

Chapter 31

A sociological
perspective on
natural theology

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In discussing natural theology, I am not assuming that there is something essentially different between revealed and natural religion. That distinction is essentially political or theological: political when it is used to allow a particular religious tradition to trump or supersede another form of religion; theological when a religious elite seeks to justify proselytizing a subordinate population or to discredit the beliefs of the laity. The political use of revelation to trump natural religion is familiar enough. People on the periphery of a social system may employ apocalyptic or millennial beliefs to condemn the political or cultural centre, or an elite may use apocalypticism to colonize and suppress the faith of a vulnerable population. An elitist, ideological interest in undermining the soul's sense of its own local, unique, particular agency, even while promising it a recovery of its spiritual agency, is revealed in the strategy of Dutch theologians and missionaries in Indonesia, who, according to the anthropologist Webb Keane, argued that 'only when humans realize the agency that is proper to them, wresting it from the false agents to which they had imputed it, will the many local histories flow into a universal one' (Keane 2007 : 145). Similarly, anthropological treatments of indigenous religiosity may

also subordinate or compare them to imported or more global systems of belief and practice, as if the indigenous is primarily a preparation for or inferior / the universal: natural, /to as opposed to revealed.

I argue here that to understand natural theology we have to grasp what Freud referred to as a 'pre-animist' form of religiosity, one that was widespread long before spirits became separate beings which inhabited rocks and trees as well as people, and even longer before spirits became gods with their own character, will, and divinity. Even to call this a religion is a bit anachronistic; rather it is a form of the sacred in which being itself is considered and felt to be miraculous. Belief in the sacred does not necessarily need to have a god who has a particular monopoly on being or who is prototypically Being itself, in relation to whom mortals have only a contingent and derived being that can only be known and experienced as a perennial becoming. In this pre-animist state, the cosmos itself is so permeated with spirit that simply to be is to participate in the miraculous.

That is, natural religion may not really be a religion, if by that term we have in mind a well-developed set of beliefs and practices institutionalized in a specific social context controlled by practitioners, specialists, or virtuosos. Certainly it may not be a religion if we think of religion as necessarily implying a more or less accessible divinity whose very being is somehow distinct from the cosmos, or who dwells in a heaven that is wholly uncoupled from the earth. Even if a natural religion has a god or gods, they may not be the same from one valley or mountaintop to the next. The sacred will inhere in a family of forms that may transcend geographic differences, but the forms may not mean the same thing on every mountain or in every valley. That is, the sacred may inhere in spaces such as Neolithic henges or tombs, or in the basements of Stone Age houses where the bones of the recently deceased share

or take the place of the anonymous bones of those long dead, but an anthropologist would be hard put to it to find a religion in the local culture rather than the sacred in a variety of similar but distinct forms, such as stones shaped by the passage of water and time. A Neolithic stone cupped and shaped to hold water may be sacred, just as a Christian baptismal font hollowed out to hold water may be sacred, but the sacred, in the latter case, has been given sanctuary and supervision by a religious system, whereas a Neolithic stone cupped to hold water, blood, or other libations may be simply sacred.

The Time and the Place of the Sacred

For lack of a better starting point, I will consider the sacred as a time and place in which individuals or groups, communities, or even whole societies encounter, if only in symbolic gestures and objects, the crises of death, terror, and the passage of time. Towards the end of this chapter we will return in more detail to the work of a sixth-century Celtic monk and poet, Dallan, who composed a poem in honor of St Columba: Amra Choluimb Chille. In Columba his followers had found a model to follow whose light blazed again after death, because the saint had escaped the 'second death' in which the soul is confined to hell. It was Columba who:

would do no fast which was not the Lord's law,
that he might not die an eternal death.

Living his name, living his soul. [Clancy and Markus 1995 :111]

Now his still living soul, immune to the second death:

will protect us in Sion.

He will urge me past torments.

May it be easily dark defects go from me.

He will come to me without delay [115]

Now the poet has an advocate and a powerful spiritual ally whose presence and aid will guard Dallan himself from the death of the soul. Despite death, then, and despite the evil that seeks the death of the soul, no follower of Columba is expendable; their being matters as though by virtue of Columba's embodiment of being itself. Note that their universe is not 'enchanted' in Max Weber's sense of the term. It is not mundane or transparent until and unless it is somehow invaded by something from the outside; there is no inside and outside. Similarly there is no sense that in embodying such a cosmic wisdom as Columba's, his followers may be divinizing themselves; there is no divinity whose being, like that of the sun, does not permeate all beings and give them life. The metaphors of being proliferate to include all that is elemental being, and therefore all beings matter ultimately.

Columba, we learn from Dallan, was steeped in the Wisdom tradition. Referring to a passage from the Wisdom of Solomon (7:22-4), John Collins notes that:

Wisdom is so embedded in the universe that it can be expressed in physical terms ' manifold, subtile, mobile, clear, unpolluted,' pervading all things by reason of her pureness . . . In 8.1 Wisdom is quite explicitly the principle or order, which 'reaches mightily from end to end and orders all things well.' [Collins 1977: 125]

In such a universe, I would add, one does not have to worry about running out of time. If Wisdom is the source of universal order and indeed 'orders all things well', whatever happens is an expression of Wisdom itself. Becoming is an unfolding and elaboration of being.

In natural religion more generally, I would argue, and specifically in the Wisdom tradition, the world of everyday life is sacred precisely because it is embedded in a cosmos oriented towards the salvation of the soul, and in that cosmic space the soul finds not only its own embodiment but the transfiguration of time itself. There are voices in the Wisdom tradition that proclaim they have been liberated not only from preoccupation and apprehension with time but from the need to make the most of time itself. Thus to be out of time was a sign of blessedness, as it is for the souls whom the fourteenth-century Dante envisages, at the end of their tour of duty in Purgatory, as neither seeking to undo or make up for the past or to speed their passage into heaven. Because they have become masters of their own souls, they do not mind waiting. Dallan proclaimed: 'I have no time!' Rather than being a shout of despair, his exclamation about having no time was an ode to his joy at having, in the vast ranges of his poem, reflected the vastness of the cosmos and of the heavenly wisdom that was embedded and incarnated in Columba himself. It was as if time had been diffused and expanded into the heavens, where it becomes time without end, indeed eternity. As we shall see, such timelessness was essential both to human nature and its destiny.

Even in the poetry attributed to Columba himself, however, we find the attempt of revelation to trump natural religion. Columba imagined that there was a place in the depths of the earth for those who had been born out of due time and who had therefore died before they could have received the blessings of the advent of Christ. Thus there is a place in the cosmos where souls may not be animated by the cosmic breath, the Wisdom, that gives life to, and constitutes the being of, all souls. Some beings, the blessed recipients of revelation, therefore matter more than others; and some beings exist outside the reach of cosmic sympathy and can run out of time. By the time the Wisdom tradition reached the Celtic periphery via Rome, revelation has begun to trump whatever form of

the sacred could be found in natural religion.

Even in Rome, however, the sacred still had a life of its own apart from religious institutions. Indeed, the pre-animist view of the soul and of the cosmos survived in Stoicism's 'concept of cosmic breath or "pneuma" [which is] the physical substrate that pervades the cosmos through and through and that holds it together' (Salles 2009 : 8). It is a spiritual form of matter, not matter in the modern sense of the word. Therefore 'the affections experienced by one body may be transmitted, either directly or indirectly, to all the other bodies and to the cosmos as a whole. This takes us to the Stoic doctrine of cosmic sympathy' (8-9). Everyone and everything is related to every other one and every other thing through this cosmic breath, which is the breath of God. Therefore to seek to immunize or insulate oneself from the profound effects of other beings is to lose one's connection with and access to this cosmic breath; it is to die spiritually. That is because 'in the Stoic cosmic chain of causes every body is connected to all the others by breath without, however, acting upon all of them directly' (9). Thus the human being is vulnerable in its core to the presence and essence of other beings, and therefore also to their absence, to their vitality, and to their joy, but also to their suffering and to their death. Our innermost beings thus are subject to being acted upon, and by our very nature we are open to change and fated for transformation. Any attempt to resist change, to live in a closed circle of personal reflection, to become monolithic in one's own being, to avoid the delight of intense mutual connection or the anguish of loss, is therefore fundamentally a denial of the miracle of one's own being and of human nature.

A Radical Vulnerability

At the core of the sacred, then, I would expect to find an experience in which the terrors of non-being are partially assuaged, at least for a while, by a sense of being profoundly

coupled with the cosmos. A sense of connection to the cosmos, and to other souls, however, comes at a price: a radical vulnerability to the spirits, to the very beings, of others.

Part of that vulnerability leads to the terror of being hurt by their indifference or by their malice, their greed or their disloyalty. However, some of that terror is caused by the disappearance

and the absence of the one who seemed to have a grip on being and who embodied cosmic sympathy. Even Columba was known to have made extraordinary efforts to manage the aspects of the psyche that could pose harm to others and thus sought to minimize their vulnerability.

On the other hand, the same vulnerability had a passive side; in his absence and at his death individuals could lose their primal connection to the cosmos. Columba died and thus abandoned those who relied on him for a sense of their being. Thus a profound sense of being coupled with and at home in the cosmos, along with a sense that one's connection with being itself is tenuous and temporary, underlies a vulnerability to terror at the prospect of losing one's own being in the absence of others, and at their death. One's sense of one's own being in the world, then, was that one is dependent on presences that were fleeting, at best, and may have been burdensome, ominous, or dangerous. As Seneca would have it, only a strong connection with a person whose 'innate ability' has given him a name, like Cicero or Vergil's, which will be written in 'the book of Time' will guarantee that one endures past death in the memory of men; fortune and position will never guarantee this, but only such an enduring connection with the greatest of men (Seneca 1917 : 145). It is to manage this constellation of death, terror, and time that the sacred offered companionship and practices, danger and protection.

It is hard to know whether such cultural innovation causes or reflects, conceals or reveals the experience of existential terror. Of all the ways that societies have sought to take comfort in and through nature, perhaps the most successful has been the attempt to

couple the earth and its periods of light and darkness, calm and storm, with the heavens. Some have coupled the fate of the earth, and its alternating periods of darkness and light, with the heavens by using rocks that glow in the after-light of the setting sun, or by channelling the sun's rays on the longest night of the year into the depths of a cave or tomb. Still others sensed that the passage of time is somehow embedded in and transcended by the universe itself. If so, we may well understand why they sought the miracle of being in the person of extraordinary souls, whose presence was essential to life itself but whose deaths reopened the trauma of time itself, with all its suggestions that every soul is faced with non-being and darkness, absence and helplessness. We shall spend some time with a poetic elegy written in honor of St Columba, as one who had lived and died for others less endowed than he with the wisdom that links the soul with the cosmos. But even Columba had to undergo spiritual rigours in order to link the innermost thoughts of the heart with the divine soul animating the universe. So did the Stoics. Although natural religion, whether Stoic or in earlier forms of the Wisdom tradition, places human being within the context of a miraculous cosmos, even there the return of the sun and of life-giving light is as much an article of faith as of sight; extraordinary presences give life, but they too depart after having had to face their own inner darkness. The connection with superior or supernatural being is tenuous and impermanent; time is therefore always a problem, even to a soul in spiritual synchrony with the movements of the heavens. Although natural religion places being itself within the context of a miraculous cosmos, periods of darkness connote the passage of time. That is why, in a universe permeated with divinity, the return of the sun and of life-giving light is an article of faith rather than of sight. Indeed, to stop the passage of time might therefore as well bring an eternal night as an endless day.

The Dread of Time

Nonetheless, not even the Wisdom tradition, in its Stoic, early Christian, or Celtic varieties was sufficient to allay the anxieties or the terrors posed by the prospect of non-being and expressed in apprehension over the passage of time. The dread of time runs deeper in the human psyche than perhaps we know. Neolithic peoples placed rocks, scalloped by time, over tombs. These monuments may well signify that these Neolithic peoples had found a way to embed time in space and to master the terror that time would run out or sweep them away. If so, they embody the wisdom of a Stone Age people. However, these same stones may not symbolize the transformation of time into space and the victory of the enduring over transient. Did the terror persist, as Seneca put it, that 'The deep flood of time will roll over us?' (Seneca 1917 : 143). Granted that the passage of time has left its trace on rocks shaped over hundreds of years by torrents of water, our Western preoccupation with time and our attempts to master its passage may or may not conceal an underlying terror that time will run out sooner rather than later. Still, in a society that has become inured to deadlines and that prides itself on seizing the moment, the passage of time may only seem less threatening than in a Neolithic community society where the setting of the sun on the longest night of the year, for example, caused terror that the light may not return.

In looking for ways of describing and interpreting natural religion, I have chosen to begin with the Wisdom tradition because it was able to defend the sacred from being subsumed into Israelite history or being reduced to being a practical illustration and an application of a divinely revealed and promulgated Law. To be sure, the sacred became a source of ethical and cosmological reflection, as well as a way of grounding both the law and the life of the soul in nature itself. As John Collins has put it:

The Wisdom of Solomon is obviously in continuity with the Hebrew wisdom tradition, . . . but it develops the cosmic character of wisdom and describes it in language

which is more consistently conceptual and scientific. . . . The Wisdom of Solomon, however, explains the indwelling of wisdom in the souls of the righteous in accordance with its cosmological conceptions of the physical universe. . . . Nature fights for the righteous (15:7). . . . In the earlier wisdom books it was implied in the encyclopedic interests of the sages, but here it is explicitly related to the wisdom that leads to God. History is now also included in the sphere of wisdom. . . . History, like the cosmos, is an illustration of the workings of wisdom. Finally, the effectiveness of wisdom is not limited to the empirical life of the individual. It also endures beyond death, because wisdom and righteousness are immortal and can make righteous people immortal, too. [Collins 1977 : 131]

Despite the cosmic animism of the Stoic view, there has emerged a difference between divinity and matter, and between divine and human being; time therefore has become a medium for existence, a source of contingency, and an occasion for the possible intrusion of the terrors of non-being. The Stoic God permeates nature completely; God can neither be distinguished from, subsumed by, reduced to, or confused with nature.

God is the passionate soul of nature, in the same way that fire is both sustaining in the form of heat and yet an all consuming essence (Salles 2009 : 5). The Stoic God ‘pervades matter by being mixed with it through and through in such a way as to be totally coextended with it. In consequence, god is present everywhere in this mixture’ (5).

Nonetheless God and matter are bodies that ‘form nevertheless an irreducible pair’ (6). Here, then, is the philosophic equivalent of the Wisdom tradition’s comprehension of a God who permeates but is not reducible to the universe: ‘Wisdom is so embedded in the universe that it can be expressed in physical terms’ (Collins 1977: 125).

The attempt to anchor time in space could only be partially successful; time kept slipping

free of its mooring and running, like the tides or the floods, fast and powerfully enough to carry people away. For the Stoic there is plenty to fear from the passage of time. In addition to catastrophes and the violence we normally might fear from enemies, there are the mundane changes of fortune that bedevil the virtuous fully as much as they punish the wicked: over time the body and the mind age, friends desert, enemies take advantage, illness sets in, and all that is left to comfort us is the soul. As Seneca put it:

It is likely that some troubles will befall us; but it is not a present fact. How often has the unexpected happened! How often has the expected never come to pass! And even though it is ordained to be, what does it avail to run out to meet your suffering? You will suffer soon enough, when it arrives; so look forward meanwhile to better things. What shall you gain by doing this? Time. [Seneca 1917 : 79]

That is why Seneca says 'We must make it our aim already to have lived long enough' (165).

In living as if one did not need more time to enhance or ground one's being in the cosmos, the Stoics could rely on their notion of fate. The parallel between God and matter, the notion of a cosmic breath that pervades all beings and sustains a universal sympathy among all beings, is extended from space into time; time is merely an extension of the causations brought into being by the all pervasive divinity within the cosmos: 'In fact, the Stoic god is identified with fate understood as the chain of causes' (Salles 2009 : 7). Stoics claim that 'our actions are governed by our souls. A person's character (a particular tension of her soul) causes her action in the paradigmatic way in which the logos of a body is the cause of its activities. But any particular action also has an antecedent cause, the Stoics insist (and in so insisting subsume the action under the thesis of fate)' (88). Therefore the only space and time that are needed by the soul for a sense of its own being

are the here and now. Such a conflation of space and time also connotes the mutual interpenetration

of heaven and earth that characterizes the Wisdom tradition.

Not only the Stoics but some of the early Christian communities grounded the being of the individual in a similar space-time permeated with divinity. Speaking of the Gospel of Thomas, Stevan Davies writes that ‘The dual equation of Jesus with wisdom, and Kingdom with wisdom, is occasionally reflected quite clearly in the sayings in Thomas. According to Thomas 91, some people requested Jesus to “Tell us who you are so that we can believe in you.” ’ (Davies 1983: 13). Jesus responded, ‘You read the face of the heavens and of the earth, yet you have not recognized that which is right in front of you and you do not know how to read this very moment.’ From the characteristic viewpoint of the Gospel of Thomas, this question is an invalid Christological query. You ought not look to Jesus as a leader or guide; look instead to what is right in front of you. The present moment, the present world, is the goal of the quest, and the significant act is that of perceiving it properly. Here, in 91, a question about Jesus is turned around toward an examination of space and time- leading to here and now.

Out of Time: The Limits of Natural Religion

Whether we are examining the wisdom literature or aspects of classical Stoicism, we therefore have to ask why natural religion does not work better than it does. If the cosmos is on the side of the soul, and if the passage of time is enshrined within the cosmos itself, what is there, in essence, to fear? As we examine some of our sources for possible answers to this question, we will note that the cosmos itself has its terrors: thunder and lightning, for example, or the floods that symbolized for Seneca the passage of time that

obliterates one's being. Why, in other words, has natural religion, with so much time on its side, never been fully proof against the passage of time itself? For Columba himself there was a hell deep within the structure of the earth, and the possibility that some are born out of due time to take advantage of saving revelation. If there is a hell embedded in the earth, as there was for Columba, there is a possibility that time will always remain a problem; those in hell have lost forever their chance to enjoy or embody the miracle being. Even within the Wisdom tradition, they may be imagined as having lost the righteousness

that attunes their souls to divine Wisdom. In Stoic terms they may be thought to lack the righteousness that allows the soul to correspond with the divine soul that permeates and animates cosmos. For the Wisdom tradition, whether in its biblical or Stoic variations, it can always, for some, be too late.

Even if the cosmos is on the side of the soul, and its inherent powers of salvation are acquired through wisdom and righteousness, terror emerges from revelations concerning the end of time. Thus some aspects of the Wisdom tradition, and hence of natural religion, became assimilated to eschatological or apocalyptic perspectives that find the heavens as well as the earth profoundly so subject to the passage of time that it is difficult for an observer to distinguish the religious cure from the existential disease. However, I would argue that the sacred is never fully capable of suppressing the terror caused by disappearance or assuaging the terror caused by torment and death. True, time may inevitably free itself from any containment in space and become a force in its own right that will transform the cosmos. Nonetheless, if the apocalyptic is a source of revelation that inevitably and eventually trumps natural religion and evokes the dread of time, I would argue that such a dread is inevitably the result of the partial and tenuous coupling of the one psyche to another, or of one's being to the cosmos. Without becoming involved in questions of genre, which seek to distinguish between various kinds of wisdom literature, or between the Wisdom tradition and the apocalyptic, for example,

we still inevitably face the question of why it is that so much faith in the cosmos becomes displaced by the dread of time.

To transcend the passage of time was the sign of the soul that had achieved or realized its true affinity with the soul that animates the cosmos itself. The task of the soul is to accommodate its innermost thoughts and longings to the rhythms and to the divine voice audible to the wise in the heavens themselves. Rather than being terrified, then, by the passage of time, even when the sun disappears at the winter solstice, the path of wisdom is to know that one's own being is grounded in the cosmos, and even the passage of time will only shape the stones above the tomb or wash the more ephemeral parts of the body away, leaving bones to stand the test of time. Nonetheless, there is still much to dread in the universe,

and it is often coded by darkness and lives in the invisible, as do demons themselves.

Although time itself may be embedded in the cosmos, so are the souls, according to Columba, whose lives and deaths occurred too early to be present at the time of the Incarnation; it is thus too late for them. For them time consists of an unending spiritual death. Even though the universe itself is oriented towards the wisdom already present in the soul of each person, it is the work of every individual to eliminate all those aspects of the self which are not in accord with that very wisdom and which may destine the soul to the same fate as those who lived and died before the time of salvation. For those who fail to stand the test of time, their chance for salvation may be permanently arrested.

Thus there are many circumstantial answers to our question of why the dread of time reasserts itself and that revelation trumps the sacred in its various forms within natural religion. The Wisdom tradition may wear thin because the young are no longer interested in traditional devotions and loyalties. A society may also run out of time under a variety of conditions: in the midst of calamity, when the wicked prosper, or when many are attracted to novelty or to alien forms of inspiration and authority. Especially when

there are no presences who seem sufficiently miraculous to restore faith that one's being is anchored in a cosmos that favours one's own salvation, a society may feel itself to be devoid of an eternal place in the cosmos.

The powers of an alien people or empire may make it obvious that a society's rituals and devotions are not working very well. The ancestors are notoriously unreliable; they may not feel gratified by the sacrifices offered them or they may have other things to do than to assist with fishing or the crops. Worse yet, novelty may trump tradition at any time, especially in the form of a prophet with a new revelation and with powers that border on the miraculous. In traditions that have assimilated the notion of righteousness to some notion of conformity to divine law, the relative prosperity and happiness of the wicked or the sufferings of the righteous themselves may arouse the dread that one's own being is not anchored within the cosmos or that time is not on the side either of the wise or the good. The terrors that come with the cosmos, floods and fires, earthquakes and lightning, like the catastrophes that decimate both the wise and the foolish, or the just and the unjust, may animate the terrors associated with the passage of time as being sinks suddenly and irreversibly into non-being.

In our Time: The Sacred
and the Present

There are various conditions in modern societies that may raise demands for the sacred whether or not the sacred is accessible within what closely resembles either the Wisdom tradition or Stoicism. The more that individuals are unsure of the ground of their being in the cosmos or of the strength of their connections with others, the more they may doubt and yet seek an existential connection with the cosmos or with persons, like celebrities, whose being seems more durable than their own or larger than life. Conversely,

the more individuals are engaged in or seek to seize the present, the less they will dread the passage of time. The more they take seriously their own subjectivity regardless of its relevance to or authorization by any social context, the less dependent they will feel on access to the sacred mediated by an institution or an elite. Especially where individuals are free to adopt a wide semantic range in their use of traditional terms for the sacred, or claim to be able to give authoritative accounts of their own personal experience, while drawing on a variety of sources of information about the environment or the cosmos, the more they will feel capable of constructing plausible ideas about their relation to the sacred and to the cosmos.

On the other hand, there may be less demand for the sacred, and for a primal connection to the cosmos, among those who have become inured to temporality. Modern societies tend to embed space in time; that is, even the cosmos, as we examine it, is coming to us from times past; we observe the passage of time as we look into space. Modern societies also intensify time pressures and have foreshortened time-frames within which they either reminisce or plan for the future. The very organization of a modern society is temporal;

dividends and reports are quarterly, appointments are defined by the clock; the truth-value of a scientific statement lasts only until a later finding qualifies or invalidates it. Even in the interpretation of artistic genres, stress is placed on the ability of the artist to capture motion or a moment. Impressionist painters, for example, seem to have portrayed surfaces that not only reflect but embody or embed the light in scenes that capture a particular moment.

That said, however, it would be a mistake to assume so great a difference between modern and, say, Neolithic societies. Stone Age peoples also used reflective surfaces like quartz not only to reflect but to hold and embody the light of the sun if only for a moment after sunset. But such a moment shines with an eternal light. Quartz, too, often looked

watery, and belonged to the same family of icons as the stones shaped by tides and currents over many years. Such stones are double-coded. That is, they embody fluidity and solidity, the transient and the permanent, time and space. It is as if the stone not only embodied but thus arrested the passage of time.

Precisely because Stone Age peoples went to such lengths to freeze time and to couple their own lives or being with the cosmos, one wonders how deeply and how permanently grounded in the universe they felt themselves to be. Transience was a major theme in the iconography of their tombs and henges. Like bones left behind by streams that had washed away the softer remains of the dead, stones shaped over time by water coded disappearance as well as presence, softness, and vulnerability as well as endurance and permanence. The rocks signified the tracks left by time, but their very presence suggested a victory over the passage of time, as if time had been stopped in its tracks.

Natural religion, on the other hand, turned time into space, or made space a medium for embodying the passage of time. Long after Neolithic peoples embedded the passage of time in heavy stones shaped over eons by torrents of water, the Trobriand islanders seem to have followed Cicero's advice of using objects and space as vehicles for time and aides to memory:

"Location segments the corpus of myth into separate cognitive units and it also serves as a mnemonic for recall of portions of the corpus. Secondly, a precise set of locations may serve as a series producer which organizes the totality of a Trobriand mythology along a temporal axis of logical precedence which is coextensive with the spatial axis of the sequence of locations. Thus the Trobriand narrator and his audience listening to the myth of the origin of mortality may be induced to recall the myth of first emergence which precedes it and the journeys of Tudava, the culture

hero, which follow it . . . For the listener well versed in his tradition, his mind would be speeded through the whole gamut of his culture from first things to last things aided by the positioning of each section of the narrative in one of a series of locales of a sacred geography. Conversely, we in the Western world emphasize temporality as our predominant mode of series producing."/ [Harwood 1976: 787, emphasis added]

Note that these spatial references to time concerned 'the origin of mortality', the moment indeed when for everyone time is stopped in its tracks: a notion that persists in the folk image of a clock that has stopped at the moment of a person's death. The use of geography to ground time allows the community to traverse and ground a sense of its own being in time. But the reference to Cicero is revealing. Such a use of space to code time is not incompatible with temporal anxieties nor does it suggest that time would never run out in such a space. Thus the Trobriand islanders locate their myths in particular geographical locations:

the Kula trading voyages are made from northwest to southeast. These voyages might then be assumed to be a ritual reenactment of the mythological corpus; a pilgrimage replicating the sequence of sacred geography. An analogy could be drawn to the stations of the cross. [Harwood 1976: 787]

Both natural and revealed religion have made time the medium by which one's being becomes created, authorized, tested, or consummated, whether through a founding event, a defining moment or kairos, a sacred history, an eschaton, or an apocalypse. Time becomes an object of fear as the medium in which the individual's soul is tested and tried, and death is the punishment for those who fail the test of time. Time, because it is the medium of salvation, becomes the object of dread precisely because one's salvation

depends entirely on how one uses the time one has been given, or honours the past, or anticipates and longs for a particular, divinely ordained future. Whether within the scope of a sacred history or an eschatological faith, or in a secular and romantic version of a belief in kairos , suffering is caused because such a moment has been missed or, for that matter, not arrived.

In a kairos, a crucial moment in which life and death hang in the balance, as do good and evil, or the past and the future, the gap can be closed between heaven and earth, between gods and humans. That is why the god is depicted, with long hair falling over the front of his head, which must be seized in the critical moment. In such a moment time intrudes and penetrates to the core of one's own being. All that one has is action, and one must act immediately, in order to seize time and thus quite literally to stop time in its tracks.

What has been lost in modern societies, I would argue, is the capacity of the sacred in the context of natural religion to embed time within the cosmos itself. In Psalm 19 the believer seeks to realize his or her being by attuning the thoughts or meditations of the heart to the heavenly voices that are audible to the faithful throughout the cosmos, but it is a cosmos that somehow is attuned to and fosters the well-being of the individual. The deepest longings of the individual are part of a nature that is given, and it is the telos of the cosmos to fulfil those longings. Collins would agree that the salvific tendency of the world is explained by the presence of righteousness in the world:

Neither is there a kingdom of Hades upon earth, for righteousness is immortal...

The exhortation to love righteousness is therefore an urging to put oneself in tune with that force in the world which is immortal and leads to immortality. The way in which humanity is related to the salvific forces of the world is further expressed in

terms of wisdom. Wisdom is, of course, the human attribute of understanding, but it also has a cosmic dimension. [Collins 1977: 124-5]

Who now would argue or believe that the cosmos is on the side of salvation?

‘I Have No Time’: The Wisdom
of Columba

Precisely because individuals in modern societies have reason to question their connection with the cosmos, we may well doubt that there is a wisdom both in the universe and in their souls that orients and drives them towards a triumph over the terror of non-being. Nonetheless, from a sociological perspective, whether we are trying to understand contemporary islanders who track the passage of time and trace the origins of mortality in the landscape, or we are seeking to grasp an ancient dread of time, we need to place ourselves as closely as possible in the mind and heart of some who have expressed their confidence or apprehension about their being in space and in time. Perhaps our closest access to natural religion can therefore be found in the account of personal anguish by the Celtic monk who, as we have seen, mourns in poetry the death of a saint. For Dallan, Columba had stood between him and various dangers that threaten the soul with death over the course of a life time. The ground of one’s own being, for ordinary mortals, was never as solid as the foundations of noble and authoritative souls.

In the last judgement, when offences against divine sovereignty are finally punished, the soul perishes eternally; there is no reprieve. To a modern ear accustomed to psychoanalytic interpretations it would be easy to attribute such a death to a cruel and overweening conscience; much of Freud’s own work was designed to protect the soul from

mortification under the relentless gaze of the superego. In the antique world of punitive emperors or sultans, the disfavour of the sovereign could undermine the last vestiges of the soul's sense of its own inner authority and sovereignty.

Sometimes it was the darkness of one's own inner passions that threatened to consume the soul; no wonder that Dallan prayed that 'dark defects' would 'easily' part from him. In the midst of such threats to the individual's own being, the soul needed a powerful friend who could withstand judgement; Columba was 'one who commits no wrong from which he dies' (Clancy and Markus 1995 : 111). The soul needs an ally who can maintain a vital presence in the face of terror; Columba converted 'the fierce ones' (113).

Certainly the soul needed an internal guide and authority who could remain in control of its own most destructive passions, and remain substantial in the absence of any presence other than its own. Certainly Columba 'fought a long and noble battle against flesh'(111).

So that he would not offend a living soul: 'He destroyed the darkness of envy, / he destroyed the darkness of jealousy' (111). 'Although he body's desire, he destroyed it. He destroyed his meanness' (111). In the absence of the great soul capable of overcoming fear and temptation, immune to the second death, the soul may dissolve or be consumed by its own deepest anxiety; Dallan lamented that after Columba's death 'we do not have the seer who used to keep fears from us' (105). Now who will protect his followers from their fierce enemies, and who will eradicate envy, jealousy, and meanness from the hearts and souls of the people?

It would be too easy to read such a lament as reflecting the loss only of a strong, charismatic leader. Columba's uncanny and superb strength was due only partly to the rigours of his asceticism. Columba's soul was coupled with spiritual essences even more powerful than his own. In the presence of such a soul this life is coupled with the next: 'He reached the apostles, with hosts, with archangels; he reached the land where night is

not seen' (107). That is, in Columba we have the answer to terror over being consumed with one's own or others' passions, or by non-being itself. His very life suggests that the antidote to terror is to couple the soul with undying and vital presences far removed in both time and space.

Because he 'used to speak with the apostle', time itself becomes coupled with space, and the heavens reunited with the earth (109). Because 'he spoke with an angel', his very nature was grounded in the supernatural, his earthly existence continuous with the heavenly (113). Being deeply rooted in tradition and conversant with the company of heaven, Columba had triumphed over the death of the soul. Therefore he also was grounded in nature and the ways of the cosmos:

he put together the harmony concerning the course of the moon, the course which it ran with the rayed sun and the course of the sea. [109]

For those who are interested in whether or not there is something Pelagian about Columba and Celtic spirituality, these affirmations might cause some apprehension that Columba felt that there was something that individuals could do to warrant or perfect their own salvation. In fact, there is enough continuity or resonance between time and space, the heavenly and the earthly, the supernatural and the natural, that whole-souled righteousness is itself not only a source but a sign of the coupling of the two worlds of the spirit. To a believer as grounded in the Wisdom tradition as were Columba and his followers, this would pose no problem; what beside their faith might be expected to make them whole?

Thus also to Stoics whose understanding of the cosmos assured them that it was animated by a divine soul analogous to their own, the Wisdom tradition was more like a commonplace than an esoteric revelation. Only those with an ideological

commitment to a revelation of radical transcendence wished to place a barrier between heaven and earth which no soul, however righteous and faithful, could pass over. At the very least, then, the elegy for Columba evokes a world of the spirit in which the soul is defended against the terrors of non-being by being coupled with ancestors and angels, and with both nature and the supernatural. As Collins reminds us:

Wisdom is, of course, the human attribute of understanding, but it also has a cosmic dimension . . . Human beings become wise, and friends of God, by the indwelling of the spirit of wisdom, which is also the cosmic principle which holds all things together. While Wisd. of Sol. 1.4 implies that the recipient of wisdom must already be righteous, Wisd. of Sol. 7.27 suggests that it is wisdom which makes them righteous, but we should not regard these statements as opposed. Rather, wisdom and righteousness are inseparable. Neither is found without the other. What is important is that the wisdom and righteousness of an individual is not an isolated relationship with God but partakes of an order and purpose which is immanent in the universe. [Collins 1977 : 125]

Natural religion thus insulates the individual from the terror of non-being by affirming a profound affinity between the depths of her own human nature and the motions of the cosmos. The soul may be terrified by the sheer absence of another soul commensurate with or corresponding to one's own. In addition, the darkest of human passions threaten to consume the soul from within or from without; passion, our own or that of another, may deprive a soul of any sense of its own vitality and control. All of this may assault or destroy the soul even without the added burden of fears of being sentenced to eternal death. Thus the soul so deeply unsure of its own presence or vitality, integrity, or control, needs to be profoundly connected with someone or something

far more enduring and vital than itself if it is ever to recover a sense of its own being and sovereignty.

Such a coupling may take various forms, such as a belief that every living human being is in the presence of a divine soul which permeates the cosmos; conversely, the divine soul may be incarnated in an extraordinary human being whose spirit unites the living and the dead, the natural and the supernatural, indeed earth with the heavens. Therefore Columba's very absence threatens an uncoupling of heaven with earth, of this life with the next, and in that uncoupling a gap opens up through which fear and terror rush in:

Great God protect me
from the fiery wall, the long trench of tears. [Clancy and Markus 1995 : 105]

Now his followers are left without an advocate for their souls in the face of terror and death:

Now he is not, nothing is left to us, no relief for a soul, our sage

...

The whole world, it was his:

It is a harp without a key,

it is a church without an abbot. [105]

A seer or a sage, a priest or a monk, or even an ascetic or a holy warrior, can couple the heavens and the earth only if there is continuity in being at all levels of the cosmos.

As John Collins puts it of the central chapters (6 - 9) of the Wisdom of Solomon,

there is an order, which 'reaches mightily from end to end and orders all things well'
(Wisdom 8:1) One therefore need not despair in the absence of such a soul as
Columba, who is able to unite the social order with nature, and in the society he creates
is able to encompass humanity itself, because 'there is an order in the world
which is directed to salvation and well-being: "God did not make death and he does
not delight in the death of the living. For he created all things that they might exist,
and the generative forces of the world are conducive to salvation" ' (Collins 1977: 124).
That knowledge of the order underlying the cosmos, and of the meaning of time, is
embedded in the Wisdom tradition, both in its biblical context and in various forms
throughout the ancient Near East.

According to our poet, St Columba was steeped in the Wisdom tradition, specifically
the wisdom books of Solomon, but he was also the very embodiment of that tradition,
an example and expression of wisdom. He understood—and revealed—the coming
together of space and time:

when Wisdom enters into people, it does not simply make them just. Their transformation
is far more than merely moral. As people acquire wisdom, they receive 'an
accurate knowledge of the things that are, [and are to come] to know the structure
of the world and the working of the elements, the beginning and end and middle of
times'. [Collins 1977 : 125-6].

Thus Columba's knowledge of the ordering of the cosmos was a sign that he possessed
the wisdom of which he had long made a study.

Time Out

There are really two universes of experience and understanding, only one of which is based on the truth about the soul and its relation to the cosmos. One universe is based on anxiety and terror; the threat of soul-loss is real, situational, and yet existential, perennial, and endemic. In the second universe the soul finds its salvation through the desire for instruction that leads to understanding not only its place in the cosmos but also the meaning of the moment in the total span of all time, past, present, and future. With that understanding comes the realization that the soul, however real may be the threat of its loss or destruction, is rooted and grounded in the order of the cosmos itself. It is anchored in space and transcends the passage of time. Its own vital presence is given by the deity but can only be received through wisdom. Therefore the soul's desire and longing for wisdom opens a pathway to righteousness; righteousness is the mark of a soul that has discovered the eternal coupling of the living with the ancestral, the human with the angelic, the earthly with the heavenly. By our very nature we are endowed by the order of the universe with the longing and the capacity for the wisdom and righteousness we seek. Only divine judgement upon the darkness of our own and others' passions, along with the terror of non-being, threaten us with the loss of our souls.

It is only when the heavens are experienced as uncoupled from the earth that the passions appear to rule and, when unassuaged, to destroy the soul from within or without. Therefore the terror of feeling one's soul being consumed by the darkest of passions comes to those who have lost a sense of their original coupling with the ancestral and the angelic. With sufficient light we are able to see the universe as seeking to protect and guide our souls on their way to their original destination. Ontology is on the side of eternal life, and the cosmic order is conducive to salvation. Righteousness is not a moral achievement so much as a way of accepting what is already given. The terror of being

alone in the universe and of disappearing into a vacuum of non-being is based on the failure to see what is always and already there. No one needs to dread time. In the end, the Celtic poet who proclaims 'I have no time' and the Stoic who says that, by not dreading the future, one comes to live wholly in the present and thus to have time may have been saying the same thing.

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