

NATURE, HISTORY AND SPIRIT:
A THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION ON NATURE, HISTORY AND SPIRIT IN TRIALOGUE
AMONG WESTERN SECULARISM, HINDU SPIRITUALISM AND
CHRISTIAN TRINITARIAN FAITH

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INTRODUCTION

It is evident today that both eastern and western nations recognize that modern means of communication, transportation, progress in technology, and the inter-mingling of different peoples have created a "global village". This increasing awareness of space consciousness has stimulated a new dimension in our understanding of space and time, or in other words, in our understanding of the nature and history of the universe. This has led us to believe that there is a closer relationship between nature and history than previously thought. We propose to show that the "spirit" is the key which relates nature and history and thereby offers a unified concept of reality which integrates eastern and western thought.

Aim and Purpose

Having the basic aim of presenting a unified interpretation of reality in the light of the Christian understanding of the Trinity, this study undertakes to investigate nature, history and spirit as interpreted by the western Christian theologians, Tillich and Teilhard, and the Hindu philosophers, Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo, in the context of their own respective cultural, historical, philosophical, and religious backgrounds with the hope that a realistic and fruitful dialogue can ensue. This dissertation has four main purposes.

1. Prologue. It aims at providing a general outline of the idea of nature and history in western and eastern "Geistesgeschichte" as prologue for the study.

2. Monologue. It aims at presenting the concepts of nature and history as interpreted through the four thinkers.

3. Dialogue. It seeks to establish a dialogue between the western Christian theologians and the eastern Hindu philosophers on the ideas of nature and history where spirit is seen as the key for relating and integrating nature and history in both systems.

4. Trialogue. It aims at presenting a trialogue on the conceptions of nature, history, and spirit between western secularism, Hindu spiritualism, and Christian trinitarian faith. Consequently, it shows the Holy Spirit as interpreted in the dogma of Trinity both relates nature and history and also transcends nature and history in a higher vision of reality. Moreover, we do not intend to propound a new idea of Trinity but to refer to the Trinity as the rule of faith. This means that we shall not engage in elaborate historical and/or philosophical discussions of the dogma of the Trinity. We shall rather be employing what we consider to be the simple common faith of the Christian community in the Triune God--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the thesis of this dissertation is that the Holy Spirit as interpreted within the dogma of the Trinity is the One, who not only relates and integrates but also transcends and transforms nature and history. This ecumenical vision of reality based upon the Christian theological perspective can provide a basis for unifying both nature and history in both eastern and western modes of thought.

Scope and Sources

The scope of this dissertation is a Christian theological vision of reality, which encompasses nature, history, and spirit. It presents a unified perspective of reality, as reflected and revealed in the principle

of the dogma of the Trinity.

The theme of this dissertation is very intricate and has a wide range of application. Certainly it needs careful analysis with concentrated elaboration and argumentation. We restrict the treatment of our theme, however, by dealing with only two of the appropriate representatives of the West and two thinkers from the East, whom we consider to be adequate representatives of their respective cultures and at the same time are pertinent to the theme of our dissertation. On the western side we have selected Tillich and Teilhard; from the eastern side we have chosen Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo.

Paul Tillich's¹ works defy summary, since very few areas of contemporary culture are absent from his vision. It is this many faceted character of his writings that makes subsequent theologians and thinkers indebted to him.

Tillich (1886-1965), throughout his career both in Germany and the United States, tried vigorously to formulate a systematic theological perspective based upon the union of religion and culture. To him "the substance of culture is religion and the form of religion is culture."² Every religious act in the most intimate movement of the human soul is for Tillich culturally formed.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) a French palaeontologist and an ardent Jesuit priest, studied geology, natural sciences, and theology in France. He spent most of his life in palaeontological research work

¹For autobiographical details refer to Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, eds., The Theology of Paul Tillich (New York: Macmillan Company, 1952), pp. 3-21.

²Paul Tillich, The Interpretation of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 50.

mainly in China as well as in Asia, Africa and America. He had a passionate love towards God and the world. This passion permeated through his thought where he forcefully tried to present a synthetic vision of reality which related natural science and theology.³

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) taught philosophy in most of the well-known Indian universities and also was professor of comparative religion in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. He has written several works on the religions, philosophies, politics, and cultures of the East and West. Throughout his life, he passionately advocated a "religion of the spirit" which integrated eastern religions and western philosophies.⁴

Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950) after his studies in England, was intensely involved in the national freedom movement in India. But after 1910, he left politics and spent the next forty years in the small town of Pondicherry in south India, practicing yoga and writing a number of works on integral yoga. His major work on The Life Divine presents a synthetic vision of reality which relates nature and history on the basis of integral yoga.⁵

For the sources of our study we depend mostly on the original writings of the four thinkers. Apart from the original writings, we shall refer to major secondary sources for deeper and fuller understanding of

³Refer to Claude Guenot, Teilhard de Chardin, trans. Vincent Calim-ore (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965); and Robert Speaight, The Life of Teilhard de Chardin (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

⁴Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, My Search for Truth (Agra: Shiva Lal Agarwala & Co., 1946).

⁵Prema Nandakumar, Sri.Aurobindo (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1972).

the original sources.

Methodology and Relevance

In order to have a clearer understanding of the theme, "Nature, history and spirit", we shall provide an historical survey of the ideas of nature and history from the classical period through the modern period in the "Geistesgeschichte" of the West and East as a prologue. In the light of this background, we shall seek to understand and evaluate the interpretation of the concepts of nature, history, and spirit in the systems of the four thinkers.

There are three elements in the methodology of this study. The first is analytical, the second is synthetic, and the third is transcendental.

Analytical Approach

We shall carefully analyze the thought of each of our four philosopher-theologians on nature, history, and spirit within their own cultural and conceptual frameworks.

Synthetic Approach

The second element is synthetic. Here the idea of spirit will be introduced and dealt with as the link which relates nature and history. An attempt will be made to bring Tillich into dialogue with Radhakrishnan and to bring Teilhard into dialogue with Aurobindo. We shall seek to show how these four thinkers relate nature and history through the concept of spirit. Tillich proposes to relate nature and history with spirit by correlating religion and culture. A similar attempt has been made by Teilhard in his synthetic vision of natural science with religion.

Radhakrishnan strives for the 'Fellowship in Spirit' which integrates western philosophy with eastern religions. Aurobindo visualizes a spiritual fellowship of gnostic beings in and through the evolution of the divine spirit. All these four thinkers incline towards a synthesis of nature and history.

Transcendental Approach

Initially, we shall analyze the concept of nature and history in the systems of the four thinkers. But because nature and history are not dualistic, we shall show in the second place how these two concepts are related in and with the concept of spirit which is the synthesizing element unifying them. As analysis should not fall into dualism, so also should synthesis not fall into the pit of syncretism. Spirit does relate nature and history, but at the same time, spirit in the light of the Christian idea of trinity also transcends and transforms them.

This transcendental, triological approach, on the one hand, carefully maintains the unique and distinctive character of nature and history but, on the other hand, it negates any attempt to identify or to mystify nature and history with spirit. While keeping the dialectical relation between nature and history, this approach attempts to relate and transcend both nature and history in spirit by way of the Christian doctrine of Trinity. It thereby unites East and the West in a very positive sense. In Indian terms this methodology accepts neither the monistic view, Eshwaraism, nor the dualistic view, Dvaitism. It positively approves a unity based on the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and not in the sense of the Hindu 'saccidananda' or the western triadic principle of impersonal reality in nature, history, and spirit. The dialogue is between western secularism, Hindu spiritualism, and Christian trinitarian faith.

Relevance

What are the crucial and relevant problems of today that justify undertaking such a study for a dissertation? Let us enumerate them.

East and West

There is a growing awareness among people of different nations of the oneness of the world and the unity of all mankind. In spite of the tragic misery and the negative consequences of the annihilation of the two brutal world wars in this century, all nations have intensely felt the essential need and existential necessity of unity, constructive cooperation, and co-ordination in the face of the imminent threat of nuclear war.

Secularism and Spiritualism

Secularism is one of the acute problems of the modern world. Since the industrial revolution the growing awareness of economic, social, commercial and political problems has increased to involve the whole of humanity. Modern man in the secular environment of both the western industrialized and developed nations and of the eastern developing countries, is becoming more and more characterized by a one dimensional view of life.

Mircea Eliade comments about the situation of such a modern man thusly:

The non-religious man refuses transcendence, accepts the relativity of 'reality' and may even come to doubt the meaning of existence. . . . Modern non-religious man assume a new existential situation; he regards himself solely as the subject and agent of history, and he refuses to appeal to transcendence. In other words, he accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in various historical situations. Man makes himself and he only makes himself completely as he desacralizes himself, and the world.⁶

⁶Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 203. †

Here the distinction between secularity and secularism, so also between spirituality and spiritualism must be noted. Theologians as Gogarten, Cox, and Gilkey have adequately shown the negative consequences and the dangers of secularism and spiritualism, as ends in themselves. In this context of the growing trend toward a desacralized world, we see the problem of how to relate secularity and spirituality with the active life of the modern world. Conscientious leaders and thinkers are deeply concerned as to how to overcome the problems of secularism in the West and the problems of spiritualism in the East.

Technology and Technocracy

This is the age of technology. Technological advance in every field of research has been greatly improved, a fact which must be accepted and appreciated. Anyone from the East who visits the developed western countries, is astonished by the enormous advance, for example, in the fields of nuclear energy, electronics, computer systems. But at the same time, one notes also the innumerable related problems caused by technology, especially with regard to ecology. These problems demand our attention, care and concern today.⁷

Through technology we have attained the ability to know the laws of nature and the skill to use them. But we are approaching the limit of the earth's capacity to produce through the manipulation of nature. Modern man not only uses nature but he abuses nature and its resources for his own selfish, personal, and national interests in order to dominate the economical and commercial world. Today, the nations which control technology, control the world economy, usually for their own national and political self-interests. This self-centered attitude furthers and increases the

⁷Victor Ferkiss, The Future of Technological Civilization (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974), pp. 3-7.

continued imbalance of exported and imported goods between countries. This brings inflation in prices, unemployment, and the increase of prices of essential commodities in the world market. Unfortunately, national pride and self-interests dictate the socio-economic needs in the world today.

Matter and Spirit

For centuries we have been under the impression that matter and spirit are two separate and distinct entities. The notion of body and soul in the dualistic hellenistic sense also crept into the idea of matter and spirit. But through the recent discoveries in the field of atomic physics, eminent scholars and scientists have shown valid evidence of the fact that matter and spirit are closely related and united through energy. This discovery has a tremendous impact toward how one relates nature and spirit.

Nature and History

It has been presupposed for a very long time that nature and history as well are different, distinct, and divided as two completely unrelated realities. One assumed that nature had no history and that history was indifferent to nature because as history belonged only to beings with intelligent will and power of action. But through the idea of evolution and the deeper and wider understanding of the awareness of space and time in modern science, modern men have found that there is a clear relation between nature and history. Nature and history are being considered today, even in the East, not as realities thrown only to blind forces of Karma or to the natural laws of necessity, but as interdependent.

Spirit and Nature

Spirit is not antagonistic to nature nor foreign to nature. Spirit is related to nature as energy which is both within nature and outside

nature. Throughout the ages we often find trends both in western and eastern cultural history to either rationalize the spirit or to spiritualize the spirit in such a manner that a healthy relation between nature and spirit is disrupted. But in fact, spirit permeates throughout matter, mind, and soul and has the capability to transcend both nature and history.

History and Spirit

Nor is history independent of the working of the spirit. Spirit is alive in and through even beyond history and nature. Spirit is at the same time independent of history and nature and interdependent between history and nature. Spirit in reality is not pan-logical but is pan-entheistic. The spirit is yet paralogical and transcendental in its working. Further, it is both personal and inter-personal. Spirit is not only related with nature and history but ultimately, it is also united with God, who is spirit.

Furthermore, there are additional problems associated with the theme of nature, history, and spirit related to ethical, philosophical, scientific, sociological, economical, and religious issues. Therefore, these problems, which are both particular and universal, personal and social, religious and theological, scientific and philosophical, can be approached only when we deal with the theme of our present study on nature, history, and spirit in its widest vision, deepest insight, and in the direction of a Christian faith perspective.

This concludes our introduction to the dissertation. Now we shall proceed to present in the first chapter of our study a general outline of the idea of nature and history in both western and eastern thought, as prologue for our further investigation.