

The Natural World

A Sacramental Understanding

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An Opinion

Introduction

[1] When I was young I was torn between being a priest and being a scientist. I eventually opted for science, caught up in the discoveries then being made by the space program. I became a geologist and since then have spent thirty years lecturing and working to apply space technology to environmental problems here on Earth. Underneath this work there was always a sense of awe and wonder which drove me to discover more about this world, how it came to be and how it worked. As I grew older it became clear to me that this sense of awe was a perception of something real: that something in me was responding to a quality of the universe just as my eyes respond to light. In 2006 I undertook a graduate degree in theology – not to discover the sacramentality of the natural world but to find the words and thought patterns to express and understand the sacramentality I had always known. Those who follow a secular, reductionist philosophy often try to set up an opposition between science and the perceptions of the spirit. However, this is foreign to both science and Christianity as I have always known and understood them, and I hold the perception of the sacramentality of the universe to be the most important insight of my scientific studies.

[2] In all its most ancient traditions Christianity is a sacramental religion. Sacraments form the very life of the Catholic and Orthodox churches (and Protestant churches to a lesser extent) through which the Spirit of God is seen to flow into the world. However, sacramentality implies a particular view of nature which is radically at odds with the secular, materialist view of modern western culture – a sacramental view is a view that holds creation to be graced, sacred, and full of meaning. The sacredness of nature thus lies at the very heart of these most ancient traditions of Christianity, and it is vital, when our relationship with

nature is looming as one of the great moral questions of our time, that the Christian churches learn to deeply understand and teach how fundamental the sacredness of nature is to their sacramental life. In recent times this has become difficult in the Western Church because of the minimalist and informal way in which the liturgy and the sacraments are often approached.

A Reductionist World View

[3] In our modern world the very idea of a sacrament needs some explanation. Traditional societies understood them better. In traditional societies, the world was defined by human and sacred values. The divine was seen as close in the natural world and the affairs of the natural world and those of the human world were seen as intertwined. It was in the natural world and in life that people met their God. Modern western culture, on the other hand, views the universe as a three dimensional grid of space/time extending to infinity and independent of human existence or perception. Since the sacred and the divine can not be measured nor confined within such a universe, this utilitarian, reductionist view has no place for them. They do not fit. Even such human values as beauty and love are seen as purely cultural or biological artefacts with no objective reality. In such a view of the universe human life itself, indeed all life, can only be considered as an incidental and unimportant accident. Descriptions of this view are well known to all of us from the populist astronomy books we read as children or from “educational” television shows. A typical example would read something like this: we are a species of ape living on a small planet orbiting one very average star among billions of stars, on the outskirts of one galaxy among billions of galaxies. The clear message, either implicit or explicit, is that there is nothing special about us and that it is foolish to attach any significance to human existence – or even to existence itself. This is often stated not as opinion or as philosophical viewpoint but as if it were fact “. . . the universe is, to say the least, utterly indifferent to us. In the words of a 16th century tanka (a Japanese verse-form) we are ‘no more than fleeting foam on the surface of a violent sea’” (Heidmann: 3).

[4] This has been even more bluntly, and less poetically, stated by the Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking: “The human race is just a chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet” (quoted in Davies 2006).

[5] Not only does such a view give our society problems when conversing with the remaining, meaning rich traditional societies but it also means that many in western society live out their lives in a hostile, indifferent universe they believe to be devoid of meaning or beauty. Economic imperatives then become, essentially, the sole driving force of human culture and nature becomes a resource to be used.

[6] This malaise is well expressed by Alain de Botton in his reflections on a visit to the Westminster branch of MacDonald’s.

The mood inside the restaurant was solemn and concentrated. Customers were eating alone, reading papers or staring at the brown tiles, masticating with a sternness and brusqueness beside which the atmosphere of a feeding shed would have seemed convivial and mannered. The setting served to render all kinds of ideas absurd: that human beings might sometimes be

generous to one another without hope of reward; that relationships can on occasion be sincere; that life may be worth enduring. . . The harsh lighting, the intermittent sound of frozen fries being sunk into vats of oil and the frenzied behaviour of the counter staff invited thoughts of the loneliness and meaninglessness of existence in a random and violent universe.

[7] This sense of meaninglessness is exacerbated by a lack of historical consciousness, which means that many people tend to regard the current secular, reductionist view of the world as the “natural” default view underlying, and independent of, all human culture – the view that is “objectively true” and “scientifically correct.” However, this radical reductionist view of reality and humanity’s place within it is not the traditional view of European culture, nor is it some natural, underlying view of reality which has been obscured in the past by human religion and culture. Although its adherents often treat such a worldview as supra-cultural in this way, this reductionist view is clearly the product of the specific history and culture of 16th and 17th century Europe (Szerszynski). It is a view that has developed with the attempted application of empirical, scientific methodology to the concepts of human society and existence, even though this methodology cannot be properly applied in these areas, and it is a product of the triumphal anthropocentrism of the industrial revolution. In its most basic form it is a view that holds that only that which can be objectively observed and measured truly exists. It is ironic that a worldview that holds the mind of man to be the final authority in the universe also denies any fundamental significance to human existence.

[8] This is the view used by atheistic groups as a weapon against the traditional religions that all ascribe a deep significance not only to human life but also to the whole of the cosmos. It is clear from the drop in religious practice in many western countries that over the twentieth century this attack started to have some effect. The rise of this worldview also coincides with the development of the utilitarian view of nature, a view that sees the natural world primarily as a resource for commercial exploitation, which has caused massive environmental degradation.

The Failures of Reductionist Thought

[9] Ironically, what has replaced the traditional religions with their reasoned theology was not rational, secular humanism but the superstition of the new age movement and of even more bizarre sects. This was inevitable since the reductionist view of the world has no place for those very things that make human life rich and full. We are sacramental by nature: we are always seeking meaning and purpose in the things around us. This is one of the things that defines us as human beings. Indeed, cognitive science tells us that even our eyes work not so much to see what is as to see the meaning of what is. The ultimate failure of the secular, reductionist view of the universe is that it cannot adequately describe human life as it is lived and experienced.

[10] Of course, value laden reductionist descriptions, such as the ones given above, do not even accurately represent the understanding of science. We live around an average star not because we are mediocre or insignificant but because any other type of star would give either too much or too little radiation. Similarly, we live on the edge of the galaxy because those stars closer to the galaxy’s core are all deadly to life, either because of more frequent bursts of radiation from super novas or because of disastrous stellar close encounters. In short, we

seem to live on a planet orbiting the only kind of star that could support life. Moreover, we live on a planet that is remarkable in many ways: it has oceans of liquid water; it has a large iron core and a strong consequent magnetic field, which protects the surface from solar radiation; it has a large moon that gives tides to the oceans, etc. Many of these features are the result of an extremely unlikely collision about four billion years ago, a collision so unlikely that the Earth is probably unique in the galaxy. This collision, between the proto-earth and a Mars sized planetoid, profoundly effected the subsequent development of the planet. So, we live on a very unusual, possibly unique, planet and it is those very features that make it so unusual which also make it an ideal home for life. To describe it only as an average sized planet, implying that it itself is average, is simply not accurate.

[11] Even the very constants that define the physical nature of our universe have just those values that make life possible. If any of these constants had had other values, then matter, stars, planets, and biochemical reactions would have been impossible. All of this has led physicist Paul Davies to comment the “*the universe seems like a put up job*” (1992). In a later book Davies has called this the *Goldilocks Enigma* (2006). Why do we live in a universe where the very laws of physics are, like Goldilocks’ porridge, “just right” for life? Reflecting on this, Davies writes: “I cannot accept these features as a package of marvels which just happen to be, which exist reasonlessly. It seems to me that there is a genuine scheme of things – the universe is about something” (2006).

[12] It is worth noting that this is not a view that comes from a religious standpoint – Davies is not a Christian – but rather from a mature reflection on scientific knowledge. It is a view of the world that is more “scientific” than the “humanity as chemical scum” view described above. Reductionist thinking has no adequate explanation for human life as it is experienced, nor even for the features of the universe in which we live. We live in a universe that seems to be designed to bring forth life, and we are a part of that universe. We are, indeed, that universe conscious of itself.

A Sacramental World View

[13] Given the failure of the secular humanist view of reality to provide an adequate framework for an understanding of human life, it may well be time to look at a sacramental/symbolic view of the universe; one that is not so much concerned with what the universe is as with the meaning of what it is. This is the view of reality expressed in the sacramental life of the Christian Church where all of creation is seen as sacramental – a symbol that mediates the thing that it symbolizes, an efficacious sign of the grace and love of God. Indeed, Paul Collins was expressing a very ancient and traditional Christian view when he said that creation was the “primal sacrament of God.” Pope John Paul II emphasized the sacramentality of nature and its role in the sacramental life of the church:

Christianity does not reject matter. Rather, bodiliness is considered in all its value in the liturgical act, whereby the human body is disclosed in its inner nature as a temple of the Spirit and is united with the Lord Jesus, who himself took a body for the world's salvation. . . Cosmic reality also is summoned to give thanks because the whole universe is called to recapitulation in Christ the Lord. This concept expresses a balanced and marvelous teaching on the dignity, respect and purpose of creation and of

the human body in particular. With the rejection of all dualism and every cult of pleasure as an end in itself, the body becomes a place made luminous by grace and thus fully human. To those who seek a truly meaningful relationship with themselves and with the cosmos, so often disfigured by selfishness and greed, the liturgy reveals the way to the harmony of the new man, and invites him to respect the Eucharistic potential of the created world. That world is destined to be assumed in the Eucharist of the Lord, in his Passover, present in the sacrifice of the altar (*Oriente Lumen* 1995).

[14] Christianity has had this sacramental view of creation from its very earliest beginnings. In its battle against the Manicheans, an early Middle Eastern sect who saw all matter as evil, the Church proclaimed that creation is good, an efficacious symbol of the love and grace of God, and is destined to enter, through the priesthood of Christ, into the very life of the triune God. In the sacramental Christian view, the world we see around us is not only sacred but is also the vehicle for the grace of God. If this was not true of creation, then sacramental rituals would be empty play acting. By asserting the validity of these rituals, these churches are asserting that nature is graced and sacred from its creation by God and the grace of its creation, while it can be obscured by sin and evil, can never be destroyed. As Evgueny Lampert writes:

Nature is symbolic, and the power of this symbolism is the mystery of the life of Nature. The Holy Spirit came down into the world at its creation; His everlasting presence is its very life, and Nature witnesses to Him. . . Whence does the world of Nature receive its power of life, of growth, of development if not from the divine “fiat” resounding in its very depths? This “fiat” is the call of the divine Spirit to Nature to be, or to become what it already is in its inner destiny and meaning. Nature has never ceased to be a symbol; and the power of the Holy Spirit, which is also the power of cosmic beauty, of life and being, will never die away from the depths of her immensity: “et vidit Deus quod esset bonum.”

[15] This is the ancient understanding of the Christian Church, both east and west, and each branch of the Church (Catholic, Orthodox and, to a lesser extent, Protestant) has sought to express this sacramental understanding in its own cultural and historical circumstances. This understanding pervades the Christian experience of space and time. Traditionally, it is expressed not only in the great sacraments of the Church but also in the small sacraments of prayer and Christian living that incorporate the sacred in day-to-day life. Some ancient and beautiful examples of this are the prayers of the people of the Hebrides Islands, which were collected and translated by Alexander Carmichael in the nineteenth century. Many of these prayers have at their core a powerful understanding of the sacred in nature. The following is but one example:

There is no plant in the ground
But is full of his virtue.
There is no form in the strand
But is full of his blessing . . .

There is no life in the sea
There is no creature in the river
There is naught in the firmament
But proclaims his goodness . . .
There is no bird on the wing,
There is no star in the sky,
There is nothing beneath the sun
But proclaims his goodness . . .

[16] These prayers arise from a sacramental view of the world, a world seen as suffused with the grace and love of God. It is a worldview as warm as the rationalist view is cold, as profound as the rationalist view is superficial, and as full of meaning and hope as the rationalist view is pointless and despairing. This worldview was not a peculiar product of the Hebrides Islands nor even of Gaelic Culture, though the way in which it was expressed certainly was, but rather a view that was once the common wisdom of all Christians and even, to some extent, of all humanity. Esther De Waal describes the world and way of life from which these prayers arose in the following way:

“. . . (they had) prayers whose daily and yearly rhythms marked their lives: prayers from birth to death, from dawn to dusk, from the start of the year to its close, for they lived quite naturally in a state of prayer. It was a praying which responded to, and grew out of, their way of life . . . grew out of their sense of the presence of God as the most immediate reality in their lives. Religion permeated everything they did. They made no distinctions between the secular and the sacred. They were unable to discern boundaries of where religion began and ended and thus found it natural to assume that God was lovingly concerned in everything they did. They felt totally at home with God.”

[17] What the simple fishing and farming people of the Hebrides Islands expressed in their daily prayers, the great minds, the engineers, architects, and artists of Christendom sought to express not just in ritual but in stone – in simple parish churches as much as in great cathedrals. Their efforts have sometimes been endearing and sometimes awe-inspiring, but they have always attempted to express a view of the world that is diametrically opposed to the empty reductionist view of the modern secular world. The great cathedrals of Europe express a worldview that sees nature as sacred and full of meaning, pregnant with the grace of God, transformed by the incarnation of Christ and destined, at the culmination of time, to transcend its limitations and be joined to the divine. How well they succeeded can be judged by contrasting Alain de Botton’s reflections on a visit to Westminster Cathedral (below) with those of his visit to the Westminster MacDonald’s, given above:

The facile din of the outer world had given way to awe and silence. . . Everything serious in human nature seemed to be called to the surface: thoughts about limits and infinity, about powerlessness and sublimity. The stonework threw into relief all that was compromised and dull and kindled a yearning to live up to its perfections. After about ten minutes in the cathedral, a range of ideas that would have been inconceivable outside began

to assume an air of reasonableness. Under the influence of the marble, the mosaics, the darkness, and the incense, it seemed entirely probable that Jesus was the Son of God and has walked across the Sea of Galilee. . .

Touring the cathedrals today with cameras and guidebooks in hand, we may experience something at odds with our practical secularism: a peculiar and embarrassing desire to fall on our knees and worship a being as mighty and sublime as we ourselves are small and inadequate.

Conclusion

[18] The indwelling and communication of the sacred and eternal in the material things of this world is at the core of any sacramental understanding of the world. Assaulted by the secularism of our age, many Christians have to some degree lost their sensitivity to the sacramental rituals of the Church. In one of his Narnia books, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, C.S. Lewis has one of his child heroes in conversation with Aslan, the lion who is a representation of Christ, about the nature of stars. The boy repeats what he has been taught at school, that stars are just big balls of flaming gas. Aslan says that that is not true in Narnia (in Narnia stars are people) but also points out that even in our own world that is not what stars are but only what they are made of. A reductionist view sees everything as only being what it is made of. A sacramental view goes beyond this superficial understanding and sees the stars, the seas and indeed all the cosmos for what it is – an expression of the grace, beauty, glory, and love of God. However, we should not make the mistake of believing that the choice is between a sacramental or a sacrament free, secular life. Sacramentality is the most profound part of our human nature and we can not escape it. No, the choice is rather which sacramental life do we wish to live. The sacraments of the traditional religions, such as those of the Christian Church, where life and the whole of creation are full of grace and meaning, or the hedonism and consumerism that are the desperate and despairing sacraments of reductionism and secularism. The Christian sacraments, incorporating and presenting the incarnation of Christ, are a proclamation of hope and joy in a world full of pain and despair. Left to themselves, the sacraments of a commercially driven reductionism would eventually destroy the world.

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