation needs to shape the syntax of theology, not the other way around. And doing so will help us to break the mould in which we confine the infinite God, keeping him or her to a size we are comfortable with.²² Your acceptance of the fact of our genetic affinity with all that lives is like baptism. It may be the end of something, but it is also the beginning of something altogether new. It is the start of a new life. Because now, if you believe in God, you must look at the living world around you with new eyes.

As our appreciation of the beauty and diversity of life grows, so does our understanding of the utter *complexity* of every other life form – that each of them is as physically, chemically and biologically complex as we humans are, each in its unique way. The more we study a particular group the more we are drawn into the thrill of its being: *the more we are drawn into the thrill of its being*: whether it be moths, or flowers, or hoverflies, fishes or birds or snails – and I mention only a few of the groups you are familiar with. The more you attend in this way the more you come to appreciate these beings as God appreciates them: and such attention is the very core of worship, and the gratitude that wells up in us is the very essence of Eucharist. The thrill I get is the faintest echo, the palest reflection of God's fulfillment in creation. And it comes to me though encounter with creation: sensory encounter first of all, augmented and deepened

²² John Feehan (2001). Towards a Greener Theology. *The Furrow* (January), 54-56.

by intellectual encounter: *and that is something that grows and develops through history.*

What progress in our understanding of complexity enables us to see is that the unique aspects of the Face of God that we see in the different species, each of their uncountable millions, are complementary: in other words, we cannot claim that one aspect of goodness is superior to another. But here the metaphor breaks down, because The rainbow of life, *distinctio rerum et multitudo in esse*, is not three dimensional in space only, but the play of colours into which it unfolds changes through time. Its future is given into the hands of our custodianship: not to do with as we will, because it does not belong to us, but given into our hands to care for as our modern comprehension of the nature of life, the story of life, of our place in nature, of the functioning of earths' systems enables us to do: and our maturing appreciation of what God is About in Creation calls upon us to do.

So beyond our way of grasping it, taking hold of it for human consumption, that this is as far as our words will take us. And it's not just that there are not enough words. It's that the structures of language are not up to it. And so we end up with the theological debate as to whether theism or deism, pantheism or panentheism best describes the way in which God is present to/in all things. But the intimacy of that relationship is beyond the distinction of prepositions. God is All in All. The presence of God (in which He is revealing Himself) is in the personal experience of the encounter, not in words.

Every walk in the woods, every visit to the farm or garden, is an invitation to come closer. It scarcely matters what language we use to describe the invitation. For most of us it will be the language of person and relationship, but when we have entered into It and look back we may see that it scarcely matters: that it might as easily have been the impersonal language of much eastern religion, or even a language that in the academic halls in which it echoes carries no mention of a godhead.

When we go into the woods then or into the garden, or up the mountain or walk by the ocean, it is not (just) to be with nature, or to get 'way from it all': it is to be with God through the unfolding of God – a unique cross section of which is the things experienced uniquely in this moment of time, never to be repeated. It is not to get away from it all but to approach it.

When we watch some aspect of the natural world on TV we share, although our sharing is the merest spark of a spark, a faintest glimmer, in God's appreciation, of God's joy in what is achieved by this being. Our attention is a simple form of prayer, largely visual and aesthetic. But to *encounter* any one of these creatures – to become a naturalist – to

be *with* them in the real world, lifts the experience onto a different plane of appreciation. No words are adequate to encapsulate the encounter, however enhanced our attempt is by the deeper aesthetic, imaginative or intellectual penetration of its achievement that further study and investigation allow and provide. Such study, pursued to this end of knowing God better, is prayer at another level. We are in the presence of God.

This is why our exercise of naming is so important. God's first words to Adam, remember, are the injunction to attend to the creatures around him. Naming is a first step in attending to what This Thing is, to what is being said to me through the experience, the being with, this Other that/who stands equally and differently in the Presence of God, *is* something of God. You don't have to become a biologist. You may not have the time or space for other encounters that are possible if you do. The farmer who *attends* is closer to God than any biologist who doesn't.

Incarnation

Those of us who are theologically inclined may wish to reflect on the way all of this deepens and extends the meaning of incarnation.

The science of cosmogenesis elucidates in ever greater detail the earlier stages in the unfolding of creation, in the process giving us a picture that is breath-takingly greater, more awe-inspiring, than anything any earlier age could even envisage, calling for the human response that finds expression in acclaim and worship.

Notice that what makes this blossoming possible is that progress of scientific understanding of which I spoke earlier, which is itself a process of evolution, part of that broader process of unfolding which is how God works in the world. Our spiritual development then, is an evolutionary process. *Dogma* is useful in anchoring our slow progress in the vertiginous process of ascent, as useful and necessary as the pitons hammered in bedrock by a climber, but needing to be replaced by others higher up as we climb.

The progress of scientific understanding is now beginning to do the same for the way in which we may think of how God incarnates in the world, giving the same sort of articulation to what that means in material terms, bringing the dim theological notion of the Cosmic Christ into something that begins to come into focus, begins to make the kind of sense we can actually understand – without getting any closer to the mystery of it: insofar as our human grasp is up to it: in the way cosmogenesis does for the earlier phases, *creation and incarnation being the same process, not isolated, time-separated events*. What this means is that incarnation did not begin with the conception of Jesus.

Incarnation – the embodiment of the Divine in material form – begins at the beginning of time, with the calling into Being of that Seed from which all material reality subsequently unfolds.

The dimming of the rainbow of life on earth

As we come to better understand God's purpose in creation in this light – the same light with which Thomas Aquinas saw it, but ours is a brighter bulb by far – as it becomes clearer to us that creation is at its most fundamental about God's own self-fulfilment in Being ... not therefore for us or about us in the first instance, however central we are to its continuation into the future God intends; as we come to better understand God's purpose in creation in this light, we begin to see that the haemorrhaging of the living abundance and diversity of life we are bringing about in our time, the greatest ecological extinction the earth has ever experienced, has a significance that goes way beyond our concern for its impact upon our human welfare. The great American naturalist William Beebe once wrote: 'When the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another Heaven and another Earth must pass before such a one can be again.'²³

We evaluate the critical nature of the biodiversity crisis in terms of its effects on the human situation. But now that we come to see – are beginning to see – earth alive as the very embodiment of divine purpose, everything in that human-centred perspective changes. This dimming of the rainbow of life's diversity is not merely inconvenient, potentially disastrous. It is denial of God's purpose. If we truly believe, and bring our understanding to bear upon what we are making of the world, we should be horrified. God's mind and heart and word to us are in all the species that weave life's diversity. Just as we look back appalled at the venality and cruelty of the advance of Christianity over the centuries, so (a thousand years into the future) we may look back on our moment of custodianship of the earth as the time we lost our way, again.

It is given to us, our unique privilege and responsibility, to care for the earth not as we would care for a garden in which we grow the vegetables that sustain us, but because it is the garden God walks in, and we have been invited to walk with him. We are placed in this Garden of Eden to share in God's own wonder and delight at his creation; ourselves alone endowed with that gift of Mind that enables us to tend and nurture it as God wants us to tend it.

²³ Quote inscribed on a mural at Cleveland Metropark Zoo.

Conclusion

If we can attain this way of seeing in all of reality the manifestation of God, our relationship with Creation – and with all the particular existents in which it is embodied – must be essentially characterised by *fundamental reverence*. It cannot be merely instrumental. This is the mysticism to which we are, all of us, called. We find an intuitive sense of it in primitive religions which see in nature something numinous, whether identified with the things of nature themselves – trees, streams and mountains and so on – or distinct from them, sometimes assuming personality and the mantle of divinity on some level. *Our* reverence is informed by our vastly greater understanding of *how* they have come to be, of how their history is entwined with ours, of the wondrous complexity whereby their existence is maintained.

I will finish with a quotation from Willigis Jäger.

God incarnates in the cosmos. He and his incarnations are inseparably connected with one another. He is not *in* his incarnation; He manifests himself *as* incarnation. He reveals himself in the tree as tree, in the animal as animal, in the person as person, and in the angel as angel. They are not creatures in addition to which there is a God who slips into them. God is each and every one of these creatures and yet he is not them, since God never exhausts himself in any single creature, but is always all the others as well. It is precisely this that is the experience of the mystic. The mystic apprehends the cosmos as the meaningful manifestation of God, while many people behave towards the cosmos like illiterates toward a poem. They count the individual letters and words but are unable to understand the meaning that gives the entire poem its form.²⁴

POSTSCRIPT

The spirituality of Robert Lloyd Praeger (1865-1953)

It is hard to find anything you would describe as ‘religious’ language in the writings of Robert Lloyd Praeger, but the tradition of popular natural history into which he was born saw everything in nature as God’s handiwork. In his formative years he was deeply influenced by James Lawson Drummond, who was a professor in the Belfast Academical Institution where Praeger went to school. His *Letters to a Young Naturalist on the Study of Nature and Natural Theology* (published in 1832) pervaded the philosophy of the Belfast Natural History Society, in which Praeger was to become so actively involved. Drummond saw natural history as an essential part of general

²⁴ Willigis Jäger, *Mysticism for Modern Times* (2006).

education, and devoutly believed that through it we could trace in detail the working out of God's plan in the world.²⁵

I will quote a few short passages from the book, in which you will notice first of all the emphasis on *naming*, and in which I think the main features of Praeger's own approach can be detected.

Even the mere circumstance of knowing the scientific name of an object may prove of the first service in leading us to a knowledge of all that is known respecting it.²⁶

This leads me to recommend to you the practice of examining minutely the different plants and animals you meet with. Let your magnifying-glass be no day idle, for it is in the miniature world that most variety, most beauty, most elaborate mechanism, most wonderful displays of creative wisdom are to be found.²⁷

It is in minuter parts of creation that the works of the Almighty proclaim most clearly to us the wonders of his hand, and that man cannot be entitled to the appellation of wise who dares to condemn or asperse them.²⁸

And there is this passage with its echoes of that deepest *something* of which I spoke earlier, that reaches out to us from the heart of things, that we flounder in our attempts to find words for, and that you will find echoes of in several passages of *Laudato Si*:

In your own mind there is a principle which, of itself, if it be allowed fair play, obliges you to be impressed agreeably by the sight of a fine waterfall, the picturesqueness of an aged oak or time-worn ash, the shade of woods, the gurgle of streams, the sounds of the ocean wave, as it murmurs on shelving sands, or talks in thunder on rocks and precipices. These, and other general components of nature, have only to be seen or heard, that they may come home with power and effect to the mind. ...

I require no associations, no preparatory thinking; but a sentiment of sublimity and grandeur is at once called up, I know not how; but I am satisfied

²⁵ The influence of the same tradition is found in the national education of the time. See *Selections from the British Poets* published by the Commissioners of National Education in Ireland in 1852 (volume 2).

²⁶ Drummond, *Letters to a Young Naturalist*, 102.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

that it is neither artificial nor acquired.²⁹ I believe the feeling of the sublime and beautiful in nature to be truly innate, and that its great value lies in its elevating our thoughts to the Deity himself.

But if the great features of nature be so impressive, how much is to be found in her minuter details when they come to be investigated. ... in the minuter departments, the number of organised beings, of geological, physiological, and other phenomena of the highest interest, are absolutely not to be numbered.³⁰

Praeger's first book (*Open-air studies in botany: sketches of British wild-flowers in their homes*, 1897) is in the Victorian botanical tradition, but it has none of the periodic digressions in praise of the Creator for the particular wonder being described that characterise much natural history writing of the time. What is especially distinctive about it is the emphasis of the title and sub-title on the open air (echoing Drummond): his firm belief that you can only come to know plants properly if you study them in their natural habitats. In other words, it is only through *personal encounter* that you will come to appreciate what they really have to say to us: and *what that is* he finds no words for. You will find nothing of the regular asides on nature as God's handiwork you find in the works of popular writers of natural history such as the Rev. Johns in the writings of Praeger. It is to *the depth of his response to nature* – that feeling for which he can find no words – that we must look for his spirituality.

In Praeger's writings God hardly ever appears by name. He only turns up once in *Beyond Soundings* (one of his two books of occasional essays). 'The mind is staggered equally by the vastness of the machine of which our Earth, all-important to us, forms so insignificant a fragment, and by the excessive minuteness of the units – the atoms – of which the whole Universe is built up. Whence did it arise? What does it mean? "Sense knows not; Faith knows now; only that it is through Mystery to Mystery, from God and to God."³¹ And then, on the last page: peering into the distant future he asks:

At present the vegetable and animal worlds are dominated respectively by Flowering Plants and by Man. Will these also give way in their turn to something higher, and so pass progressively towards some far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves; or will Life, even as it has ascended ever since the Earth became habitable, eventually descend as the Sun's heat diminishes, and cease at length among lowly organisms such as those with which it began.³²

²⁹ Consider however the light shed on this sentiment by the concept of biophilia.

³⁰ Drummond, *Letters to a Young Naturalist*, 242-243.

³¹ Praeger, *Beyond Soundings*, 155.

³² *Ibid.*, 208.

At the same time, although he never enters into discussion that could be labeled ‘theological’, Praeger is not afraid to speak in a familiar and relaxed way about God that is not possible for a ‘proper atheist.’ In referring to the silence of the countryside (something that meant a great deal to him), he wrote of ‘how characteristic of Ireland, and how precious, is this God-given silence of ours, so freely available here, so difficult to achieve – and increasingly so – in and near the busy centres of population and industry.’³³

In a passage in one of the essays in *A Populous Solitude* (1941) he describes his feelings about wild creatures. Here he is describing a long walk in the Mourne in the 1890s.

From Killeen I headed across country for Narrow-water, descended through woods to the ferry, and crossed to the old castle which guards the channel on the Down side. I climbed an unresisting fence that seemed to invite trespass, and wandered awhile under the trees of Narrow-water demesne among beds of wild-flowers, recalling the extraordinary thrill – a feeling too private and too sacred for any description – with which I used to greet the earliest Primrose or Violet in the lanes above Holywood long ago, and the Blackbird’s first trill, and the gleam of the first butterfly; and how the amazing beauty and joyousness and quick intelligent movements of Tits and Chaffinches had convinced my childish mind of the *necessity* for the existence of a beneficent creator. At seventy-five I can feel that thrill still, though the whole matter seems now much more complicated than it did at ten years old.³⁴

You may be surprised that I see a parallel between Praeger and Teilhard de Chardin. They were contemporaries; Teilhard was 16 years younger: but they had the same exceptional sensitivity to the natural world, *the same receptivity to its deepest resonance*, and the same attention to its detail: Teilhard more to the geological detail, Praeger to plants.

Compare Teilhard’s description of a sunset at sea on his way to China in a letter to his cousin with Praeger’s description of his first visit to Clare Island.

I could never tire of looking to the east where the sea was uniformly milky and green, with an opalescence that was still not transparent, lighter than the background of the sky. Suddenly on the horizon a thin diffuse cloud became tinged with pink; and then with the little oily ripples of the ocean still open on one side and turning to lilac on the other, the whole sea looked for a few seconds like

³³ Praeger, *A Populous Solitude*, 27.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

watered silk. Then the light was gone and the stars began to be reflected around us as peacefully as in the water of a quiet pool.³⁵

And here is Praeger's account of his first crossing to Clare Island

Noting that its botany was curiously unknown, my wife and I crossed over from Roonah Quay in the post-boat on an evening in July, 1903. It was dead calm, with an oily roll coming in from the west. All the hills around were smothered in a white mist, which over the island formed an enormous arch, solid enough seemingly to walk on, and descending nearly to sea level. We lurched across in an ominous stillness, and darkness descended before it was due, as we groped our way to the little quay. Next morning, when we wished to get away to explore the island, all was dense fog and heavy rain, still without wind, and all day we fretted in our little cottage, unable to move. Late in the day the rain ceased, and a strange red glow, coming from the north-west, spread through the thinning mist. We hurried out to the north point of the island, and there, just sinking into the ocean, was a blood-red sun, lighting up thick inky clouds which brooded low over the black jagged teeth of Achill Head, rising from a black sea tinged with crimson. It was a scene fitted for Dante's *Inferno*, and if a flight of demons or of angels had passed across in that strange atmosphere it would have seemed quite appropriate, and no cause for wonder.³⁶

Teilhard (in his own words) sought to respond to 'a beauty reverberating at the very core of his being, which drew him out of himself, filling him with 'an impassioned awareness of a wider expansion and an all-embracing unity':³⁷ the beauty, and the meaning it held, experienced in intimate encounter with the real things of the natural world. But every word of this is as true of Praeger as it was of Teilhard.

There is a phrase in *The Divine Milieu* which I think marks the crossroad where their response takes different expression. Teilhard felt that he was 'so surrounded and transfixed by [the Divine Presence] that there was no room left to fall down and adore.'³⁸ But whereas Teilhard *did* find room, Praeger – although he spent his entire life attuned to that 'paradoxical and silent voice' – could not find the space to fall to his knees, or the words to talk about it.

³⁵ Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters from a Traveller*, 67.

³⁶ Praeger, *The Way that I Went*, 184-185.

³⁷ Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War*, 118

³⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu*, 112.

Isn't this what Patrick Kavanagh was talking about, in that mysterious little poem of his, 'To a Blackbird':

O pagan poet you
And I are one
In this – we lose our god
At set of sun.

And we are kindred when
The hill wind shakes
Sweet song like blossoms on
The calm green lakes.

We dream while Earth's sad children
Go slowly by
Pleading for our conversion
With the Most High.

But perhaps the passage in which Praeger's spirituality is seen most clearly is in *The Way that I Went* (he is talking about wild places such as the Nephinbeg mountains):

I confess I find such a place not lonely or depressing but inspiriting. You are thrown at the same time back upon yourself and forward into the mystery and majesty of nature, and you may feel dimly something of your own littleness and your own greatness: for surely man is as great as he is little: but the littleness is actual, and the greatness largely potential. Anyway, go up to the hills, as sages and saints have done since the beginning of the world, and you will need to be a very worldly worldling if you fail to catch some inarticulate vision of the strange equation in which you stand on the one side and the universe on the other.³⁹

Could will you find a more poetic exegesis of the 'paradoxical and silent voice' of the new Encyclical?

³⁹ Praeger, *The Way that I Went*, page 207.

'The science of cosmogenesis elucidates in ever greater detail the earlier stages in the unfolding of creation, in the process giving us a picture that is breath-takingly greater, more awe-inspiring, than anything any earlier age could even envisage. The progress of scientific understanding is now beginning to do the same for the way in which we may think of how God incarnates in the world, bringing the dim theological notion of the Cosmic Christ into something that begins to come into focus in much the same way as cosmogenesis does for the earlier phases, creation and incarnation being the same process, not isolated, time-separated events. What this means is that incarnation did not begin with the conception of Jesus. Incarnation – the embodiment of the Divine in material form – begins at the beginning of time, with the calling into Being of that Seed from which all material reality subsequently unfolds.'



Cover painting: Black Knapweed by Brigid Birney

