

NATURE AS THE IMAGE OF GOD: REFLECTIONS ON THE SIGNS OF THE SACRED

by *Langdon Gilkey*

Abstract. This is a brief survey of aspects of the modern scientific view of nature to see if implied therein are signs or traces of the sacred—as early religious apprehension surely supposed. Nature's power and order are discussed as is the strange dialectic of death and life, evident in modern biology as it also is in all early religion.

Keywords: death and new life; hierarchy and/or levels; imago dei; order; power; redemptive unity; traces.

Our subject is the interrelation of science and religion, two important and, I believe, permanent features of our common human enterprise. These two have, over the centuries, had a sometimes cozy, sometimes troubled life together. The relation of science and religion represents, of course, a very complex and variegated matter; I shall be concerned with only one aspect of this large subject, namely the question of whether there can be said to be traces or signs of the divine in the modern scientific account of nature—as there surely were thought to be in ancient and in prescientific views of nature. Or, turned around, we could ask theologically, is nature also an image of God?

Let us note that this theme is theologically deviant; humans alone

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have in our tradition been said to be *imago dei*. Nonetheless, it is, I believe, important to suggest that nature also represents an *imago dei*, an image and likeness of its divine creator. This point is important because if nature be in truth an image or mirror of the divine, then—as is the case with humans—nature has an integrity in itself, a value for itself. It is not just an object for us, a means for our use and misuse, but an end in and for itself, in and for God. In this context, image is taken to mean a sign, symbol, or sacrament of the divine, disclosing through itself the divine glory. By image, then, I will mean that nature manifests or reveals certain unmistakable signs of the divine, namely power, life, order, and redemptive unity bestowed on it by God. It is in an analogous sense that humans have been considered to be *imago dei*, namely insofar as they manifested in and through their humanity the being, life and creativity, the intelligence and will, the freedom and the love that are, or better, can be, characteristic of human existence and are surely traits of the divine.

In neither case, let us note, is this imaging obvious to just any random observer, to just anyone reflecting on nature or on human beings. One may well look at nature or at humans and find there no traces of the divine. In neither case, therefore, is this an issue of proof. However, in both cases the traces, as I prefer to call them, are there, present in nature and in human existence, for anyone to observe and ponder. They are there, and interestingly enough, present in the modern scientific account of nature. But to see them as traces of *God* presupposes that through these media the divine discloses itself to us, and that we respond to that disclosure with acknowledgment, assent, and obedience—namely, it is an act of “faith.”

Our task, then, is to draw out, articulate, and so bring into clearer view those traces of the divine, of the activity and presence of God in nature, which are to be dimly discerned in our experience of nature. In viewing them, it becomes apparent why they can be so interpreted; they possess a unique ultimacy of reality and value; they are signs of the sacred. But there is little necessity here—other interpretations are possible. However, with this caveat it must also be said that other interpretations would encounter formidable intellectual obstacles: either they deny the traces via a reductionist process that ends in self-contradiction because it denies the possibility of the human subject and so of science itself; or they save the facts of the reduced world and the science that performs the reduction at the expense of an incoherent dualism of matter and spirit, extension and thought. There is present here, therefore, an argument, an argument that a theistic interpretation makes coherent sense of the width and

the depth of our experience of nature as no other interpretation does. Most important, it is hoped that this interpretation of nature and of its theological implications may serve as a "lure" to all who hear it, a lure toward a richer experience of nature and its mystery and so toward a more creative relation of modern men and women to the nature on which they depend.

For most of the human story, nature disclosed itself as teeming with power, with life, and with an infinitely valuable order. These aspects of the experience of nature seemed to archaic men and women to represent without question disclosures of the presence of the sacred, to represent unconditional powers of reality and value resonant in and working through the entities and forces of nature both surrounding and appearing within men and women. Interestingly, and it can be shown by comparative analysis, much of what was thus apprehended as "sacred," and thus dealt with by the means of archaic religious rites, sacrifices, myths, and obligations, still appears as central to any modern scientific account of nature. Power, life, and order are definitely *there* when we moderns study and theorize about nature; but their sacrality has been quite lost for us. Nature appears as one-dimensional, and hence nature is reduced from source and ground of our being (as it was for archaic humans) to a level below us, to a means, to a system of objects to be examined, manipulated, and used, to a warehouse of goods needed by us. These signs of the sacred are there but disguised, "incognito" for us.

Is faith then necessary for seeing these signs as *signs*, as signs of the sacred, of the divine in creation? Yes. Does "faith"—our subjective receptivity—therefore *create* these signs so that they can be said not to be there objectively but to be illusions, so that there can be no discourse about them as they appear in general experience? No. Why, if they be there to be looked at, can we not describe them and speak of them as "pointers" to the presence of God (a kind of natural theology), as well as signs of God for the faithful? I think we can. Is this a tenable, coherent position? I don't know. But let us see how it works.

SIGNS OR TRACES OF THE SACRED

Nature First of All Discloses Itself as Power. This was once the case for all primeval religion; it is now also the case for a scientific account of nature. Nature, cosmological physics tells us, represents *power* in dynamic process as it converts itself into energy and into matter and forms out of itself whatever entities or substances exist. This dynamic power is, therefore, the basis of all being whatsoever in our

experience, of every entity that is, whatever its kind or place, whether galaxy, stone, or human being. It appears as a stream of energy-matter, arising out of the past and continuing into the present, and then projecting itself, apparently, into an open future. Since power in this sense is equivalent to being, to existing, that is, to coming into being, remaining there, and projecting into the future, power is for us of ultimate value; without it, there is nothing, and in our experience there *are* no values except for things that are. This power represents, then, a unity at the most fundamental level of being and of value, of reality and value, which we experience not only in things around us but also within ourselves in our power to be and to be active, which we share (for the moment!) with all that is. The origin and continuity, the dependable presence of this power around us and in us is thus an ultimate question, *the* ultimate question, for us: a question for our own existence and its meanings (an existential and religious question), a question for reflection (a philosophical question); and, of course, as the question of our common continuing survival and well-being, it represents the most fundamental practical question—to answer which we devote all facets of our crafts, our vocations and our works, our commerce and our politics. Science also raises implicitly this question about power: Where does the power to be in all things arise? But science cannot answer it in its own terms except by reductionism or in effect by ignoring it—or, best of all, but rare, by acknowledging it as a “limit” question raised by science but answerable only elsewhere, in other ranges of discourse, a limit question which, because of its existential as well as its reflective force, will not go away.

Power—like life and order—manifests itself on different levels, in a kind of hierarchy of modes which modulate and suddenly change as they appear in different but analogous ranges of finite being. Power on the inorganic level seems nonpurposive, in its career almost wholly determined or necessarily caused, hence amazingly predictable and comprehensible in terms of quantitative, homogeneous, and mathematical categories of analysis. Power on the level of life discloses a modulation: the power in life becomes *vitality*, a vitality not fully comprehensible in terms of physics and chemistry, a “force” (if we may call it that without reification) that can vanish in death, a powerful élan directed at the preservation, the propagation, and the expansion of life. This is a force dependent on the unity of the organism; it is partially self-maintaining and self-directing (“information-processing” as contemporary biology likes to put it). Power in humans continues both this physical power and this organic level of power, but it adds another dimension: vitality now includes

“meaning,” purpose, the fulfillment of a goal. As meaning evaporates, human vitality recedes; when the will finds itself empty of purpose, the will goes limp; as Casey Stengel said: “You’ve got to have heart!” Finally, in historical communities power becomes political, economic, and social, that is, infinitely complex, inclusive of shared public meanings and purposes, courageous decisions, authentic assent, of the uneasy balance of unity and diversity—and yet such power cannot be lacking in physical and life power, material and economic, in all their facets.

This hierarchy of power, made up, so to speak, of these analogous levels, is undeniable. Yet the relation between these levels is generally ignored; each discipline in our universities plies its own trade on one or another of these levels. Again, the limit questions of the origin, the description, and above all the unity of power arise. Must there not be some permanent, necessary, infinite, and unconditioned source of all this “richness” in whose depth the possibility of these various and distinct levels coherently appears? Can it be sensibly said that all levels of power—powers of matter, of life, of mind and of spirit—arise out of the lowest level, unless we reduce, as we usually do, all of the higher levels of experienced power to the lowest level, or unless the mystery of nature as the source of all of these levels be made almost impenetrable?

In all religious awareness, disclosure of the sacred is accompanied by *demand*, divine presence by law and obligation, acknowledged and witnessed by obedience and service. In archaic religion the ultimacy of obligation, of what is real, of ultimate power, is thus balanced by an ultimacy of obligation, an undeniable and unavoidable sense of “ought,” of requirement, of what we snobbishly call their *taboos*, which has accompanied each religious tradition from its beginning. One may try—as many moderns do—to translate that “ought” out of its uncomfortable apodictic status, and along with it all religion, into the more comfortable region of prudent self-interest or even the prodding of the genes. But those who thus translate the apodictic “oughts” of others reveal in the last chapter of their own socio-biologies, a chapter seriously devoted to the ethical and political implications of their inquiry, that even they have been “called” by moral obligations (mostly liberal), obligations they cannot refuse and which *they* do not consider to be self-serving. No one escapes this demand, and its accompaniment in what we call conscience. The forms of the demand, the laws and ideals seemingly required, change as cultures change—and, accordingly, the content of conscience changes as well. But both appear universally, whether in what we call religion, the traditional religion of the culture, or in the moral canons

and ideals of the culture generally, in what Paul Tillich called the "religious substance of the culture."

Humans have always been able in part to comprehend and hence to use for their own ends the power coursing through themselves and through the things around them. With the advent of science, and its offspring modern technology, however, this knowledge and this use of power have increased immeasurably. Knowledge is power, said Frances Bacon, and he meant precisely this: the power to use nature as we humans will to use it. Through recent science the power within things, the very power of finite things to be, has been in part understood; and in that understanding this power has become our power, power in our hands. Thus, as Bacon predicted, it is now power directed by our intentions, our intelligence, our purposes, in short, what we term our "freedom." This turned out, however, to be a much more ambiguous and hence frightening eventuality than Bacon had foreseen. Suddenly and irrevocably modern scientific culture realized to its surprise on the one hand the precarious fallibility of our freedom and on the other the ultimacy of this power to be of reality, its transcendent awesomeness, its terrible finality. With that disclosure of the "sacred" power of things has appeared the corresponding demand, the unavoidable voice of conscience, of the "ought," which has shaken the scientific community and motivated many, though by no means all, within it ever since to control radically our use of this power. As in the archaic experience of nature, the awesome power around us and within us brings with it a demand and, hence, requires, if we are creatively to share in its benefits, self-discipline and sacrifice. As we are discovering, all power, ancient *or* modern, is hedged about by innumerable taboos, constraints on our free use of the power our knowledge has given us; we cannot, we absolutely cannot, be heedless or irresponsible in our use of this power. This lesson is plain before us today, both with regard to nuclear power and with regard to our power over the environment, our power to poison it or to despoil it. Most of us have proved too "modern" to have heeded this lesson. Here, then, in the experience of an ultimate demand, an ultimate obligation, concerning our use of nature's power, and so our use of our own power, we apprehend the moral responsibility that accompanies every disclosure of the sacred. Power, as an ultimate threat and an ultimate demand, is one "trace" of the sacred in our experience of nature.

Nature Exhibits Order. As well as power and life (and we shall omit here a discussion of that latter trace), nature exhibits an *order*, an order that has been universally apprehended by the humans

participating in it and witnessing to it. Though order has been seen and venerated by every cultural community, it has nonetheless been differently sensed and so articulated in widely diverse symbols in these human responses to order. That the order is somehow *there* is as indubitable as the power that illustrates it; order is presupposed in all social life, in all of the arts, and in all reflection. Perhaps most significantly, its presence is the precondition for our own empirical science and for the technology that flows from that science. Nevertheless, its presence and character raise or imply recurrent questions that no special discipline can intelligently handle, limit questions that point our discourse—and our minds—beyond the experienced order within observable things and so within the special disciplines, to order's mysterious source or ground. On every level at which it appears, this order combines paradoxically with radical spontaneity and openness; hence, it is an order without rigid necessity and, what is more, with a continuing possibility of novelty—an intriguing union that begs for fuller understanding.

It is, moreover, a self-maintaining order. Since the order exhibited in nature is often referred to in terms of "laws," we are reminded of this intuition's ancient roots (at least in Greece) in political experience. In speaking easily of these "laws" of nature, we continually appeal to this analogy—and then quickly forget it *is* an analogy. But there are no police, no courts, no army enforcing these "laws." If obedience to these laws is continually observed, such obedience must be self-imposed, self-maintained by the nature of entities themselves and hence illustrated in all they do (which is why the Greeks thought the stars were rational, and so ensouled being). The union of such a self-maintained order with spontaneity and ever-present novelty represents an almost eerie puzzle, a limit question arising out of scientific inquiry, but one that calls for philosophical reflection.

Above all, order, like power, appears in analogous forms as one moves from one level or dimension of nature to another. The order illustrated by an inorganic event is similar to but also in significant ways different from the order illustrated by an organism and by its relations to the environment—as all biological language discussing functions and roles, always using such phrases as "in order that," shows. Further on, the order of organic life becomes even more complex; on the human level, conscious purposes and meanings mix in with physical and organic process to form with them a unified order, of the inorganic, the organic, the psychic, and the purposeful. Finally, the order of the community, the state, and so of history itself, is still more complex—as is the disorder. Again, puzzles or questions have appeared out of experience, ordinary social experience and

scientific experience, puzzles about the ground of order that point beyond the diverse realms of our special ontic discourse to a further level of metaphysical discourse, of metaphysical symbols, and even to a transcendent unity of power, order, and value implied in each special realm of discourse.

Amid perpetual change and passing away, amid the continuing presence of confusion and novelty, and so the inescapable impingement of disorder, order has yet appeared, reappeared, and been sustained. Moreover, the ordered characteristics of things outside of us maintain a fortunate, if very strange, correlation with the order inherent in our own minds, our systematic naming, our norms of thinking, and later our logic and our mathematics. What this correlation of thought and object of thought, of thought and being, of subjective order and objective order, means, we hardly know; but it has given to order the welcome role of mediator, of representative, between ourselves and the otherwise infinite strangeness and mystery of external things.

The texture of order has, therefore, always been deeply enmeshed with value. This close relation of order and value is reflected throughout the extent of nature, up and down the various modes or levels. On the cosmic level, order appears as the precondition, the "compossibility" of our world, the possibility of *cosmos*, of our ordered universe and so an ordered habitat; as we know now in several fields, even "chaos" has within it a strange sustaining order. On the biological level, order is the condition of any sort of survival, of security over time, of greater well-being, and so of the propagation and continuation of the species. On the psychic and social level, order makes possible social existence of all sorts: family, community, creative circles, intimacy and bonding; and on the cultural level order is essential for economic and political life, for all of the arts, for knowledge and reflection, for the creative enhancement of community life and for the fulfillment of common meaning. On every level of this hierarchy, there is no value or maintenance of value without some participation in order, as there is no increase of value without new contrast and novelty—which in extreme cases provides threats to value. As a universal and foundational but yet precarious, even fragile, characteristic of reality, order is one of the pervasive and ultimate traits of things and one of the deep grounds of value. Hence order has always been apprehended as sacred, as a god or goddess (Apollo, Athena, Indra), as the divine itself (Tao, Dharma, Logos)—or, in our secular age, as a strange presupposition of common discourse and empirical inquiry, an unexplained and yet transcendently valuable character both of reality and of our thinking.

The intuition of order and its relation to value—of “form” as both sacred and “good”—has been almost universal. Modern scientific knowledge about the process is based itself—as its own precondition—on the presupposition of order. There are no data from yesterday without order over time, nor data from Yale or MIT without order over space. Yet in its *conclusions*, with their implication of the randomness and the radicality of nature’s changes, this empirical knowledge has seemed to drain our interpretation of nature of this sacrality, of its moral and religious implications. Do we not, as Steven Weinberg asks, now know that it is all pointless? But there is more to the modern scientific picture than its reductionist emphasis on material and official causality. What has become the “wonder” of modern cosmology is that in natural process order combines with change and with novelty and yet remains order. Change and order were felt to be in radical tension by the Greeks, and novelty was certainly considered to be antithetical to order, almost the principle of disorder. The modern scientific vision of a changing evolutionary process exhibiting continually new forms, and yet illustrating precisely in these changes a universal order—this vision is *new*. Incidentally, it arose in reflection on changes in *history* (not in nature) in the late eighteenth century. It represents the most compelling limit question of modern reflection. Quite aside from the question of the progressive character of these changes in history’s or in nature’s development (the “story” or “purpose” in them), there remains the question of how novelty can combine with order, how order can tolerate novelty and yet remain order. What ordered power mediates between the past, which illustrates one set of forms, and the future, which illustrates another set of forms? Any “explanation” presupposes an order spanning these two modalities: achieved actuality in present and past and not-yet possibility in the oncoming future. How is such a mediation possible; how or what thus spans past and future, making possible over time a self-sustaining order among new actualities? Almost universally there has appeared a religious intuition of some ground of permanence and abiding value amidst change and passingness. This universal human intuition responds to this trace of the sacred, this sign of the divine—the *logos* in all things—in ordinary experience.

Again with each disclosure or trace—in this case of order—there comes a corresponding demand. The identification of the pervasive order of things with value is nearly universal; in all schemes of order an “ought” appears. For a multitude of human communities, what we are required to do to be human is fixed by the ultimate yet natural order of things: an order perceived perhaps in the laws of earth, its

animals and birds; or in the order of the heavens; or an order “known” especially in the order of relations in the family or in the wider community (for example, the Tao or the Logos). Order here is thus not only what in fact we all do, even what we do to achieve or participate in value; order is even more what we “ought” to do—so that if we do not, we know we are not merely, so to speak, fined, we are *wrong* and retribution must be made. Hence in the hierarchy of order, above unity and harmony there is *Justice*, the order that incarnates value and goodness—to each her due; and above justice there is *Righteousness*, the divine power that upholds the order of all things, the Natural Law, and so the morality that fulfills all things.

Set within these archaic religious or mythical symbols, this hierarchy of reality and value now seems bizarre and unreal to most of us. Translated, however, into our own symbolic universe, the identity of power and order on the one hand, with our own highest values and norms (ideals) on the other, is manifested every time in a democracy we speak of the equality of all men and women, of the inalienable rights of all, and of the sanctity of each individual—and so of the ultimate obligations thrust thereby on each one of us. Again with regard to order as to power, disclosure of ultimacy and categorical demand go hand in hand.

The processes of nature not only exist and embody an order, which is strange—and fortunate—enough. Even more it seems that this orderly process as a whole exists in an *improbable* way and that it embodies an *improbable* order. First of all, it has—so far as we can now tell—a beginning; thus its existence as well as its order are not self-explanatory. To one who feels deeply, as much religious apprehension has, the radical contingency of all things, this characteristic of nature as non-self-explanatory, as throughout and in itself *contingent*, has seemed evident even without such a beginning. Thus contingent, passing nature, merely in being there at all, has seemed to point beyond itself to some further noncontingent ground or cause. This intuition, expressed reflectively as the cosmological proof, has surely been buttressed by the apparent fact of a beginning, which even more persistently seems to call for a ground beyond contingent nature. Thus, the scientific hypothesis of a beginning of our process, that Big Bang or Singularity with which all that we experience started, has raised its own limit question and calls, at the least, for more careful reflection than is usually awarded it in modern cosmologies: for example, that “in that event something came to be out of nothing.” In coming to be at all—and reflectively stated, that means coming to be “out of nothing”—the natural process seems to disclose dimly but persistently an ultimacy of being in the ever dimmer background of

that far-off event. Such reflections are intriguing as reflections of the intellectual articulation of a deep religious intuition of our contingency and so of the divine being, in its creative power and self-sufficiency; they are not, so it seems to me, in themselves useful as proofs.

This process of radical changes over immense time and space embodies, as we noted, a certain very strange form or "story." To us this form, having produced us, is full of meaning. Even scientific observers have apparently been existentially moved by the "wonder" of this immense and blind process producing the scientific observer—and they have recognized that a genuine if elusive question is here posed. What gives this question a special force as a genuine puzzle or wonder is the immense, almost infinite, *improbability* of this process taking the fortunate (for us) path it did. These cosmic changes that took place immediately after the singularity were vastly improbable changes; they made possible our stellar universe and so ultimately our earth; could they then really be said to be random, purely chance? Further, were the mutations and recombinations explanatory of later developments of life forms genuinely random; or is there in this process, unseen and unseeable by the inquiries and perspective of empirical science, something at work, some direction of some sort? The "story" of creation and of life, in its modern *even more* than in its literal biblical form, provides a genuine trace or sign of the sacred, the deep and unexpected unity of power, of order, and of value. In short, this trace represents the very sort of hierarchy of power, order, and purpose we have seen revealed elsewhere in our ordinary experience of nature. For in ourselves, as parts of nature, we experience—and experience *directly*—causes on the physical or somatic level uniting in a variety of ways with unconscious and even conscious intentions and purposes on the psychic and spiritual levels, uniting to achieve *unified action* and to make possible every instance of purposeful activity, yes, every act of cognition, including, of course, those acts that constitute empirical science.

Nature has apparently prepared for the various unexpected levels that are a part of nature. This is, so to speak, an aspect of the "story" just referred to; here, however, we seek to highlight another facet of this strange yet beneficent character of natural process, one disclosed to us by evolutionary science. We now know as never before that inorganic matter contained (apparently) the possibility of (the ingredients of?) life—however that emergence came about—and further that the earliest life contained the possibility of more complex mutations. (Where did *they* come from? As Whitehead remarked, "Possibility cannot float in from nowhere."). Further, as sociobiology

has shown, these expanding complexities in life contained the seeds of psyche and then of all aspects of the human spirit: of purposes, intentions, values, expressions, and symbolism, goals, fears, and hopes—projects on the one hand and despair on the other. Thus all of high culture: art, myth, religion, practical crafts, politics, and—of course—science itself (even genetics and sociobiology), all of the facets of mind, reason or spirit, stretch back into the dimness and mystery of matter, of nature as our source and ground. Here nature as matter—and as known by physical science—shows its deeper and more mysterious union with nature as the veritable source of psyche and spirit. Nature as source of all *objects* is here united with nature as the ground of *subjects*; nature as power and order discloses itself as inclusive of, as creative of, nature as source and fulfillment of meaning. If the divine represents the unity of power, order, and meaning—as we say of God—this too is a trace and sign of the sacred, evidence of the presence of the divine in and through the mystery of the system of things.

Nature as Death and the Renewal of Life. The final trace is the strangest of all. Perhaps it should not even be called a trace since it is, if anything, too paradoxical and enigmatic, too much an “incognito” in itself, to mediate at this point a disclosure of any sort. I refer, first, to the strange unity of death with life throughout nature, especially as modern evolutionary *science* understands nature. And, second, I refer to the fascinating, if to modern sensibility “primitive,” parallel apprehension in all early *religion* of an analogous unity of death with life. In early religion we see, almost universally, that the divine powers of life are also the lords of death; that the same gods and goddesses preside over both; and we see this as well in the recurrent myths of dying consorts of the Great Mother Goddess, dying that crops may arise. Clearly ancient men and women apprehended this dialectical movement of life, of death, and out of their union new life, as a sacred process on the one hand and, on the other, as a process which, in uniting death with life, did not so much extinguish value—as modernity would, and did, surely conclude—as precisely to secure and increase value. How is this union of life, death, and value in these symbols of the divine possible? How could the “terrible” dialectic of death and life in nature itself become a sign of the divine, as it surely was to early religion? And how might it become a trace for us?

As any attentive reader will be aware, our discourse on life and death in nature, “the Great Dying yields the Great Renewal,” as Holmes Rolston put it, and on the religious response to that dialectic

in nature in the myths and rites of most ancient religions, has landed us squarely in the midst of the problem of evil. If God is all powerful and good, how then can there be any experience of evil; if God created and rules the world, how is the tragedy of death possible? Is God the ground, then, of death as well as of life, of that which threatens value as well as that which creates and increases it? If so, then what could we mean by identifying God with life and with value; how could God be the God of mercy, love, and grace if God is the God of tragedy and death as well? These are the questions that press in on us when we view nature as science describes it, when we look clearly at early religion—and, not least, when we seek to relate a loving God to our own personal lives and to contemporary history—where deaths do occur and where tragedy stalks almost every corner of every continent. Everywhere we look life is interlocked with death, being seems intertwined with nonbeing: in nature, in historical experience, in individual life.

In all of these death threatens life and yet intertwines itself with life and with value. How, therefore, can we understand God, not to mention human values, if God and value are separated radically from all traces of death and so from both history and nature, the realms of life *within* death? Can there be value anywhere without the negative, being without nonbeing? Can there be meaningful life without death—but can there be meaningful life *with* death? These represent the ultimate paradoxes of religious reflection and of theology. Although we cannot settle them here, we must briefly take them up if we are to deal squarely with the traces of the divine in nature, especially nature as evolutionary science pictures it for us.

In nature there is no life at the level of propagating organisms, at the level of continuing species, that does not arise from some mode of dying; and in archaic religion there is no hope for value without some mode of significant suffering and sacrifice. What are we to make of this?

The most baffling and yet the most pressing problem for the human existence of each of us and for serious reflection on that existence is the paradoxical opposition and yet unity of life and death, of value and the threats to value, of the positive and of its negation, of being and the threat of nonbeing. No one escapes this painful and disturbing problem: how can there be meaning to life, dominated throughout as life is, and especially at its end, with death, the death of others and now of myself—and of all that follow? But how can there be life, creative life, without meaning? How can life, meaning, and death co-exist?

If, however, it is true that the dialectic of life and death in nature

in itself represents a direct trace of the divine, can that not be for us a signal from the nature around us and in us that this dialectic itself is a clue to the relation of human life, of *our* human life, to meaning and of death to meaning? Then the profoundest themes raised in the end by ourselves and for ourselves as humans, as nature's offspring, in myth, in the arts, in literature, in theater, in philosophical understanding, and in religious reflection, can themselves be understood as echoes of nature's own most mysterious patterns. Surely it is the supreme task of human existence, existence in and through spirit, to unite meaning not only with the creative possibilities of life but also with the impingement of death, to unite life with death. That is, through courage not only to affirm life but to reconcile spirit and life, *our* spirit and life, to death. If there be seeds of religion as of morals in the long developments of organic and animal life in nature, (as sociobiology argues), there are (we are now suggesting) as well seeds in nature's own patterns of the explicit dilemmas and puzzles of the spirit. In both nature and in spirit there are anxiety and fear, pain of wound and of dying, terror at the threat of death, despair at the collapse of meaning and at the evacuation of hope. The unity of life and death in nature sets for humans their corresponding *spiritual* task of uniting life with death, our own living with our own dying. Nature's being is not so opposite from human existence as we had supposed: our deepest questions and nature's most mysterious patterns are in some strange way correlated. Both are grounded in power, life, and order, buoyed up by the prospects of value, and now burdened with disorder, pain, suffering, death, and despair. What are we to make of all this? In nature these patterns issued in the appearance of life and its meanings; in the "story" of nature, the dialectic of life and death generated the appearance and increase of values evident in animal and human existence.

Certainly in answer we must begin our brief reflections with the point of their union, namely the disclosure in nature itself, witnessed to and mimed in archaic religion, that while death surely conquers life and its immediate values, *life precisely arises again out of death*. The most pervasive patterns of nature in the organic realm, in plants and in animals, manifest this: one generation dies that another may arise; in every food chain or cycle of nourishment, vegetable and animal life alike is used up for the sake of other life; even species vanish that new forms may arise out of them. And, on our level, the level of culture, each generation must go if the new one is to have room; even in each university old fuddies must retire if new ideas and new perspectives are to flourish—and so on and on, even to the solar systems and galaxies out of which we are fashioned. Apparently one cannot

create, receive, or accept values without creating, receiving, and accepting death. Life issues in death; but also death issues in new life. One way to deal with this paradox is to try radically to separate these two: some powers are of life and are good, others are of death and are evil, in short some gods good and others evil, the hypothesis of the finite god. But such is the dialectical mixture of power, life, and order, and now of dying and living, that that separation bogs down soon enough.

Another mode is to recognize the dialectic as inescapable and seek to transcend that dialectic onto a higher plane: a transvaluation of the values which separates the question of *ultimate* meaning from the hither and lower meanings in the natural and historical cycles of life and of death. Thus the religions of Karma and transmigration, Hinduism and Buddhism, seek a level of existence and of meaning *beyond* the intertwined wheel of life and of death. Much of the tradition of Christianity made the same sort of move: the dialectic of life and death, and the inevitable loss of meaning in this life through death, are transcended and overcome through the promise of another supernatural level of life beyond death where the dialectic will be no more. These have represented, perhaps, the profoundest of all resolutions; their problem lies in their tendency to drain this earthly life of its values, to resolve the threat of death by relocating meaning so thoroughly beyond life that the values within life are themselves shorn of meaning. Needless to say, modernity, secular and religious alike, has been so enthralled with the infinite possibilities of values and meanings *within* this life that they resolved the dialectic by ignoring it, in effect by forgetting or denying death and despair, and so seeking here and now life without death, and value without negation, being without nonbeing. This has not worked either; we all still die. This answer tends not only to ignore the inevitability of the negative and so to encourage despair rather than courageous consent when the negative inevitably appears. Even more, it overlooks the need, even the requirement, of sacrifice, of self-sacrifice as well as self-discipline, if value *in* life is to be created and preserved.

The unity of life and death—in nature and in personal existence alike—must be accepted in consent; and yet the value of life must be affirmed and embodied. This is the dialectical “trick” forced on us by our contingent existence, and a difficult one it is. The strange fact is that the dialectic of life and death spreads out from its natural origin in nature’s patterns into the very midst of human personal and ethical existence. Nature in this sense leads into the very deepest levels of spirit. On the very highest human level we know we cannot live truly and with integrity unless we are willing to die. No value can

be defended, much less embodied in history, without the willingness of life to sacrifice itself for that value, unless life is itself shaped by love. And life withers and shrinks as it proceeds unless it can consent with acceptance and even with acknowledgment to the possibility of its own death and even the coming of that death. Life must have dignity if it is to have and create value; but a life *has* no dignity if it cannot accept its own death with courage.

The embodiment in existence of this paradox—the enjoyment of life and of its values amid the courageous acceptance of death—represents a spiritual achievement of impressive magnitude. It is possible, I believe, only as a gift, as grace, insofar as courage, self-giving obedience, and trust, as well as love of life and moral dedication qualify our life. This courage appears universally throughout the spread of human existence; its appearance is not directly dependent on a creative religious faith or a particular cultural life. But its source lies beyond our finitude since it is precisely our finitude that is here threatened and overwhelmed. The presence of this courage, therefore, is itself a sign of grace, a trace of the presence of the transcendent. It points to a resource beyond ourselves who are at once called to life but threatened by death. On our own, left to our own power, that call to life can survive only if our life ignores the threat. Thus, on our own, the threat of death can easily submerge this call to life in despair.

If this be so, what must we then say of God, the source of death and also the source of the grace to live in the face of death? As the requirements of personal existence, as our common fate as mortals, and as the strange dialectic of nature disclose *together*, God creates and rules both the realm of life and the realm of death. For it is out of death that life and new life arise. Life is the supreme value for life—all of nature discloses this. But one of the conditions of life is dying, and with consciousness and spirit this condition requires the ultimate willingness to die. Death and life can unite with value if in existence the courage to live and to die is joined with the commitment to life and its values. A total spiritual transcendence of life and its values is not necessary for the values of life to be affirmed and embodied. This dialectical relation of value to the sacrifice of value, of life to death—a dialectic also disclosed in nature's processes—is first clearly expressed in all early religion with its emphasis on sacrifice. It becomes quite conscious and explicit in high religion: in the requirement of the sacrifice of one's own worldly life if the soul will live in integrity (Socrates); in the new way beyond desire of the Buddha; and in the Christian call to give one's life if one would find it, embodied in the event of the Atonement and in every central theme

in the entire New Testament. What is only dimly and obscurely seen in nature, and reflected in early human religion, becomes clear and explicit in what we term revelation; then we can, with hindsight, see or begin to see what these signs and traces in nature meant. Life is fulfilled only when it is willing to give itself for another, only when love directs and suffuses the affirmation of life. And such love incarnates the courage which makes the affirmation of life in the face of possible death a reality. Correspondingly, the God who creates life and death and who wills a world structured in terms of both, is also the God who calls us to life and to face death for God's sake—and who promises an existence beyond life and death.

The God of nature and so of life and death—as is the God of history—is, hence, also the *Deus Absconditus* whose mystery within this dialectic is almost impenetrable. But this God has disclosed in revelation an even deeper dimension to this dialectic: that of the call to life and its values, that of life, death, and beyond life, and that of mercy, forgiveness, and eternal grace. God is not only power, order, and life, and so life and death; God is grace, life, and eternity. And most relevant of all, in disclosing the importance of value amidst negation, of love amidst death, God has in many symbols and modes, but above all in the events of the covenant with Israel and the life and death of Jesus the Christ, disclosed the divine participation or sharing in our suffering and death and thus provided in the divine power and grace the means to unite and overcome the dialectic of life and death.