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3. Religion and the Environmental Crisis

For the title of my lecture, "The Spiritual and Religious Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis," I have chosen both the words *spiritual* and *religious*. That was done on purpose, because the present usage of the word *religion* in many quarters often leaves out precisely the spiritual element. Those people who are looking for the inner dimension of religious experience and of religious truth are seeking for another word to supplement the word *religion*. It is tragic that this is so, but it is nevertheless a fact. The word *spirituality* in its current sense, and not the Latin term from which it derives, is a modern term. As far as my own research has shown, the term *spirituality* as it is used today began to be employed by French Catholic theologians in the mid-nineteenth century and then crept into English. We do not find the use of this term as we now understand it earlier than the nineteenth century. Today it denotes for many people precisely those elements of religion which have been forgotten in the West and which therefore have come to be identified wrongly with spirituality as distinct from religion. From my point of view, which is always of course a traditional one, there is no spirituality without religion. There is no way of reaching the spirit without choosing a path which God has chosen for us, and that means religion (*religio*). Therefore, the reason I am using both words is not for the sake of expediency, but to emphasize that I mean to include a reality which encompasses both spirituality and religion, in the current understanding of these terms, although traditionally the term *religion* would suffice, since in its full sense it includes all that is understood by spirituality today.

It is important we remember that all of us on the globe share in destroying our natural environment, although the reasons for this are different in different parts of the globe. In the modern world the environment is destroyed by following the dominating philosophy, while in what remains of the traditional world it is done in spite of the prevailing world view and most often as a result of external coercion as well as temptation, whether it be direct or indirect. I have repeated this truth in many places and have caused some people to become angry, but the fact is that the only action in which nearly everybody participates at the present moment of human history, from communist and socialist to capitalist, from Hindu and Muslim to atheist, from Christian to Shinto, is in living and acting in such a way as to cause the destruction of the natural environment. This fact must seep fully into our consciousness while at the same time we remember the differences in motive and perspective among religious and secularized sec-

tors of humanity. Obviously, for those for whom religion is still a reality, it is much easier to appeal to religion and the religious view of nature to discover the means through which a solution would be found for the crisis from which we all suffer.

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We often forget that the vast majority of people in the world still live by religion. And yet most Western intellectuals think about environmental issues as if everyone were an agnostic following a secular philosophy cultivated at Oxford, Cambridge, or Harvard, and so they seek to develop a rationalist, environmental ethics based on agnosticism, as if this would have any major effect whatsoever upon the environmental crisis. It is important to consider in a real way the world in which we live. If we do so then we must realize why in fact religion is so significant both in the understanding and in the solution of the environmental crisis. Let us not forget, I repeat, that the vast majority of people in the world live according to religion. The statistic that is often given, saying that only half of humanity does so, is totally false because it is claimed that in addition to the West one billion two hundred million Chinese are atheists or non-religious. This is not at all the case. Confucianism is not a philosophy, but a religion based upon ritual—I shall come back to that in a few moments. There are at most a few hundred million agnostics and atheists spread mostly in the Western world, with extensions into a few big cities in Asia and Africa. But this group forms a small minority of the people of the world. Those who live on the other continents, as well as many people in Europe and America, still live essentially in a religious world. Although in the West the religious view of nature has been lost, even here it is still religion to which most ordinary people listen, while the number is much greater in other parts of the globe. That is why any secularist ideology that tries to replace religion always tries also to play the role of religion itself. This has happened with the ideology of modern science in the West, which for many people is now accepted as a "religion." That is why the people who try to sell you many kinds of goods on television do so as "scientists"—as agents of "authority"—and always wear a white robe, not a black robe of traditional priests. They are trying to look like members of the new "priesthood." They function as the priesthood of a pseudo-religion. Their whole enterprise is made to appear not as simply ordinary science but as something that replaces religion. For people who accept this thesis it would be feasible to accept a rationalistic ethics related to science, but the vast majority of people in the world still heed

authentic religion. Consequently, for them, no ethics would have efficacy unless it was religious ethics.

In the West, for four hundred years, philosophers influenced by scientism have been trying to develop secular ethics and, sure enough, there are many atheists who are very ethical in their life. But by what norm are they to be considered as ethical? By no other than the very norms which religion instilled in the minds of people in the West. If somebody murders his neighbor we think it is unethical. But why is it unethical? What is wrong with that? The television programs you watch on nature in Africa show that animals are eating each other all the time. If we are just animals, then what is wrong if we kill one another? The fact that everybody says "no" to such an act is precisely because there are certain religious values instilled even into the secular atmosphere of the modern West which speaks of so-called secular ethics. The values of this ethics really have their roots in religion. In any case no secular ethics could speak with authority except to those who would accept the philosophical premises of such ethics.

The fact remains that the vast majority of people in the world do not accept any ethics which does not have a religious foundation. This means in practical terms that if a religious figure, let us say, a mulla or a brahmin in India or Pakistan, goes to a village and tells the villagers that from the point of view of the *Sharīʿah* (Islamic law) or the Law of Manu (Hindu law) they are forbidden to cut this tree, many people would accept. But if some graduate from the University of Delhi or Karachi, who is a government official, comes and says, for rational reasons, philosophical and scientific reasons, that it is better not to cut this tree, few would heed his advice. So from a practical point of view the only ethics which can be acceptable to the vast majority, at the present moment in the history of the world, is still a religious ethics. The very strong prejudice against religious ethics in certain circles in the West which have now become concerned with the environmental crisis is itself one of the greatest impediments to the solution of the environmental crisis itself.

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There is a second reason why religion is so important in the solution of the environmental crisis. There are many elements involved here but I will summarize. We all know and, even if we are not personally concerned with the metaphysical, spiritual, and cosmological roots of the environmental crisis, we are nonetheless aware of the fact, that outwardly (I do not say inwardly) this crisis is driven by the modern economic system appealing to

human passions, especially the passion of greed intensified by the creation of false needs, which are not really needs but wants. This is in opposition to the view which religions have espoused over the millennia, that is, the practice of the virtue of contentment, of being content with what one has. The modern outlook is based on fanning the fire of greed and covetousness, on trying to do everything possible to attach the soul more and more to the world and on making a vice out of what for religion has always been a virtue, that is, to keep a certain distance and detachment from the world; in other words, a certain amount of asceticism. There is a famous German proverb, "There is no culture without asceticism"; and this is true of every civilization.

We are living in the first period in human history in the West in which, except for a few small islands here and there of Orthodox or Catholic or Anglican monasticism and a few people who try to practice austerity, asceticism is considered to be a vice, not a virtue. It is not taught in our schools as a virtue; it is taught as a vice, preventing us from realizing ourselves, as if our "selves" were simply the extension of our physicality. This idea of self-realization is, of course, central to Oriental and certain Occidental traditions. But it has become debased in the worst way possible and transformed into the basis for modern consumerism, which can be seen in its most virulent form in America—now fast conquering Europe, and doing a good job of reaching India, China, Indonesia, etc. (within the next decade we will have several billion new consumers in such countries thirsting for artificial things which they have lived without for the last few thousand years). And what this will do to the earth God alone knows. It is beyond belief and conjecture what will happen if present trends continue. So what is it that can rein in the passions, either gradually or suddenly? Nothing but religion for the vast majority of people who, believing in God and the afterlife, still fear the consequences of their evil actions in their lives in this world. If it were to be told to them that pollution and destruction of the environment is a sin in the theological sense of the term they would think twice before indulging in it. For the ordinary believer the wrath of God and fear of punishment in the afterlife is the most powerful force against the negative tendencies of the passionate soul. For nearly all people on the earth who continue to pollute the air and the water, and whose lifestyle entails the destruction of the natural environment, what is it that is going to act as a break against the ever-growing power of the passions except religion? The religions have had thousands of years to deal with the slaying of the passionate ego, this inner dragon, to use the symbol mentioned in so many traditions. St. Michael's slaying of the dragon with his lance has many

meanings, one of which is, of course, that the lance of the Spirit alone is able to kill that dragon; or what in Sufism is called *nafs*, that is the passionate soul, the lower soul within us. We rarely think of that issue today. But where is St. Michael with his lance? How are we going to stop people from wanting more and more if not through the power of the Spirit made accessible through religion? And once you have opened up the Pandora's box of the appetites, how are you going to put the genie back into the box? How are you going to be able, with no more than rational arguments, to tell people to use less, to be less covetous, not to be greedy, and so forth? No force in the world today, except religion, has the power to do that unless it be sheer physical coercion.

For the vast majority of people there is no other way to control the great passions within us which have now been fanned by, first of all, the weakening of religion and, secondly, the substitution of another set of values derived from a kind of pseudo-religion whose new gods are such idols as "development" and "progress." But such notions do not have the power to help us control our passions. On the contrary they only fan the fire of those passions. We have been witness during the last generation alone to the ever greater debunking of the traditional religious attitudes towards the world, especially what we call in Arabic *riḍā*, that is contentment with our state of being, a virtue which is the very opposite of the sin of covetousness. Of course, the Muslims have been criticized by the West for a long time for simply being fatalistic in the face of events, of being too content with their lot. This same debunking has also been directed towards similar Christian values. But that is because of a deep misunderstanding. Where, in the current educational system in the West, is attention being paid to these traditional virtues? Even from a purely empirical, scientific point of view, these virtues must be seen as being of great value, seeing that they have made it possible for human beings to live for thousands of years in the world without destroying the natural environment as we are currently doing. These traditional virtues that allowed countless generations to live in equilibrium with the world around them were at the same time conceived as ways of perfecting the soul, as steps in the perfection of human existence. These virtues provided the means for living at peace with the environment. They also allowed man to experience what it means to be human and to fulfill his destiny here on earth, which is always bound to try to inculcate such virtues within oneself.

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Another cardinal and central role of religion in the solution of the environmental crisis, one that goes to its very root, is much more difficult to understand within the context of the modern mind-set. This role is related to the significance of religious rituals as a means of establishing cosmic harmony. Now, this idea is meaningless in the context of modern thought, where ritual seems to have no relation or correspondence with the nature of physical reality. In the modern world view, rituals are at best personal, individual, subjective elements that create happiness in the individual or establish a relationship between him or her and God. That much at least some modern people accept. But how could rites establish cosmic harmony? From the modern scientific point of view such an assertion seems to make no sense at all. But it is not nonsense; it is a very subtle truth that has to be brought out and emphasized. From both the spiritual and the religious perspective, the physical world is related to God by levels of reality which transcend the physical world itself and which constitute the various stages of the cosmic hierarchy. It is impossible to have harmony in nature, or harmony of man with nature, without this vertical harmony with the higher states of being. Once nature is conceived as being purely material, even if we accept that it was created by God conceived as a clockmaker, this cosmic relationship can no longer even be conceived much less realized. Once we cut nature off from the immediate principles of nature—which are the psychic and spiritual or angelic levels of reality—then nature has already lost its balance as far as our relation to it is concerned.

Now rituals, from the point of view of religion, are God-made. I am not using the term ritual as seen from the secular point of view, as if one were putting on one's gown and going to some commencement exercise or some other humanly created action, often called a "ritual" in everyday discourse today. I am using it in the religious sense. According to all traditional religions, rituals descend from Heaven. A ritual is an enactment, or rather re-enactment, here on earth of a divine prototype. In the Abrahamic world, that means that rituals have been revealed to the prophets by God and taught by them to man. The "repetition" of the Last Supper of Christ in the Eucharist, or the daily prayers of Muslims—where do they come from? According to the followers of those religions, they all come from Heaven. In Hinduism and Buddhism one observes the same reality. The differences are of context and world view, but the fundamentals are the same. There is no Hindu rite which was invented by someone walking along the Ganges who suddenly thought it up. For the Hindus they are of divine origin. The Muslim daily prayers, which we have all seen in pictures, were given by the Prophet to Muslims on the basis of instructions received from God.

Even the Prophet did not invent them. The Eucharist "re-enacts" the Last Supper which, as the central rite of Christianity, was first celebrated by Christ himself.

Now, these rites, by virtue of their re-enactment on earth, link the earth with the higher levels of reality. A rite always links us with the vertical axis of existence, and by virtue of that, links us also with the principles of nature. This truth holds not only for the primal religions, where certain acts are carried out in nature itself—let us say the African religions or the Aboriginal religion of Australia, or the religions of the Native American Indians—but also in the Abrahamic world, in the Hindu world, and in the Iranian religions. Whether one is using particular natural forms such as a tree or a rock or a cave or something like that, or man-made objects of sacred and liturgical art related to rites carried out inside a church, synagogue, mosque, or Hindu temple, it does not make any difference. The same truth is to be found in all these cases. From a metaphysical point of view a ritual always re-establishes balance with the cosmic order.

In the deepest mystical sense, nature is hungry for our prayers, in the sense that we are like a window of the house of nature through which the light and air of the spiritual world penetrate into the natural world. Once that window becomes opaque, the house of nature becomes dark. That is exactly what we are experiencing today. Once we have shut our hearts to God, darkness spreads over the whole of the world. This, of course, is something very difficult to explain to an agnostic mentality. But from a practical, expedient point of view at least, it should be taken into consideration even by those who do not take rites seriously, seeing what has happened to nature at the hands of those sectors of humanity who no longer perform traditional rites.

All religious people who believe in the efficacy of rites and perform them have a way of looking at the natural world and their place in it which is very different from the secularist way that has itself led us to the environmental crisis. You have all read or heard about examples of various religious rituals and their relation to nature, even in lesser known religions. Perhaps the best known, as far as displaying the direct relation between rituals and the natural world is concerned, is the rain-dance of the Native Americans, about which skeptics make jokes. But some people take it very seriously and go to Native American medicine men, the shamans, to try to get help from them to bring rain. Of course, such a thing is laughed at by official science, but that does not matter, for such a science neglects the *sympathaeia* which exists between man and cosmic realities.

We have similar rituals all over the Islamic world, the Hindu world, the Buddhist world, and in the traditional Christian world. But in the modern Western world this has now become more or less eclipsed, although it has not disappeared completely. In Greece, once you go out of big cities, you still see it, and in Italy, in the villages, when there is news of an earthquake, people recite the beginning of the Gospel of John in Latin, which many still know by heart. The faithful recite it in a ritual sense to help recreate balance and harmony with the natural world by calling upon Divine Mercy. I can hardly overemphasize the significance of this aspect of religion, because it is impossible for a human collectivity to live in harmony with nature without this ritualized relationship with the natural world and harmony with God and the higher levels of cosmic hierarchy. If we do not have this relationship, nature is reduced to an "it," to a pure fact, to a material lump, not in itself, of course, but for us, and we must bear all the consequences which such a view entails.

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Along with providing a sound basis for ethics, perhaps the most important role of religion in the understanding of the roots of the environmental crisis (and here I would include especially the spiritual element of religion, because it is the spiritual, metaphysical, and esoteric dimension of religion which emphasizes this element), is that religion possesses an extensive doctrine about the nature of the world in which we live. That is, religion, when it was integral and not truncated as it has become today in the West, provided not only a doctrine about God, not only a doctrine about the human state, but also a doctrine about the world of nature. And here, by doctrine, I mean knowledge (*docta*), not only opinion, but authentic knowledge which is not in any way negated by the scientific knowledge of the world. Every religion provides not only teachings pertaining to the emotional and sentimental realm, not only principles for ethical action, but also knowledge, knowledge in the deepest sense of the term, of God, of the human state, and also of nature. There is no major religion whose integral tradition does not provide such a knowledge. Some religions emphasize one element, some religions another. Certain religions, such as Confucianism, do not speak about cosmogony and eschatology, but they have a vast cosmology. Of other religions, the reverse is true. But these three types of knowledge, that is, knowledge of God or the Ultimate Principle, of the human state, and of nature, have to exist in all integral religions.

Now, one does not need to look very far to see what has happened in the modern world. Gradually, from the seventeenth century onwards, first in the West, then spreading in recent decades to other parts of the world, the legitimacy of the religious knowledge of nature has been rejected. Most people who study the views of an Erigena or a St. Thomas Aquinas on nature do so as historians. But their views are not accepted by the mainstream of modern Western society as legitimate knowledge of the world. What has been lost is a way of studying nature religiously, not simply as "poetry," as this term is used today in a trivializing sense and not of course in a positive one. True poetry possesses a great message as far as nature is concerned, a message which itself is usually religious. In any case modern society has disassociated knowledge of nature from religion as well as sapiential poetry itself, and relegates the religious attitude and knowledge of nature to sentiment or "simply" to poetic sensibility.

We have wonderful examples of nature poetry in the great poetry produced in the nineteenth century in England. The Romantic poets produced beautiful poetry about nature. But what effect did it have on the physics departments of the universities? Absolutely none, precisely because the science that developed in the seventeenth century, through very complicated processes which I cannot go into now, began to exclude from its world view the possibility of a religious or metaphysical form of knowledge of nature. This science even excluded the poetic view of nature in so far as it claimed any intellectual legitimacy and sought to be more than what some would call "mere poetry." Modern science has clung to that monopoly very hard, even in this pluralistic age of ours, in which everything other than science is relativized. Post-modernists usually deconstruct everything except modern science because, if this were to be done, the whole world view of modernism along with post-modernism would collapse. So you have a kind of scientific exclusivity and monopoly which has been created and accepted by most although not all people in the modern world. Goethe, the supreme German poet as well as a scientist, rebelled very strongly against this monopolistic claim of modern science. There were also certain scientists, such as Oswald, who was a reputable chemist, who rejected scientific mechanism; and one can name others. But these are exceptions to the rule. The rule became that there is no other knowledge of nature except what is called scientific knowledge. And if someone claims that there is a religious knowledge of nature, then it is usually claimed that it is based on sentiment, on emotions, or, in other words, on subjective factors. If, for example, you see a dove flying and you think of the Holy Spirit, that is simply a subjective correlation between your perception of the dove

and your own sentiments. There is no objectivity accorded to the reality of nature as perceived through religious knowledge. That is why even symbolism has become subjectivized—it is claimed to be "merely" psychological, à la Jung. The symbols which traditional man saw in the world of nature as being objective and as being part of the ontological reality of nature have been all cast aside by this type of mentality which no longer takes the religious knowledge of nature seriously.

During the last thirty years, when the thirst for a more holistic approach to nature made itself felt, something even worse occurred because neither mainstream religion nor modern science showed any interest whatsoever in the religious and symbolic knowledge of nature and the holistic approach to it. The water sought for in this thirst seeped under the structures of Western culture and came out in the form of New Age movements, nearly all of which are very much interested in the science of the cosmos. But what they claim as science is really a New Age pseudo-science of the cosmos. It is not an authentic traditional science, because a traditional science of the cosmos always has to be related to a traditional religious structure. In this New Age climate the word "cosmic" has gained a great deal of currency precisely because of the dearth of an authentic religious knowledge of the cosmos in the present-day world. Somehow the thirst had to be satisfied. So we have had both excavation of the earlier Western esoteric teachings about nature—usually presented in distorted fashion—or borrowings from Oriental religions and their teachings about nature, often distorted. Even the famous and influential book of Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, does not really speak of Hindu cosmology or Chinese physics, but only mentions certain comparisons between modern physics and Hindu and Taoist metaphysical ideas.

To be sure there are many profound correlations and concordances to be found between certain aspects of biology, astronomy, and quantum mechanics on the one hand and Oriental doctrines of nature, of the cosmos, on the other. I would be the last person to doubt that truth. But what has occurred for the most part is not the kind of profound comparison we have in mind, but its parody, a kind of popularized version of a religious knowledge of nature, usually involving some kind of occultism or even some kind of an existing cult. The great interest shown today in Shamanism in America, in the whole phenomenon of the Native American tradition (which is one of the great and beautiful primal traditions that still survives to some extent), with weekend Shamanic sessions, is precisely because such teachings appeal to a kind of mentality that seeks some sort of knowledge of nature of a spiritual and holistic character other than what modern

science provides. This phenomenon is one of the paradoxes of our day and has not helped the environmental crisis in any appreciable way. Indeed, it has created a certain confusion in the domain of religion and created a breach between the mainstream religious organizations which still survive in the West—whether they be Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox—and these pseudo-movements and the New Age phenomenon, which they rightly oppose. The fact that these pseudo-religious movements are very pro-environment, yet in an ineffectual manner, has caused many people in the mainstream to take a stand against the very positions which they should be defending. So we have the paradoxical situation in America today where the most conservative Christian groups are those which are least interested in the environment. This phenomenon was not originally caused by the rise of the New Age religions but is certainly related to it and strengthened by it.

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