

THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN SALVATION.

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There was a maxim among the classic dramatists to the effect that a God was not to be introduced, save of necessity. There was a time when some refused to introduce any but God in the work of salvation. The pendulum swings wide, and some today appear to go even beyond the dramatists and see no necessity of introducing a God at all. The natural and the supernatural however must co-operate in the saving process.

Because the modern man finds it very difficult to define either the natural or the supernatural, or to tell where the one begins and the other ends, he is prone to give up the task, and declare there is really no difference worth considering. Much of what was once regarded as belonging to the realm of the supernatural is now known to be perfectly natural. Primitive man probably considered all his dreams as supernatural. The borders of the world of mystery have been steadily pushed back along all fronts, though the advancing frontiers of human knowledge; till many have been asking whether what men call supernatural is after all anything more than the natural that as yet remains unexplained or unexplored. Is the supernatural but the uncharted natural, the extraordinary, the unfamiliar, the unclassified, the inapplicable? Is it but the upper ranges of the natural? Some have thought of it as synonymous with the spiritual, as contrasted with the physical universe, assigning all spiritual phenomena to the sphere of the supernatural. But we now recognize that there are discoverable laws of the spirit life, as well as of the material universe. If we agree that all is natural that accords with what we call "the nature of things",

then nature covers the entire range of phenomena. God made all things as they are, whether physical or spiritual; therefore all may be said to be natural; always behaving in perfect accord with their respective natures; in other words, according to natural law. In this sense, nature is synonymous with the whole range of the thought and activity of God.

When, less than a generation ago, James, Starbuck and others, began to write of the psychology of religious phenomena, many reverent souls became alarmed, lest God be banished not only from the physical universe, but also from what was thought to be peculiarly His own realm, namely that of religion. Science seemed to some to have already ejected Him from the world of matter, saying with LaMarck, when asked where God came into his scheme, "We have no need of such hypothesis". But a second and calmer reflection enabled most men to see that God was not only not to be banished from any part of the universe as an alien enemy, nor cavalierly dismissed as no longer needed as an ally. On the contrary, He became the creator and upholder of a yet more wonderful world. The domains of scientific knowledge had been enlarged, but the borders of mystery correspondingly extended. Every older question answered, meant two new questions raised. Where fainting knowledge faltered, faith still offered her steadyng hand. "The wind bloweth where it listeth", said Jesus to one bewildered at the mystery of the new birth. We have learned much in the science of meteorology since the days of Nicodemus, and now speak learnedly of areas of high and low pressure. But, neither in barometrical disturbances, nor in upheavals of soul have we learned the last word. Horizons still shut us in, or lure us onward, as the case maybe.

Religion is the response of the soul to the Infinite Mystery—the illimitable, inexhaustible God, who is continually making all things new; and salvation is the act and process of coming into fellowship with Him. A re-

ligion without mystery would be a religion without power; and it is no reflection upon Christianity that in some respects it tends to deepen rather than resolve the fact of mystery. "A dogmatism which leaves no room for doubt, that excommunicates a different opinion, that removes the necessity for faith, is essentially irreligious"¹ The demand of science that everything in religion be explained is not pertinent, seeing that science itself raises more questions than it answers, and itself must hold many things on faith. What is chemical affinity? What is that force we call gravity? What is the process of metabolism, by which the food we eat, conveyed through the blood is transmuted into vital power? We have not explained anything by simply giving it a name—if so Adam might have flowered out, at once into a full-blown zoologist. (Gen. 2:19.) Ruskin cleverly asked what makes the leaf green? and answers with the scientist, "It is the presence in it of chlorophyl". And what is chlorophyl? This is derived from two Greek words *chloros*, green and *phullos*, leaf. And we have advanced our scientific knowledge by being informed that the leafy green is simply greenness of leaf! The living organism, we are told is a unitary complex of cells; the cells are in turn unitary complexes of molecules, the molecules of atoms, the atoms of electrons. But neither atoms, nor electrons, nor aions, nor ether, have ever been seen, or proved to exist. The scientist takes the unity and uniformity of nature on faith. He believes, but cannot prove, that tomorrow will come and nature act just as she did today. Professor Jacoby, the astronomer, writes: "Is it possible for science to believe something not logically proven? Science today has attained only to the portal of knowledge; when her forces shall have stormed the citadel, when she shall stand upon the deepest foundation stone of truth attainable by man, she will find surely, that

¹Millard. *The Quest for the Infinite*, p. 19.

stone bedded upon some kind of faith, some belief outside the domain of rigid logic". When science gives up its dogmas, and finds no need for faith; when it proves that it can dispel mystery, it will be time for its devotees to ask religion to do the same. There is mystery everywhere and mystery does not invalidate facts of experience whether they be in one realm or another. The little flower plucked from the crannies, will always come with its lesson of mystery in the most common objects about us, and speak of a Presence and a Spirit

“that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.”

Religion would cease to have a reason for being, if it could explain itself. *Un dieu defini et un Dieu fini*—“A God defined is a God lost.” Religion has to do with the ideal. It sits before its devotees a flying goal. Conquests made are the grounds for extending new fronts with new salients; even as in Scripture, *μυστήριον*, (mystery) means that which, once hidden, is now revealed; and each new revelation is the lure to the exploration of what eye hath not yet seen nor ear heard. Mystery, in the Scripture sense, is God progressively manifesting Himself. To comprehend Him fully is to abolish Him.

There is no longer being made the clear-cut distinction which so characterized the dualistic thinking of the Middle Ages—and which Puritanism, unable to shake off, passed on to the major portion of Protestantism—between the sacred and the secular, the natural and the supernatural. We have come to perceive, with Jesus, that the child mind best discerns the Kingdom of God. To the little child, with heaven lying all about him, there is no distinction, between the natural and the supernatural. All nature is supernatural, and the supernatural is also natural. The spiritual world is not an unnatural world, but the highest order of the natural. From this point of

view then, the supernatural is not the unnatural, nor the non-natural; much less is it the contra-natural, but the *upper*-natural, the natural, in its higher ranges. All personality is in some sense, supernatural. That is, where human will emerges, the higher laws of spirit control, direct and use, the laws that are beneath; as the will of the engineer utilizes the expansion of gases, friction, gravitation, inertia to drive forward his engine. Thus all life is reborn from above; the lower under the direction of the higher laws. The redemptive forces are always *super*-forces; just as those that lift are always on higher ground.

We may say then there are three elements at work in the processes of salvation. First, there are those that are perfectly natural; that is, those whose laws have been discovered. Second, there are elements which may be just as natural, whose workings have not been set in order, but which some day may be scientifically classified. And third, there is the will of transcendent personality. Here we must find the supernatural element in salvation. In the first of these may be included those laws of body and of mind, of heredity and of environment, of temperament and habit, of adolescence, of suggestion and the subconscious, that powerfully influence life's choices for good or ill, for arrested development or for normal growth; that have vitally to do with repentance, faith, obedience, prayer, spiritual development, service. And while we may speak of those forces that effect human character, but have never been brought under any known law as supernatural; that faith asserts and experience confirms, but cannot affirm, approves but cannot prove—yet strictly speaking, the supernatural is something more than the unresolved. It is the divine will operative in the human. In the Will to Save co-working with the will to be saved we find the supernatural elements in salvation. Hear the Scripture represent the mystery of the new birth: "Of His own will begat He us"; "which are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will

of man, but of God"; who willeth that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth".

It is quite evident, however, that man's chief, his practical concern, is with those forces which he himself has learned or may learn to use--we call them natural forces--in the salvation of himself and his fellows. The benevolent Maker has provided the means necessary for the sustenance, and culture of all life. Nature is prodigal to bring to life and to keep her many species alive. The spiritual life is no exception. Wealth of provision is made for its propagation and maintenance. From the beginning, is this abundance. God did not leave the soul to flounder, till at some chosen moment in time, He should make a sudden plunge to rescue. The fulness of time, when God sent forth His Son, was the climax and incarnation of continuous, age-long and eternal action of the Creator for the redemption of His creatures. But men have been slow to discover and use the natural agencies which God has ordained for their salvation. These may for the moment be contrasted with those which may be termed *revealed*. Mankind has neglected many of the forces which, scientifically discoverable may greatly assist, if they be properly utilized, in the saving of men. Life consists in healthy and ready response to all environmental forces--the natural and the supernatural. The seen and unseen, all that we have ever met, makes or unmakes us. If, in the full rich sense of salvation we are to be saved; indeed, if we are to interpret the universe religiously at all, we must keep our natures open toward the unseen, the unknown, that some of its virtues and its higher energies may filter in to illumine, strengthen and refresh the soul. It is only thus that the prophet's servant sees the mountains full of protecting horsemen and chariots; or appreciates the presence of the "so great a cloud of witnesses". Equally, must those agencies we term natural, that lie ready to our hand, be harnessed and made to work for spiritual ends.

Years before the natural laws that are operative in spiritual experiences were pointed out by the modern psychologist, Henry Ward Beecher delivered his Yale lecture on "Revivals Subject to Law," in which he held that spiritual phenomena as truly under the law of cause and effect as the physical, that all spiritual developments "are under law, administered by law, as much as any part of nature, and to be studied, therefore, as we study every other department of human life". Horace Bushnell, in his *Christian Nurture*, with all its limitations, anticipated in effect, much of the thought of the modern students of child life.

When scholars began to speak of the psychology of conversion, many put out an anxious hand to study the ark, and were deeply concerned lest all trace of the supernatural should be left out of the miracle of the new life. When Prof. James suggested in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, that the discoveries, concerning the subconscious mind might throw some light upon the phenomena of the new birth, many felt that irreverent hands were being laid upon a holy mystery, and some even appeared to reproduce the revulsion of the Middle Ages against the crude dabblers in science who were thought to be in league with the devil in the "black arts". There is always the tendency to discount the natural in all matters of the spiritual life. Here God must speak to us or we die. The importance of the work to be done in the salvation of immortal beings, the thoroughness with which we desire it to be done, and the certainty we should like to feel when it is wrought, demand that a supernatural power guarantee the doing. Like Paul, we wish that it rest not in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. It was this feeling that once insisted that every professed convert be able to furnish some clear evidence of a supernatural experience. Individual salvation, just as the redemption of society with the premillenarian must be wholly miraculous and cataclysmic. To discover any-

thing natural in so vital an experience was to condemn it as mistaken and unreal. Even the children were to give evidence of a violent divine breaking-in, and a corresponding breaking-up of their mental and moral peace, before the witness of grace in their hearts was acceptable to those who sat guard for the purity and well-being of the church.

A very large part of the process of salvation is educational "Religion is education," says Dr. Peabody.¹ "Shall we then say, asks many a mind, that this normal, unconstrained education of the spiritual life is a natural or a supernatural growth? Does the power which thus lifts life act from below or from above? Is this education of the soul human or divine? That we must answer, is as if one should ask whether the growth of the plant proceeds from the action of the soil, or from the action of the sun. It proceeds from both, from nourishing earth and **from the inviting sunshine.** It is both natural and supernatural. No analysis thank God, can determine which fragment of the stalk, which petal of the flower is the product of the earth or of the sun. In every cell of the meanest flower that breathes, there is manifested the unity of the universe. So it is in the growth of the soul. The natural and the supernatural conspire". In vain would the earth coax the seed to germination, did not the rays of the sun first warm the earth's bosom and make it ready to receive the new life - born from above. In the process of salvation, it is often quite difficult to know where the natural ends and the supernatural begins, just as education and discovery are often seen as but the human side of revelation.

It is the co-operative interaction of the natural and the supernatural that effects salvation. The Apostle Paul puts it comprehensively, when he writes, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God that

¹"The Religion of the Educated Man," p. 22.

worketh in you both to will and to work of His own good pleasure". The Holy Spirit works upon the conscience, according to the laws of the moral nature, to bring conviction of sin; He leads into all the truth, according to the laws of true pedagogy; He comforts, empowers and inspires in accord with the laws of mind; He sanctifies according to the natural laws of spiritual growth.

All things therefore that in any way condition human behavior are of concern to one who would save men; for salvation is character and conduct as well as faith. The natural environment, and the natural laws that govern human life, are subjects of deep concern to one who would lift men from the low levels of self and sin to the table lands of divine fellowship. With such supernatural and scientific precision is this universe of spirit constituted that divine forces operate for salvation, when the natural conditions are made ready for their operation. There is we are told, an indefinite supply of electrical power available to do the physical work of the world, if we will assemble, direct and release it along the natural path of its working. There is no limit to the supernatural power available for the salvation of the world if we were only to make intelligent direction of the natural laws and human forces through which the supernatural always works. By the scientific use of the natural means of salvation, the infinite energies of God may be released in the task of redemption, in a way hitherto undreamed of, just as our fathers would be amazed at the rapid growth of great modern industries through the harnessing up of natural forces unknown or unused by them. Through a scientific knowledge and practical use of all the natural elements that condition salvation, the Kingdom would come quickly, nations would be born in a day. That is, intelligent and conservative utilization of the natural processes that make for salvation, sets in motion automatically the infinite energies of God, pledged to man's rescue.

As nature abhors a vacuum, the Infinite Power, never

allows to rust the human machinery prepared, fit for its use. All the supernatural forces are brought into action without further thought or effort. God is eternally active in the world's redemption. Nature *versus* grace becomes a false antithesis. Rather may we speak with St. Francis of "Sister Nature"; for grace operates through the natural. Say not, "Who shall ascend into heaven? that is to bring Christ down, or Who shall descend into the abyss to bring Christ up . . . the word is nigh thee". Waiting on God and working with God become one in the saving process. Revivals are not worked up, nor prayed down. God's Spirit, like a mighty rushing wind comes in, as at Pentecost, when the conditions are right. Only open the windows, the Sun of Righteousness is always shining.

The salvation of men, therefore, is achieved by the free, but ever purposive will of God, working in the higher ranges of the natural, as well as through the known laws of life; through environment and all education processes, to bring men into harmonious relationships and wholeness of life; into fitness of fellowship with Himself.