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Grace: A Dimension within Nature?

Bernard E. Meland

It is gratifying to me to be asked to participate in this conference honoring our colleague Joseph Sittler. The theme to which we are addressing ourselves in this conference, "Nature and Grace," is, of course, one that has become identified with Sittler through the years. There are other dimensions to his thought, as many of you have discovered; but none of them seems to surface at the mention of his name in the way that this particular one does. And there are obvious reasons for that. Not only has it concerned him deeply, but he has been instrumental in evoking that concern among others, notably those outside the theological community, and to render it meaningful in ways that transcend its cultic context, thus making it available to discussion within the culture-at-large. In relating myself to this conference theme, I have chosen to address the topic "Grace: A Dimension within Nature?" The question mark here is part of the title; for the spirit of my discussion this afternoon is in the nature of a query, rather than a declaration.

I

Before addressing myself to that theme, however, I feel constrained to offer a bit of orientation concerning my own mode and style in approaching such a theme. I do so for a specific reason. It has been a number of years since I have been privileged to address this Divinity School community. Meanwhile, many of you have come into these halls having your own fresh, avant-garde manner of dealing with theological inquiries, and little or no acquaintance with mine. So, if I am to contribute helpfully to the discussion of the theme before us, making some comment at the outset concerning my own sensibilities of thought in approaching such a theme might prove useful.

Insofar as this theme is understood as a theological topic in the discourse common to historical theology, or even to systematic theology,

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I have little to contribute beyond what is commonly known. Besides, Sittler has spoken with rare insight to this aspect of the problem, as have others in this conference. I come to it more in the spirit of one perplexed as to what its connotation within the contemporary idiom of thought and experience might be, yet alerted to constructive possibilities of its having meaning of considerable significance in the context of what I have chosen to call the "new modern consciousness." The new modern consciousness as I employ it may not be wholly new or really new in the light of readings and reflections in which some of you may have been involved more recently. It is new only in the sense that it is post-Enlightenment, post-Newtonian, postliberal, post-modernist, even postnaturalist in the sense that we once used the term "new naturalism." And while it partakes of a process orientation of thought, now becoming increasingly more familiar as a mode of inquiry in theology, my approach reflects reservations concerning the spirited inquiry into conceptual forms now dominant in that school of thought, looking toward clarifying and even enlarging upon or reformulating that singularly unifying effort projected by Alfred North Whitehead in 1929, *Process and Reality*.

The stance I find necessary to assume in addressing any theological inquiry, but especially one that raises questions concerning horizons of sensitive awareness "transcending," exceeding, or transforming our human dimension as a natural structure, is singularly elemental; that is, one that probes initially this elusive area of creaturely awareness. The procedure more common among disciplined inquirers is that of pursuing initially a systematic formulation of concepts and terms on the assumption that forming the right concepts and clarifying their meaning by way of projecting a cogent system or structure of thought might resolve the issue at stake and still the yearning, questing spirit. That assumption has always seemed a bit odd to me, and the procedure following from it premature. There are differences among people in this regard, and I am simply confessing what may help to identify my stance in approaching this query: namely, that in theological inquiry the sense of creaturehood precedes the more ambitious problem of creating a world view, or a systematic cosmology.

To all this, one can readily assert, How can anyone start thinking about anything without being fully conscious of the philosophical or otherwise disciplined stance from which his thinking proceeds? Well, all I can say to that is that many of us "elementalists" do. The sense of living and being absorbs us as an experienceable reality to the extent

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that thinking about the experience is made secondary, or at least follows upon, and possibly from, an experienceable base, as a more sophisticated way of reaching for some clarification or wider view of what is initially this bodily event of being, of existing. Preoccupation simply with the act of existing, the pain and joy of it, and the perpetual mystery of it, conceivably could absorb one for a lifetime, were it not for "puzzlements" that intrude with a persistence that becomes in itself a source of agony, or a new kind of lure that will not let one go until he has wrested from some makeshift frame of reference, or one that has been borrowed or appropriated temporarily some intelligible perspective upon events, or upon happenings which one has known more intimately and personally as sheer living.

Now there have been those who have simplified their mode of existing with a sure sense of knowing, by settling upon a singular source of insights and directives, making it the literal word of truth. Nuances, overtones of possible meaning beyond what is immediately conveyed, critical and unsettling queries that are obviously unmanageable have been brushed aside or suppressed as being simply obstacles in the path of living faithfully in accordance with the Word as read. The Word in this case is usually capitalized, which in itself singles it out as the one Source of Truth. And truth also, in this case, is spelled with a capital *T*. If it should happen that uncertainties concerning the Word of Truth, as given, say, in Scripture, were to intrude, and continue to unsettle one's confident stance, one committed to the Word as being the sole source of certainty might well transfer allegiance to the Creedal Word, or to the philosophical word, or the scientific word; in which case the Word according to the Creed, or a given philosophy, or Science becomes, as it were, a saving alternative to the Word as given in Holy Writ. Now this is a caricature consciously contrived to accentuate a contrast between a stance demanding conceptualized certainty in belief or understanding, and one which finds it possible to sustain a considerable degree of ambiguity or uncertainty in conceptualizing the truth of the faith, of the world, or of oneself without losing some sense of the reality as lived. I do not mean to offer any judgment concerning these various ways of assuming a stance for living. I mean simply to note them, and to say that, as an elemental, the act of living, with all of its imponderables, agonies, and joys, takes precedence over any conceptualized word and stands persistently in judgment of it, and a perennial, fecund source of renewal or reconception. Living, perceiving, conceiving are the stages along life's way in

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religious inquiry. And the wealth and profundity of experience seem to me to inhere in the initial stage, in the sense that we live more profoundly than we can think; although the route toward clarity and intelligibility by way of perception and conceptualization, giving rise to disciplined reasoning, can be the means of heightening, illuminating, and focusing the act of existing for remarkable human attainment, and for exercising the powers of this human emergent to well-nigh unimaginable degrees. Such rigorous conceptualization, on the other hand, may also serve as an enclosure upon what otherwise could be fecund with possible richness of awareness and meaning in living. For, in the sharpening of the conceptual focus, the intrusion of the human structure, with its limited, even fallible forms and symbols, accelerates. So, except as conceptualization and critical reasoning have built into their mode of inquiry and reflection intermittent occasions of returning to the fecund source of existing and living, what appears to be man's surest defense against insecurity in living can become misleading, to say the least, and, at the most, illusory.

But, make no mistake about it! The reach toward intelligibility and the disciplining and fulfilling of these human powers of apprehension, inquiry, and reflection are of the very essence of our emergence as natural structures in the mode of human being. Nothing that I have said is intended to negate that implicit fact of our existence. The important, critical issue I see in this quest for intelligibility, as I have hinted all along, is how one is to proceed in a way best calculated to diminish the risk of coalescing language and reality; that is, of presuming that our fallible forms and symbols speak for these realities with the precision and relevance we tend to assume or claim.

These observations lead me to comment on what I choose to call "sensibilities" of thought. Perhaps I can convey what I mean to imply here by mentioning names. Despite their differences in modes of thought, I have always felt that Leibniz, Hegel, and Hartshorne convey common sensibilities of thought in the sweep and daring of their modes of reflection. Similarly, I sense in Schleiermacher, William James, and Rudolf Otto common sensibilities of thought, both in the way they designate and design their areas of inquiry and in the kind of reticence they manifest in recognizing and limiting the bounds of inquiry. Now Immanuel Kant, Josiah Royce, and Alfred North Whitehead suggest a third differentia in sensibilities of thought. They evidence a kind of daring and freedom to encompass a wide range of inquiry, yet with checks and balances that appear to them to observe

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the proprieties and limitations of human inquiry. Strange as it may seem to some of you, I found Wieman and Tillich, in their earlier years, each in his own way, straddling what I have designated two and three, evidencing affinities with the lure of an unimaginable depth of reality and being, as expressed in Schleiermacher, Otto, and James; yet responding with their own critical reserve to a sweep of inquiry found in Kant, Royce, and Whitehead.

What attracted me to Wieman as a student of his in the 1920s was the fresh and discerning way in which he could point up and express this surplusage of experience which attends each lived event, and which gives hint of a depth of meaning for each event which our words do not articulate, but which our bodily events experience and from which they draw resources. This surplusage of experience, so it was indicated, contains within it resources which not only sustain and nurture the very act of living, but fructify and yield sensitive awareness to our acts of thinking when responsiveness to it is given. Wieman recoiled from all modes of mysticism with which he had any acquaintance, save this one that had informed and remarkably heightened, even illumined, his own sensitive outreach toward what, in fact, "did for us what we cannot do for ourselves." That the pursuit of this depth of meaning and surplusage of experience proved unmanageable as a mode of inquiry led Wieman to abandon what, for me, had seemed the most prescient dimension of his mode of thought. But it was to propel me toward a mode of inquiry into this horizon of sensitive awareness that has indeed been unmanageable, yet not altogether fruitless, in my judgment, for religious inquiry. People differ in their responses to ambiguity. Getting clear about something seems to some the most important objective in life. And of course it is in confronting certain demands and decisions. But in probing the depth of realities that form our very lives and speak to elemental depths of our creaturehood, or of our meaning as human beings, can we hope to move swiftly or even confidently simply by sharpening our tools of thought? Language itself is fallible insofar as it must employ forms and symbols fashioned out of our own limited human structures. Thus, it would seem, and has seemed to me through the years, that we must seek clarity, meaning, intelligibility, and surety with persistence and with all the critical facilities at our command. Yet we must be concerned to do so within the context of this depth of awareness, enduring its unmanageable character as we seek to receive its fructifying hints of judgment and wonder, rather than restricting inquiry to a line of investigation or reflection

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simply because it is manageable, and its results, when found, seem assured, even incontrovertible within the terms we had chosen to employ. I relate this because it has been one of the traumas of my own professional adventure in seeking both a basis and mode of inquiry relating to what can only be described as having an ultimate bearing upon our experiences as lived, or thought. And certainly what is implied here relates to the theme we are presently exploring.

Now if I can say this without misleading you in what I intend to point out, I would have to say that I have always found affinity with the spirit of inquiry exemplified in the work of Schleiermacher wherein he was content with setting our human sense of absolute dependence in juxtaposition with what he designated as ultimate and holy, rather than pursuing a vivid formulation of the Absolute in conceptual terms. In a similar way, I have found myself arrested by Rudolf Otto's various assertions, following somewhat in the path of inquiry pursued by Schleiermacher. One can discern in these remarks that I responded also to Tillich's reticence with regard to specifying or formulating a clear and defensible conception of God; though the sensibilities of an Ultimate Concern impelled him to reach out toward whatever can illumine or clarify what is answerable to such a concern. I say I find a kinship with the sensibilities of thought and inquiry in evidence here; but then I find it necessary to withdraw from conclusions toward which their numinous mode of theology inevitably tended. For the import of their appeal to the numinous was to suggest distinctions between spirit and nature with which I could find no accord. Here the numinous mode as suggested by the Platonic image of such otherness "casting its shadow" upon these natural scenes seemed to intrude. Tillich was to make this more vivid for me in differentiating between the work of grace as envisaged in relations between God and human beings, as against that which occurred within relations between human beings. The latter, he suggested, was in the nature of a token expression of grace. Here affinities between our styles and sensibilities of thought seemed to me to come to a stop, wherein a whole complex of queries intruded.

The reticence I spoke of earlier evidenced in Schleiermacher, Otto, and Tillich with regard to refraining from "specifying overmuch" what it is we encounter in this outreach as creatures was evident to a considerable degree in William James as well. Like Schleiermacher and Otto, he recoiled from centering down decisively upon what, in the nature of the case, seemed to elude sensitive, human reflection. Yet, he

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pursued many facets of the problem with no decisive results. But what he did for phenomenology and for process thought was to give to them an empirical ground for taking relations seriously as being experienceable and as being experienced. I do not know that I can convey to you my own sense of the importance of that insight as a philosophical judgment and the consequences it was to have in other disciplines. In my mind it is basic to process thought, and the whole era of contextual thinking wherein the dichotomy between self and object, self and world, which tended to isolate selfhood, was overcome. Whitehead's reformed principle of subjectivity, wherein the self simultaneously participates as a self and as an individual-in-community, stems from this Jamesian insight concerning the experiencing of relations. Similarly, it can be said that all contextual thinking in recent years from gestalt psychology onward stems from this seminal insight which James disclosed and developed in his volumes on *Psychology*.

James, though known chiefly for his pragmatism during his lifetime, was preeminently a radical empiricist. And this meant that, while he accepted the pragmatic method of conceptualizing that which was given in perception, his chief bent of mind and interest was that of probing possibilities of attending what he called the "more" in experience which eluded perceptual experience in most instances, but which, in any case, could be only meagerly assimilated to experiences of the most sensitive and perceptive individuals. And it certainly could not be contained within the conceptual forms of thought designed principally for practical ends or actions. This sensitivity to what Wieman was later to call "the surplusage of experience" appears in various subsequent philosophies such as that of William Ernest Hocking, and of course, the phenomenologists as well as early process thinkers. I have always looked upon William James as our most seminal American thinker, and his influence, though acquired rather late in my life to any serious degree or dimension, is possibly basic to my mode of religious reflection. This is singularly true with regard to the theme we are considering today.

Now if I may presume to speak for Joseph Sittler in this context, by way of pointing up some similarities and contrasts between us in our theological ruminations, I would say that the contours and sensibilities of his reflections impel him to pursue a mode of thought that, in its own way, conveys this elemental stance within a lived history; in his case, a history in which "the story of our lives" is symbolically rendered in their scriptural mode in the preaching and reflecting

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within the church's history. But Sittler as a biblicist and church theologian, as he chooses to characterize himself, has a roving eye for every sensitive or pertinent utterance in literature or the arts, or in the elemental happenings among folk who exemplify, vivify, or celebrate the thrust of this Christian legacy; hence the range of his outreach toward the living word within our own cultural foibles and follies, environmental or otherwise, as well as in our celebrative, secular acts. The appeal of his presentation of this living word within this history now lived is, not just in the sensuous and aesthetic delight of his rhetoric or humor, but, more significantly, in its aptness in addressing this elemental thrust of the issues as they loom within these lived experiences, provoked and invoked by a sense of the pertinence of the Christian story and witness to such issues. And this, in my judgment, is where the power and provocativeness of his many utterances emanate; notably, in addressing such themes as the care of the earth and the ever-present reality of grace.

Concerning "Nature" and "Grace," Sittler's words are not always my words; nor are my words his words. We speak out of different conceptual and rhetorical precedents; though I am confident out of continuities with an underlying legacy of faith and the feeling context which persistently presses for more adequacy of expressiveness than language can provide. What brings us within hearing distance of one another is our common convergence toward relating modes of discourse that are attentive simultaneously to the notions of nature and grace; not so much by way of distinguishing between them, as is more commonly done, but by way of correlating them, conceivably even, of interrelating them as dimensions of every act within these lived experiences. Sittler is not a "card-carrying" empiricist; yet, as I insinuated in my comments about him in *The Future of Empirical Theology*, there is an empirical cast to everything he utters. His tantalizing rhetoric arrests us because it is often, as it were, "gut" language straight out of these lived experiences that summon the affirmation of faith to acknowledge its carnal embodiment; not as a visitant, or undercover agent, designing to assume this lowly estate for pious ends, but as a self-conscious participant in creaturehood among the creatures of earth. The care of the earth comes naturally to him because he is fully aware of himself as a creature of its processes even as he acknowledges within the rhetoric of the Christian legacy that "our life is in God."

Something of vast import and efficacy is here in the reality of grace, however defined or located; of that I am confident. My reticence or

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reserve in speaking about it has more to do with the magnitude of its meaning and reality than with its identity. I am no less reticent in speaking about nature; though there are more visible guidelines here by way either of finding a route of inquiry or of reformulating the context of its meaning. My procedure in this paper will be in part historical, as a way of conveying the context in which I see the problem of understanding the themes Nature and Grace; and, in part, constructive in an effort to reconceive both terms, and the relation between them, as well as the spatial imagery in which each of them may be identified. Sittler has, in part, given sanction to such a procedure in his *Essays on Nature and Grace* wherein he writes: "What centuries of Christian reflection have felt and thought about God's grace is not to be repudiated. But the doctrine must be relocated for our time, and a fresh way must be found to propose the reality of grace to men who understand the cosmos as a closed system."¹ I would add, not only to those "who understand the cosmos as a closed system," but to those who presume to understand it as being open, yet, with their own conceptualizations, proceed to close it. But now that very commentary of mine might disclose some differences between us, at least in the objectives we pursue, and in the areas in which we pursue them. I speak of the conception of grace; Sittler's phrase is "the doctrine of grace." He, of course, speaks as a "church theologian," a designation he has claimed for himself repeatedly. I am not sure that the culture-at-large thinks much about "doctrines"; nor do I hear the word spoken very much in the churches, though in some of them one may. I, myself, would be content and principally concerned with reconceiving the "notion" or "conception" of grace, along with a corresponding fresh understanding of "nature," so as to instate, or possibly reinstate, these terms in a fresh way within the language of our day, common to church and culture alike. And I read this intention as well in all that Sittler has said and written in his concern with ecology and the care of the earth.

II

Now for some historical clarification: "The old theological rubric of "Nature and Grace," writes Sittler, "did not have to attend to

¹ Joseph Sittler, *Essays on Nature and Grace* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 1.

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Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Marx, Freud, or to the world-and-self-understanding which has been engendered by the knowledge and insight these names represent.”² They who knew these terms within the old theological rubric Sittler refers to as “men who understand the cosmos as a closed system.” And in a later essay on “Grace and a Sense for the World,” he makes trenchant observations about the way the modern world since the Enlightenment has seen the world, not as nature, but as history, and in this humanly focused vision has rendered nature but a playground or a vast deposit of resources for man’s exploitation and profit. From these remarks one may readily see that the notion of the cosmos as a closed system is not an ancient idea, but a very modern one as well; so modern, in fact, that it persists within our own generation to support and encourage some of our most pernicious habits and public policies as a human community.

The notion of the cosmos as a closed system began in the West with some impressive biblical credentials, leading to a theological understanding of Creation as being an event formulated and enacted in the interest of serving and saving man. The ultimate end of the initial act was to effect man’s redemption, and his temporary residence while this act was being effected was the planet Earth, which served as well as a nurturing, testing, and proving ground for man’s ultimate destiny. With that as a premise, making of nature simply temporary housing, one could hardly expect much zeal in the way of upkeep and “care of the earth.” But, as I read the story, the desultory effects of this anthropocentric view upon nature did not really occur during those ancient times. Nature, for many of those ancient communities, was a lovely setting for man’s livelihood, offering enjoyment and eliciting their appreciation. Artists portrayed it, musicians sang or composed symphonies and choral pieces about it, and poets eulogized it, while the rest of that ancient humanity simply partook of its quiet shade or cooling springs or took to the hill country and mountains for the vigorous challenge of its “steep ascents” and the lure of uninhabited spaces. The serious turn in Western history that transformed a quaint, mythological anthropocentric view of nature into consciously formulated philosophical designs and directives for exploiting nature for man’s ends first appears as a program for scientific conquest in the writings of the early seventeenth-century philosopher, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), whom John Dewey, in his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, heralded as “the great forerunner of the spirit of modern life.”

² Ibid.

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Anthropocentricity received here its programmatic launching, designating the sciences the vanguard of man's conquest of nature. The magnitude of nature's canopy as progressively designed and expanded through scientific discovery, following Copernicus and Galileo, even the relocating of earth—removing it from its prestigious position as being the center of the universe to that of being one among various planets revolving around the sun—had little effect upon this persistent, anthropocentric bias concerning nature. Man on any planet, in whatever location within cosmic space, remained the reason for nature's existence and all the creatures in it.

The closure of the cosmos among the ancients was not only in its anthropocentrism, its final end, but in its present character. Change could have no other connotation than decay, and the meaning of ultimacy could only be changelessness. The end of life was man's pilgrimage toward such assured changelessness in the blessedness of eternal life. (I am speaking, of course, of the Christian West.) But, one would have to say that such an ultimate goal of history did provide a sense of openness in the human venture toward an ultimate destiny. The precarious conditions under which the venture was undertaken, however, threatened as it was with possibilities of endless agony in the depths of the demonic, except as prescribed conditions of redemption rendered one exempt from such eternal agony, turned existence, itself, into an agonizing interim, as "the young Luther" was to acknowledge.

The closure of the cosmos in the sense in which it emerged in the Enlightenment and after, at least as far as the end of the nineteenth century, was twofold, if not threefold: the historicizing of the world, to which Sittler refers, was but a projection of the anthropocentric view initiated in ancient theology and attributed to Scripture; only now the motive was both thisworldly and otherworldly. Theologies and philosophies directed toward ultimate ends could still retain the redemptive theme as opening toward an ultimate destiny: the "Kingdom of Ends," as it was called. Only now ethics, rather than the cultic act of forgiveness and penance, became the means and basis of assurance. Within that theological perspective, the historicized world was closed to nature in a sense even more decisive than had been true in medieval times. But an even more decisive enclosure had already been in progress since the time of Descartes with the Cartesian dualism. For here, mind—as the precious organ mediating the divine reality, or God, to man—became sharply differentiated, even dissociated from

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nature, nature being a realm of mindless passion, impulse, and mechanism. In this turn of thought, anthropocentrism achieved new heights. And though it took time to register fully, it was to mean, not only that God had created the world for man, but that God, the Creator, could best be understood in the image of man. Thus, human personality assumed absolute significance as the summit of nature and history and the apex of divinity.

But the story from the seventeenth century on became more complex. Although Cartesian and neo-Platonic idealism were in ascendancy, the astounding accomplishments of Isaac Newton started a trend that was to gather momentum with each succeeding scientific discovery and invention. Darwin's *Origin of Species* was, in a way, but an acceleration of that trend, linking the whole of the history of man's creation to the Newtonian world order, or "world machine," then in dominance. The dissociation of Absolute Idealism and theological historicism from this ascendancy of natural science in the Newtonian image stemmed in part, at least, from this crucial linkage of man with nature, insofar as this linkage implied the formation and development of cerebral processes issuing in mind. For this had the effect of challenging the age-old anthropocentrism that had persisted within idealism and theological liberalism. The rising, appalling vision of nature as a world machine became at once entrancing beyond any other creation of God or man, and a decisive declaration, either in the spirit of a taunt or boast of despair, ending the long, Western dream of anthropocentrism. The famous lines "Man is a fly sitting upon a huge wheel, imagining that the wheel is turning for his benefit" set the contrast in bold, cynical relief. The positivistic philosophies of science were born of this vision of the world as a mindless, relentless machine. Idealisms and religious zeal, along with various forms of mysticism, struggled valiantly to counter this conception of the world and of its futile, if not tragic, implications for the nature and destiny of man. Others took it in stride as being a welcome release from the impassioned zeal to improve man or to impel him toward higher ends. One would have to say, however, that, despite the overwhelming consensus of scientific judgment which, by now, had become scriptural in prestige among sophisticated and critical minds, the legacy of the humanities and of humanistic dreams persisted, and even thrived as a heroic stance of defiance against what this vision of a world machine implied. In fact it seemed for a time that the utter senselessness of this purposeless universe precipitated and encouraged a mode of humanism and idealism that

cherished human goodness and grace for its own sake. Bertrand Russell gave voice to this plaintive plea in his famous essay, "A Free Man's Worship." After describing the world machine in the lines, "Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way," Russell depicts the life of man as "a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, towards a goal that few can hope to reach, and where none may tarry long." In so meaningless a universe, Russell cautions, "Let us not weigh in grudging scales their merits and demerits, but let us think only of their need—of the sorrows, the difficulties, perhaps the blindness, that make the misery of their lives; let us remember that they are fellow sufferers in the same darkness, actors in the same tragedy with ourselves."³

Much of the social idealism of the period, as evidenced in the work of Jane Addams and projected philosophically by John Dewey, was, I think, of a piece with this mood of compassion. And many, in the spirit of George Santayana's *Essays on Religion*, were to speak of this kind of goodness as primary religion, as contrasted with cosmic piety, associated with theological renderings of the motive for righteousness. I, myself, wrote a paper in the 1930s, under the title, "Primary Religion," setting forth that thesis.

Interestingly enough, the Modernists, notably Shailer Mathews, committed as they were to the findings of the sciences as resources informing theological inquiry, were not intimidated by the prevailing scientism expressed through positivism; for, while the evolutionary theory had been adopted as being of a piece with their theology, they readily turned it to idealizing ends. Mathews's way of stating this idealism was to speak of the natural forces as being "personality-producing activities," with the implication that man was the goal and fulfilment of the cosmic process. Humanists of the day were to echo this rationale of a revived anthropocentrism in speaking of "man as the planet come to consciousness." George Coe, a pioneer in the religious education movement and psychology of religion, gave the classic statement of that view. When taunted in a heated discussion over this issue with the question, "Astronomically, what do you think of man?" Coe replied, "Astronomically, man is the astronomer." So anthropocentrism revived itself even more sharpened in wit and eloquence.

In my judgment, neither nature nor grace was recognized for what they were in those days. Nature had certainly been caricatured and

³ *Mysticism and Logic* (New York: Longmans Green, 1917), pp. 46-47.

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maligned; grace, insofar as the educated and critical spirit of man was concerned, implied a sensibility of patient and inherent goodness that did not panic in the face of cosmic threats or the frustration of human hopes. If one were to scan the theological literature of the period extending through the twenties and thirties, one might well come to the judgment that well-informed people simply disregarded, or avoided speaking of, the tragic sense of life. It was in fact a mark of impropriety to talk about it, and of indecency to dwell upon it. There was a Spartan spirit manifested here that, in a way, trusted the ways of the universe despite its caricatures, or felt committed to the idealizing process in itself as being a work of grace in man impelling him toward his higher destiny. John Dewey, in *A Common Faith*, deigned to speak of this idealizing process in man and in the human community as "God."

III

The break with that era on this theme, Nature and Grace, within our own time is decisive, even dramatic. What has followed from discoveries in modern physics and in related sciences, and to a degree assimilated by disciplines outside the sciences, has radically altered our conception of nature. The neat conception of nature as a world order which had persisted in the West since the time of Newton and which had given credibility to positivism from the early years of the nineteenth century onward has exploded like a rocket in midair. Within the new vision of science, the terms "natural order" have seemed to loom as a figment of scientific imagination. Actually, the word "order" in the context of world order or cosmic order, implying the premise that nature is uniform, was not initiated by modern science, according to George Herbert Mead, but, as a postulate, was taken over from Christian theology.⁴ The sciences, to be sure, were to employ the term with rigor and demonstrable assurance following Newton to the point of reconceiving Nature as a world machine. The scientific community still finds the notion of order to be essential to their mode of inquiry. Whitehead, in one of his earlier works, *The Principle of Relativity* (1922), noted that the assumption of order is indispensable to scientific inquiry; yet, he warned against employing that assumption in constructing a metaphysics or religious philosophy, except as a working vision of

⁴ George Herbert Mead, *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Merrit H. Moore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), p. 7.

reality. Einstein was to make the same point in suggesting that the notion of order is essential to scientific inquiry, but in employing it, one is doing so as an act of faith.

The wisdom of such sensitive inquirers readily fades or is compromised by less sensitive inquirers eager to get on with the job of inquiry and by the public response to their successes; hence, in recent years, aided and abetted by miraculous results in projecting scientific formulae, we have tended to give way to a new scientism as a public mind. Yet the fact remains, as scientists themselves have said, that numerous formulae are projected. Many fail, but those that result in startling and fruitful consequences lead to assumptions comparable to what persisted during the era of Newtonian science. It is this discrepancy between the disciplined and the public reading of the work of the sciences that has given rise to present ambiguities in designating the meaning of Nature. Is it to be equated with the accumulative findings of the sciences as a sphere of workable knowledge about natural forces? Or is it to be reserved as an all-embracing term, employing not only what is clearly known and used in scientific and technological projects, but also what presumably is apprehended as being potentially explorable, yet elusive in responding to direct inquiry, conceivably beyond inquiry?

If it is true that what results from scientific investigation is but an inkling of the creative process, much of which eludes inquiry, and that the findings of laboratory experimentation can therefore no longer be viewed as "picture models" of the universe in the Newtonian sense, but as "disclosure models," to use Ian Ramsey's terms, then we have an expanded view of Nature which is coterminous with the notion of Reality embracing all that is existing and prescient of becoming in the Creative Passage. That is a context exhibiting levels or dimensions of evolvment, of structural character, and dynamic relations. It is literally a house of many mansions, of many modes of lived experience and of entities incipiently living, or exhibiting intentionality.

Nature within this revised, modern view would seem to be a plenitude of concrete events. And though, as explored and disclosed to the sciences for laboratory purposes, it will be viewed, as Whitehead stated in *The Concept of Nature* (1920), "as that which we observe in perception through the senses," its inclusive meaning, as conveyed in the new vision of science, becomes much more. For the limited range of inquiry to which scientists must confine their inquiry cannot attend to the penumbra of events which exceeds such modes of inquiry. The effort

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to see or to imagine the notion of nature beyond this limited laboratory perspective then becomes an adventure of ideas in the manner in which Whitehead projected it, in which an organismic view of nature is set forth as a cosmology, identifying each concrete event in terms of its distinctive actualities, yet presuming its relevance to every other individuated event. Nature in this wider context is made coterminous with reality itself; that is, with all there is, bearing upon the actualities now existing, and as becoming.

Within that frame of reference, all existent events occur within the context of the Creative Passage, which is Nature in this more inclusive sense. Thus, insofar as the notion of Grace is to be viewed as a reality of goodness, not our own, which “does for us what we cannot do for ourselves,” it is conceivable as a surplusage of goodness arising from within the relational ground in which each individuated event or life is cast. In the organismic view, Grace is not an intrusion from without the plenum of concrete events that are becoming, but a resource of appreciative concern and redemptive love emanating from relationships within the context of the lived experience; a gift unearned, unanticipated, a work of wonder and surprise that yields its own efficacy and effect. Since, in this process imagery, concrete events comprise the whole of actuality within the Creative Passage, including God, the Grace of relationships is by no means a secondary mode of grace, or a human derivative or token of divine grace. It is the efficacy of tenderness and concern conveying, as it were, the essence of the holy in relationships, “which can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.”

Within that idiom, there is no bifurcating of the creative or redemptive ground into noumenal and phenomenal acts or presence. The good-not-our-own simultaneously transcends our individuated structure, even as every individuated event prehends every other individuated event with varying degrees of relevance. Given this view of Nature, then, as the Plenum of being as becoming within the Creative Passage, and of Grace as an efficacy of tenderness and redemptive love within relationships, issuing from the relational ground that defines our life in God in relation with every other concrete event, the answer to our query, conceptually, must be that Grace *is* a dimension of the relational ground within Nature.

IV

This way of speaking about Nature and Grace opens before us a range of puzzling questions bearing upon our anthropocentric stance and the

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current concern with ecology for which I find no ready answers, or even fruitful ways of inquiring into them. As early as 1933 I struggled with this issue,⁵ and, at that time seemed more readily able to point up a way of overcoming our anthropocentrism, which seemed to me even then to be a “fallacy of misplaced” valuation. The issue, as it posed itself to me then, was that of becoming “at home in the universe,” as I worded it, not as plunderers and exploiters of nature’s resources, but as creatures of earth, born of its processes, nurtured and sustained by the subtle and intricate interchange as humanly evolved organisms within this enveloping atmosphere. Problems of pollution or desiccation, or admonitions relating to the care of the earth as they pertain to human survival, were not in focus then. It was more in the spirit of being a child of earth, in the sense of realizing and experiencing our creatural identity, that I wrote and thought. I had wearied of this anthropocentrism with its spirit of enterprise and conquest. And I cringed at the thought of the Christian legacy setting its seal of approval upon it, either through glib, biblical utterances, or through intricate arguments offered by theologians whose views of man and creation hardly entitled them to be called a child of earth. And I hoped that God might find their views offensive, too.

I blush a bit, reflecting upon those naïve years of eager inquiry; for I suppose I was, in my way, at one with the flower children of recent years, though we did not have so charming a title to give ourselves. We called ourselves “neonaturalists,” of all things.

Now this lapse into romantic reminiscences is not an act. If it is, it is an act of confession that what was bestirring in me then was a legitimate discontent with the stereotypes of our anthropocentrism, whether ancient or modern, Christian or American; and that discontent has not been relieved with the years. I rally to the call to fight pollution, and to the care of the earth, and to every cry of protest against the mechanizing processes that seem destined to obliterate our sense of humanness. But that is where the rub comes again. Is it really “the care of the earth” that has evoked such a general response to this appeal, or is it that same old, deeply laid anthropocentrism, now in panic? Without stretching the imagination unduly, I think one can recognize that, just as our Judaic-Christian anthropocentrism is of a piece with modern man’s exploitation of Nature, so the cry we are

⁵ Bernard E. Meland, “Kinsmen of the Wild,” *Sewanee Review* 41 (1933): 443–53; “At Home in the Universe,” *Modern Man’s Worship* (New York: Harpers, 1934), pp. 144–58.

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hearing today against such disregard of nature, itself, calling for the care of the earth and a persistent fight against pollution and other human obscenities against nature is, in its own way, though only in part, but a reechoing and reasserting of that ancient-modern stance. Only now it is strident with the note of anguish, lest man be too late in recognizing the judgment of Nature, itself, upon the folly of this man-centered view of the Creative Process.

Conceivably man, the heir of millions of years of subtle and silent attainment in the evolution of the earth's life alone, not to mention galaxies upon galaxies in outer space, stands forth as its most dissolute and disoriented inhabitant. The magnitude of men's folly in relating themselves to their natural environment can be matched only by their folly in relating themselves to each other, not to speak of their response to other creatures of the earth. Whether we in the West have been peculiarly demonic in this regard is difficult to judge. There is considerable weight of historical evidence to suggest that such a judgment could be made, and is, in fact, being made by other cultures, as was in evidence at the recent United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm. The weight of judgment, if it is to be interpreted as judgment, rests heavily upon our cultural identity, and upon the legacy of faith and understanding that has shaped our identity and has authorized our course.

Thus, in speaking of Grace as a dimension within Nature, we may be opening another Pandora's box. For, in so reconceiving Nature and Grace within the imagery of the new vision of science and the philosophy of organism consonant with it, many of the clichés about the cruelties of nature, in the tooth-and-claw version, tend to be outmoded, or, at best, rendered half-truths. To be sure, there is ruthlessness in nature, raw use of power and energy to attain creatural ends. And there seem to be modes of rationale for it, relating to survival or some compensatory principle of balance in nature. Cruelty, to be sure, persists at all levels of creaturehood; yet man, up to now, appears to have attained the summit of cruelty, both in act and in demonic designs.

To be sure, relationships among creatures, all creatures, tend to magnify and to extend the efficacy and opportunity of such evil. And this appears to be a stubborn fact of evolvment and fulfillment among all species. Yet, what is often obscured, or simply missed, is the fact that there are subtle, tender occurrences in the behaviors of creatures at all levels. And they attend, or often counterbalance, more assertive efforts. On closer examination it might be revealed that among the

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various species, the funded reserve of sensitivity and gentleness among them assumes proportions of persuasion and restraint amounting to a resource of efficacy and strength which is basic to survival itself. This "gentle might," as it has been called, is, of course, integral to the growth process itself, and the accumulative, persistent force of such subtle, gentle occurrences can become massive in effect.

I would argue that the tenderness of life within relationships, at all levels of creaturehood, provides the minimal margin of grace effecting a creatively redemptive energy and lure sufficient to sustain this plenum of being as becoming. This margin of grace, of goodness that is simultaneously creative and redemptive beyond all tendencies and contrivances to defeat life, must be acknowledged to be a source of wonderment, inviting further inquiry into the nature of Nature and its resources of Grace. It is, in fact, the elemental theological problem: Whence comes this goodness that is as a gift that is given to these relationships that hold us in existence? To say that it is a dimension of efficacy inherent within the creative matrix itself, persistent beyond all opposing energies expended to expunge its recreative lure is a viable judgment. And this is the judgment I have come to, acknowledging this surprise of redemptive good to be inherent within the Creative Passage that has formed the stars, their planets, and all the creatures in them. And if, as has been reported in the Judaic-Christian legacy, "the New Creation" that we celebrate in litany and song is a summit view in concrete act of the dimension of Grace within Nature, though but subtly and intermittently visible among the earth's creatures, there is a recognizable degree of coherence between that legacy of faith and the testament of fact inherent in the processes of Nature reconceived. That efficacy of grace, prescient within relationships at all levels of evolution, among all creatures, must be designated the promise of hope and the basis of trust among all creatures.