ESSEX HALL LECTURE

THE RELIGION OF NATURE

BY

BASIL WILLEY, M.A., F.B.A., Hon. Litt.D.

King Edward VII Professor of English Literature,
University of Cambridge

Essex Hall
Lecture
1957

LINDSEY

PRESS

Price 2s. net

THE RELIGION OF NATURE

BY

BASIL WILLEY

M.A., F.B.A., Hon. Litt.D.

King Edward VII Professor of English Literature,
University of Cambridge

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1957

www.unitarian.org.uk/docs

Scanned by
James Barry
as a volunteer

THE LINDSEY PRESS
15 GORDON SQUARE, LONDON, W.C.1

NOTE

The Essex Hall Lecture was founded by the British and Foreign Unitarian Association in 1892, with the object of providing an annual opportunity for the free utterance of selected speakers on religious themes of general interest. The delivery of the lecture continues under the auspices of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, as a leading event during the course of the Annual Meetings of the Assembly. A list of the published lectures, including those still obtainable, will be found at the end of this lecture.

15 Gordon Square,
London, W.C.1

THE RELIGION OF NATURE

I HAVE called this lecture 'The Religion of Nature', rather than 'Natural Religion', so as to make it clear from the outset that I have no intention of trying to discuss Natural Religion in the abstract as a branch of anthropology, theology or metaphysical speculation. I want rather to approach the subject from a standpoint more proper to one who, although admittedly an inveterate trespasser on other men's domains (and sometimes deservedly 'prosecuted' for so doing), is yet by profession a student of literature. In a word, I want to consider it from what might be called a Wordsworthian point of view. I propose to ask how far, and in what sense, the spectacle of the physical universe —or of some parts of it—has value for us which can be called religious or spiritual, and how far the classical injunction 'Follow Nature' is valid for us as a moral maxim. I might take as my point of departure a remark by a modern theologian to the effect that 'nowhere *within Nature* is there any point of redemptive contact with the divine'; and in order to start our thoughts moving I would juxtapose this with certain familiar phrases of Wordsworth: the passage, for instance, where he compares the universe to a shell held to a child's ear, a shell which to the ear of faith imparts

> Authentic tidings of invisible things;
> Of ebb and flow, and ever-during power;
> And central peace, subsisting at the heart
> Of endless agitation;

—or his description of Nature as

> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my moral being;

—or his affirmations that by

> deeply drinking-in the soul of things
> We shall be wise perforce,

and that by the 'quickening impulse' of 'sensible impressions' we may be made

> more prompt
> To hold fit converse with the spiritual world.

There appears to be a flat contradiction here between Wordsworth and the modern theologian, and I suspect that this theologian is representative of most people to-day (whether religious or not), in holding that Wordsworth's beliefs are outmoded and inoperative, however fine the poetry in which he expressed them.

If Wordsworthianism is an exploded faith, why discuss it? My reply to this objection would take several forms. First, exploded faiths have a way of coming to life again: *Naturam expellas furca, tamen usque recurret*; and the best way of preparing for such spectres, whether by way of defence or of welcome, is to understand what once gave them life and power. Secondly, it is not merely Wordsworth with whom we are to deal; the religion of Nature, in one form or another, is probably the oldest of all religions, and it has survived the victory of the supernatural religions, like Judaism and Christianity, whose *raison d'être* was to deliver men from Baal and Ashtaroth, the hosts of heaven and the beggarly elements of the world, and give them an object of worship beyond and above Nature. It has survived, not merely in folk-lore and superstition and poetry, but in certain august conceptions which have moulded the thought and politics and ethics and aesthetics of men throughout history—such conceptions, I mean, as those of Natural Law, Natural Right, and such teaching as that to follow Nature is the secret of success both in life and in art.

But, thirdly, in one sense it is indeed mainly Wordsworth's ghost that I want to bring upon the stage, for it was his influence, and his version of the ancient religion of Nature, which more than any other dominated the century immediately preceding our own—a century we all want now to understand better, if only to extricate ourselves from it more effectively. Perhaps I am assuming too much in saying 'we all'; perhaps I am forgetting that it is not everybody who, like myself, has been lately living and thinking in the society of nineteenth-century writers. I think, nevertheless, that more than a merely historical and academic interest is to be found in considering why it was that so many leading minds of that century reverenced Wordsworth and looked to him for spiritual guidance, refreshment and healing. I need hardly remind you that the list includes people as diverse as Coleridge, Thomas Arnold, Newman, J. S. Mill, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Pater, Ruskin, Leslie Stephen, Mark Rutherford, John Morley, and such more recent figures as Earl Grey, A. N. Whitehead and G. M. Trevelyan. As this list partly suggests, Wordsworth's influence, like Carlyle's, was felt mainly by minds estranged from orthodox religion yet eager for a satisfying substitute. Of course the idea that Nature offered a by-pass road to God, avoiding the twists and the hold-ups of the old theological route, was not peculiar to the nineteenth century. Bacon and his followers of the Royal Society had justified natural science on the ground that the study of God's work, if carried far enough, would increase men's reverence for the divine workman; Milton had shown how 'in contemplation of created things By steps we may ascend to God'; Pope had spoken of looking 'through Nature up to Nature's God'; Rousseau had lent the magic of his eloquence to the view that God was to be sought not in text or creed or temple, but amidst mountains, forests and sunsets.

The whole deistic movement of the eighteenth century proceeded on the assumption that Nature could supply, what a questionable Revelation no longer could, an assured knowledge of God's existence, power and benevolence. Still, it was in the nineteenth century that the religion of Nature assumed its most influential form—becoming, in fact, a faith to live by. In the eighteenth century religion was something which needed to be proved by evidences; what you did with it after proving its credibility was of less importance. In the nineteenth century, when the old evidences were continually losing their power to convince, it became rather

> a feeling and a love,
> That had no need of a remoter charm
> By thought supplied;

it became something to be 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart'. Nature had been largely an intellectual abstraction to the jurists, moralists, theologians and critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Wordsworth turned it into something which could be seen and heard and felt. Perhaps because of the incomparable beauty of the as yet unspoiled English countryside—in particular of the Lake District—and because of the ever-sharpening contrast between this beauty and the disfigurements of industrialism, Nature, now fully identified with 'the country' and 'the open air', and consecrated by the poet-priest, became a holy and uplifting thing, at once a haven for tired doubters, and a restorative for the toiling millions. Even those for whom science had 'untenanted Creation of its God', or for whom inanimate Nature had become a meaningless concourse of atoms, and animate Nature an evolutionary war of all against all—even these often retained their century's passion for natural beauty, and some of them possessed one of its choicest gifts,

the power of rendering that beauty with matchless precision.

We must now come to closer grips with our subject, and ask what we ourselves mean, and what other men at other times have meant, by 'Nature', whether as an object of worship or as an ethical standard. For surely there are few stock abstractions of equal importance which have so many possible meanings and are so ambiguous. An American scholar has distinguished more than a hundred meanings, and even in the seventeenth century Robert Boyle listed eight senses in which it was then used by natural philosophers. Of these the most interesting were (1) The Author of Nature, or God; (2) A semi-deity or personification, subordinate to God, but often spoken of as the sole immediate cause of phenomena and thus often replacing the idea of God as a principle of explanation; (3) The established course of things, the settled and unalterable order of the universe; (4) The Essence or Quiddity of a thing; that which makes it what it is; or (5), of a human being, the qualities which a man has at birth, i.e. when fresh from the hands of God, before education and convention have done their work upon him. In this lecture my aim is not to add a browner horror to the woods but simply to throw a spotlight on a few of the largest trees. So let us begin by following J. S. Mill; let us resolutely exclude, for the moment, all but two meanings of 'Nature', and concentrate briefly upon those.

The two meanings given by Mill are to be found in his essay called 'Nature', written before Darwin's *Origin of Species* but published posthumously (1874). They might be crudely paraphrased as 'Everything', and 'Everything Minus Man'. His own words are (1) 'All the powers existing in either the outer or the inner world and everything which takes place by means of those powers'; and (2) 'What takes place without the

in the writings of such rebels against decadent civilizations as Rousseau, Thoreau, Tolstoy or D. H. Lawrence.

But this Cynic teaching is mainly negative; it tells us to eschew the artificial, and to be natural, without explaining what it is that makes Nature worthy of imitation. The Stoics were more constructive: they pointed to the cosmos and exhorted men to imitate its majestic harmony, serenity and order. Like their modern counterparts Kant, Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold, they saw a link between the starry heavens above and the moral law within; man is a microcosm, and the same law which in the great world preserved the stars from wrong would, if observed in the little world of man, preserve the soul from evil. Nature was divinely rational, and man, to become godlike, must be rational too. To follow Nature, then, meant to follow reason, the divine spark within; it meant to be self-sufficient, self-dependent, and invulnerable to the assaults of pain, fear or desire. The Stoic, then, we may say, took his conception of Nature mainly from that part of its phenomena in which the appearance of harmonious order is most impressively maintained—namely, the facts of astronomy. And we find this view still operative in what is often called the 'Elizabethan World Picture'—in Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, for example. The stars keep their courses, the planets and the elements maintain the positions assigned to them; we too must obey the law of our nature by keeping what Shakespeare calls 'degree' in our political, social and domestic relationships. Disloyalty, rebellion or unfilial conduct are 'unnatural' in this sense. Man differs from Nature in that being a free agent he can disobey the law of his nature, whereas Nature cannot; disproportioned sin jars against Nature's chime.

So far, then, the injunction 'Follow Nature' seems to be intelligible. Difficulties begin, however, directly we widen our conception of Nature to include other

aspects of it. Nature of course includes lovely, grand and ideal things: sun, moon and stars, flowers, the beauty of the seasons, perhaps the music of the spheres; but it also includes jungles, deserts, disease-germs, drought, famine, blizzard and earthquake. In the well-known hymn the Lord is praised for making all things bright and beautiful, and the writer specifies the little flowers and birds, the purple-headed mountain and the pleasant summer sun; but her perfunctory allusion to the cold wind in the winter does not atone, one feels, for her omission of tsetse-flies and lava-streams. Wordsworth taught us to think of Nature as a benign goddess or glorified schoolmistress, ever correcting our errors, moulding our growth, and leading us back to the sources of our spiritual health. Can we believe this, we who have been told of Nature's recklessness and indifference, of the survival of the fittest, or of entropy? If you listen to Mr. Hoyle relating the latest news from the big telescopes, doth it to you impart authentic tidings of invisible things, or suggest a central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation? When you hear of dead worlds, celestial bombardments, suns a hundred times bigger than our own, the dust-clouds of Venus, or the unimaginable frost of the outer planets, perhaps you will feel the terror of a Pascal rather than the reassurance of a Wordsworth. Years ago Mr. Aldous Huxley suggested that if Wordsworth had grown up in the tropics instead of amidst the 'cosy sublimities' of our Lake District, he might have been inclined towards devil-worship rather than pantheism; and Wordsworth's own poem *Ruth* acknowledges that there are types of scenery less morally wholesome than the landscapes of Somerset or Westmorland.

We began this part of the discussion with J. S. Mill: let us sum it up by noting his final indictment of Nature in the sense of the Not Ourselves. What

strikes every unflinching observer, he says (and he wrote this before Darwin had familiarised men with the picture of Nature red in tooth and claw), is 'the perfect and absolute recklessness' of natural forces. 'Nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another, are Nature's everyday performances'; killing she inflicts once on every living creature, but she often accompanies it by the protracted tortures of storm, earthquake, hunger, cold or disease, and that with callous indifference to the moral virtue or turpitude of her victims. 'Anarchy and the Reign of Terror are overmatched in injustice, ruin and death, by a hurricane and a pestilence.' What is Mill's conclusion? That 'it cannot be religious or moral in us to guide our actions by the analogy of the course of Nature'. So far from following Nature, our very aim and *raison d'être* as moral agents must be to correct, alter and amend it. If the 'artificial', that is, if all the techniques and skills of civilised life are not better than wild Nature, why wear clothes, cultivate the garden, build houses and cities, etc.? It can, we know, be argued metaphysically that this is necessarily the best of all possible worlds, but as moral beings we must always return to the paradox of Candide: '*Cela est bien dit, mais il faut cultiver le jardin.*'

If then, the spectacle of the Not Ourselves fails to provide us with a moral example, perhaps it is our own nature that we must follow? We are often exhorted, by moralists of all times, to live according to the law of our own being, and the idea of self-fulfilment or self-realisation certainly has a very persuasive aspect. It may be represented, moreover, that in aiming at this we *shall* be imitating the Not Ourselves in its one meritorious quality, that, namely of fulfilling the law of *its* being, which it cannot help doing. But we must ask again, what *is* this self of ours? What *is* the law of our being? Is Man naturally sociable and good, or is he by

nature a pugnacious egoist? If we believe that Man is naturally good, then we shall be fulfilling the law of our nature by being kind, selfless, public-spirited, philanthropic and so forth. If we believe that he is naturally vile (even though all else in Nature pleases, which as we have seen is more than doubtful), we shall be fulfilling the law of our nature by aggression, self-assertion, force, fraud and war. It is a platitude to say that Man is a composite creature, made up of soul and body, reason and passions, intellect and instinct, and that virtue for such a creature consists in maintaining a proper order amongst these elements, with due subordination of the lower to the higher. But this, which might be thought the specific human task, is in fact superhumanly difficult, and many teachers have found it easier to regard one part of the complex as our 'Nature' *par excellence*, and urge us to follow that only. Thus to some, 'Follow Nature' means 'follow reason and suppress the passions'; to others, it means 'follow instinct, for this is sure, whereas reason notoriously goes astray'. To the Stoics and some Christians it meant the first; to men like Blake or D. H. Lawrence it meant the second. Lawrence's natural man obeys the blood, not the mind. It may be remarked in passing that those like Hobbes or Swift who think men Yahoos are not pleased with the thought; it is not they who urge us to live according to Nature. Hobbes teaches, on the contrary, that by nature men can never live peacefully together: they need a deliberate contrivance, an absolute Leviathan, to keep them in awe. Swift, less robust and practical, takes up the attitude of a frustrated and sulky idealist; we know how Nature would have us live: we are meant to live like rational Houyhnhnms. But since hardly anybody does, he retires into his ivory tower, and from thence shoots arrows of irony and sarcasm at everybody except the enlightened few.

It seems pretty clear, then, that ' Follow Nature ' ceases to be ethically valid if you believe Man to be naturally wicked. And this brings us to an aspect of this bewildering subject which for many of us is of central importance. For it is not only Hobbes and Swift who are of this persuasion; the Christian religion also teaches the depravity of the natural man since the Fall. There have, indeed, been variations in the degree of stress laid, within Christianity itself, upon the doctrine of Original Sin, but it remains true that for all kinds of Christianity Nature stands in need of Grace to perfect it (*gratia perficit naturam*), so that ' Live according to Nature ', unless elaborately qualified, will not serve Christians as a moral maxim. It could no doubt mean ' Live as you were meant to live, and as you might have lived, if the Fall had never occurred '. But this is admittedly impossible advice, so the maxim becomes unworkable. In order that I may not seem to be misrepresenting Christianity in this respect, let me just quote three fragments of Christian literature—first, this from Thomas à Kempis :

> ' O Lord, let that become possible to me by Thy grace, which by nature seems impossible to me.'

Secondly, this from the Baptismal service in the Book of Common Prayer :

> ' forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin ' [and] ' none can enter into the Kingdom of God, except he be regenerated and born anew, . . .'

we pray that God

> ' will grant to this Child that thing which by nature he cannot have.'

Thirdly, take this verse from one of Charles Wesley's hymns:

> Long my imprisoned spirit lay
> Fast bound in sin and nature's night:
> Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
> I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
> My chains fell off, my heart was free,
> I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

One could only fit 'Follow Nature' into this scheme by saying, as indeed some theologians have done, that our fallen nature, through the sheer desperation of its plight, itself directs us to seek in supernatural grace the only possible deliverance from 'nature's night'. But this is to strain the maxim further than it will bear, and turn it into a useless paradox.

It seems to emerge, from what we have seen, that there are the gravest difficulties and ambiguities attending the use of 'Follow Nature' as a religious or ethical injunction, since (to summarise the argument up to this point), if by 'Nature' we mean all that goes on in the physical world without human intervention, we find there no lessons in love, mercy, justice etc.—in fact no morality in the human sense at all; and if by 'Nature' we mean human nature, we cannot be sure whether to follow reason—for reason goes astray, or instinct—for this may be anarchic, or the whole complex of thought, will and passion—for this ('human nature' in general) may be wicked, if not 'fallen' in the theological sense.

Yet, in spite of all this, it remains true that throughout the ages men have, in one sense or another, invoked Nature as a standard and guide in religion, in ethics, in jurisprudence, in international relations, in politics and in art. And in face of so impressive a fact as this we may well pause and ask whether there is something we have overlooked. In appealing to Nature what have men in fact been doing? Behind the appeal there has often, no doubt, been the feeling that

things as they are, or as they were when fresh from God's hands, are far better than they become when Man has besmeared them. So Wordsworth could contrast ' Nature's holy plan ' with what Man has made of Man—and of Nature too, for that matter. But further, the appeal to Nature has generally been an appeal to certain human values, aspirations or ethical standards, to which men have tried to impart compulsive authority by ascribing them to Nature—whether or not they are actually to be found realised in physical nature or human nature. In order to make this plausible, men have made a selection from the phenomena of physical or human nature, a selection of those aspects which appeared to illustrate or to sanction the ideal standard, and then appealed to these as if they were the whole of Nature or human nature. Thus, as we have noted, the stars in their courses appear to be orderly, harmonious and dutiful: Nature therefore teaches these standards. But, as we have further remarked, Nature is also red in tooth and claw, and in most ways appears amoral; so this collapses. Some moralists, from Solomon downwards, have chosen their moral patterns from the animal or vegetable kingdoms rather than from the stars: we have repeatedly been urged to go to the ant or the bee for lessons in industry and sociability; and doves, eagles, lions, horses and dogs have long been favourite symbols of love, aspiration, courage, fidelity and the like. Nature therefore teaches these virtues. But drones, cuckoos, apes, tigers, wolves, swine, asses, snakes, toads and vermin typify all the vices, so this collapses too. As for the vegetable kingdom, we have the Gospel injunction to Consider the Lilies of the Field. This injunction, divine and beautiful as it is in its context, can be used in isolation to illustrate one of the many fallacies which cluster round the Religion of Nature. Man, being a composite and divided being, often at

war within himself, can only fulfil his end by effort and strain, and part of the attraction of 'Follow Nature', for a creature wearied with the problems of his 'struggling, task'd morality', has lain in the illusion that this meant giving up the struggle and imitating the effortless decorum of the lilies, which neither toil nor spin. But this, for Man, would merely be a lapse to the sub-human; the only way for Man to be like the lilies is to be truly Man, and this, for Christianity, means following what is truly superhuman. Again, turning once more to human nature, some men or even some tribes of men, have perhaps been markedly just, tolerant, honest, sociable, innocent, merciful and truthful; human nature therefore is good, and we should try to live according to these laws of our being. But history on the whole does not support this view; human nature seems far more generally to be infected with greed, self-seeking, competitiveness, pride, lust—in fact, if we take the theological view, with original sinfulness.

I return to our main question, which is still unanswered. The human race, despite its frailty, has always recognised certain ethical and spiritual values and reverenced them, even if it failed to live up to them. Why should it ever have seemed necessary to strengthen the authority of these standards (Justice, Charity, Temperance, Purity, Altruism, etc.) by calling them 'Natural'? I suggest that it is because, deep in the human psyche, whether above or below the conscious level, there has always lurked an instinct to worship Nature, an instinct derived perhaps from the remote past of our species, and one which has never been eradicated by Christianity or by others of the higher religions. If this is so, if the idea of Nature does evoke a religious response, a feeling of awe, then 'Follow Nature' becomes a prophetic exhortation meaning 'Obey the gods!'—perhaps the dark gods?

but at all events powers possessing numinous authority. It is interesting that even within Christianity, a religion in which Nature as a whole—the Creation as well as Man—is held to be fallen, this old sub-religious sentiment has survived. The idea (perhaps a later sophistication of primitive nature-worship) that order, duty, harmony and degree were the Natural Laws in creation, and that the same virtues in humanity—social subordination, filial piety, justice and peaceableness—were Natural Laws for men : this idea was not extinguished by the doctrine of the Fall. The feeling was, I think, that these were the laws and virtues which would have prevailed in Nature and Man if there had been no Fall; that they represented God's plan, and that in spite of the Devil this plan was still manifest—even if only in part or only in a mutilated state. Still manifest : but manifest above all in the Creation, which, though affected by the Fall, was still far more free from taint than Man and his works. Perhaps we get here (though only in part, and through a glass darkly) a glimpse of the explanation we are seeking; an explanation, I mean, of the persistence of the appeal to Nature in spite of so much adverse evidence, and in spite of Christianity. Nature, already a goddess before Christianity, became in the latter Christian centuries (especially from the seventeenth century onwards) the handiwork of God proclaiming its divine original; a heavenly spectacle which, though not now in all respects what God had intended it to be, had not lost all its original brightness—or nothing like as much of it as men had. It was safe to regard Nature as a wise guide because it was fresher from the hands of God and less affected by human sin and folly—indeed, unaffected by these except by God's express permission. We may go further : we may even say that Nature has at times appeared divinely alluring, bland and beneficent, in contrast not with Man but with orthodox religion

itself; at times, especially, when theology has been unusually dark and baleful, when Christendom has been inly racked with controversy and persecution, and when the church has been most intolerant, corrupt, narrow and blind to new truth. This happened during the religious wars of the seventeenth century, from which by reaction the modern religion of Nature arose; it happened again, in a quite different sense, in the nineteenth century, when Wordsworthianism was in its heyday. Mark Rutherford, representing the nineteenth century, has expressed the feeling I mean in a prose fragment called 'The Preacher and the Sea', where, by simply juxtaposing the doctrine of the preacher with its natural setting, he achieves an effect of telling irony:

> 'This morning as I walked by the sea, a man was preaching on the sands to about a dozen people, and I stopped for a few minutes to listen. He told us that we were lying under the wrath of God, that we might die at any moment, and that if we did not believe in the Lord Jesus, we should be damned everlastingly . . . "you are all wounds and bruises and putrefying sores [he shouted]; the devil will have you if you don't turn to the Lord, and you will go down to the bottomless, brimstone Pit, where shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth for ever".
>
> 'Sunny clouds lay in the blue above him, and at his feet summer waves were breaking peacefully on the shore, the sound of their soft, musical plash filling up his pauses and commenting on his text.'
>
> *More Pages from a Journal*, p. 158.

We can understand what the same writer means when he tells us elsewhere that Wordsworth had converted him from the God of the church to the God of the hills,

' substituting a new and living spirit for the old deity, once alive, but gradually hardened into an idol '.

In sum, we have to accept, as a datum, that mankind, often in the face of facts, persists in calling ' natural ' whatever qualities in the Creation or in humanity it approves of morally, and does so because of an ineradicable reverence for the Power which has ordained things to be what they are, and an irrational but partly defensible conviction that what they spontaneously *are* is what they *should* be.

Man, as part of the animal kingdom, is a product of the natural order, but as a rational, moral being he seeks to master Nature, making it serve his purposes, moulding it nearer to his heart's desires, building houses, cities, constructing machines and annihilating distance, and so on. As long as he remains Nature's slave he worships her in the manner of the primitive nature-cults : fearing her unknown powers and caprices, trying to placate her anger, and hoping to influence her procedure by sympathetic magic and ritual. But when he has sufficiently tamed Nature by civilised techniques to feel no longer wholly at her mercy, the old superstitious fear is replaced by a new and more sentimental attitude—a feeling of nostalgia for a lost paradise, a lost home, or a lost parent. Whenever civilisation has become excessively urbanised, excessively remote from its roots in the soil, a cult of ' primitivism ' has made its appearance. I am thinking, for instance, of the antique pastoral tradition, *Saturnia regna*, the Age of Gold, Idylls and Georgics, the cult of the simple life, Sabine farms and the like. This reappears in Renaissance literature, partly as a classical convention, but partly also as a real yearning for pristine innocence and simplicity of life. It appears conspicuously in the eighteenth century as part of the revolutionary protest against a corrupt and obsolete social order. It acquired an immense access of

authority in the nineteenth century as a reaction from the horrors of industrialism. It reached new intensities in the prophet D. H. Lawrence, who saw modern civilisation as a hideous man-made smudge upon the face of a pure and beautiful world, and ascribed all our woes to the hypertrophy of mind—mind, which, like a vampire, battened on the blood-stream of life. In much modern thinking the Unconscious figures as 'Nature', the quickening reservoir of life, and mind as the forger of manacles. The industrial revolution, which created a rootless proletariat and destroyed so much of the rural economy in the affected countries, undoubtedly gave a new lease of life to the Religion of Nature in its modern, sophisticated form. An inhabitant of a Greek city-state (if he were not a slave, or possibly even if he were), might think his way of life the most natural for Man; a dweller in the nineteenth-century English Black Country or in any corrupt European capital might be excused for idealising rustic life, and for thinking it superior to his own because closer to Nature. Moreover, as I have already suggested, the plight of orthodox Christianity in the last century sent many honest doubters to the sea and the hills in search of whatever gods might be. Leslie Stephen and his group of 'Sunday Tramps' really felt that a walk in the country was better than going to church, because in the open air you confronted the living God whereas in church you only met with a fossilised one. And an excursion to the Lake District, as Aldous Huxley has said, was the equivalent of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In the writings of Stephen and Ruskin about the Alps the note of mystical exaltation is ever-present. For a man like Stephen the ascent of a mountain was a spiritual as well as a physical exercise, purging and bracing the soul. He and his like could echo Wordsworth in thanks to the Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe for linking their

lives, ' not with the mean and vulgar works of Man, but with high objects and enduring things . . . purifying thus the elements of feeling and of thought '.

It is one thing to account historically for a belief, but quite another to hold it oneself as valid. And I must return, in conclusion, to my point of departure and ask again : what remains for us now of the Wordsworthian Religion of Nature ? Can there still be any sermons in stones, any moral or spiritual renewal to be derived from scenery ? Certain things may be conceded at once : trees are more beautiful (to most people) than chimney-stacks, mountains than slag-heaps, green fields than pavements ; and farming operations are doubtless healthier than working in a mine, attending a blast-furnace or sitting in front of a conveyor-belt. We may even say that the cultivation of the soil will always be the basic occupation of Man who lives on bread and meat, and is thus in that sense his most ' natural ' way of life. But it is doubtful whether it is morally superior for that reason to any other way of life, or whether it produces better men and women. Few to-day, I think—however it may have been in the days of St. Thomas More or Rousseau—would venture to idealise the so-called backward peoples as moral examples for the rest of the world. The noble rustic or savage are exploded myths ; rustics and savages merely turn out to be ignoble in ways somewhat different from our own. Our reflexions, then, seem to have forced us to conclude that, as a moral principle or incentive, ' Follow Nature ' is too ambiguous, too full of half-truths, unexamined assumptions and baseless sentiment to be of much service to us. More often than not, it is a mere attempt to secure illegitimate sanction for moral principles of which we approve on other grounds. It is better to approve of them because they are right than to try and make out they are right because they are natural. As to how to prove them right, that is

another story. But whatever we do, we shall find ourselves in difficulties if we try to justify our ideal standards by attributing them to a natural order, whether physical or human, which on inspection turns out to be *not* ideal.

And yet it is not on this note that I wish to end. Perhaps because my own mind was formed in a Wordsworthian mould, and because to me the Lake District has never ceased to be holy ground, I still feel that Wordsworth is not wholly discounted. I cannot help responding when his apostrophe to Nature returns to my thoughts—as it often does :

> Thou hast fed
> My loftiest speculations; and in Thee,
> For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
> A never-failing principle of joy
> And purest passion.

We are increasingly cut off, by our mechanised way of life, from something that is native to us, and solitude amongst objects not made by Man can give massive satisfaction to certain deep cravings which,

> amid the many shapes
> Of joyless daylight

and

> the fretful stir
> Unprofitable, and the fever of the world

normally remain unfulfilled and often unrecognised.

> When from our better selves we have too long
> Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
> Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
> How gracious, how benign is Solitude !

Solitude, silence, the admonishing presence of grand, fair and permanent forms, and the gentler allurements of pure air, flowers and clear streams—these are

amongst the best things we have in this imperfect world; they are valuable in themselves, quite apart from any pantheistic or moral implications that may be forced upon them. They can induce moods of meditation, inward poise, and detachment, which are becoming rare or almost impossible for many in modern sophisticated living. They remind us that Man is not all, that there is something Other and greater than ourselves, on which we are dependent, and can thus produce an acknowledgement of Being-over-against-us, which is part, though only a part, of religious experience. Wordsworth, we know, also taught that love of these things leads on to love of Man. I venture to doubt the truth of this. Setting aside altogether the question whether Nature is intrinsically benign, indifferent or positively malevolent, do we find in fact that mountains, however valuable they may be in the ways I have suggested, make us more philanthropic, or that those who are most addicted to solitary communings with the sublime are noticeably kinder, more unselfish, more loving than others? On the contrary, they often seem apt to be proud, reserved and egotistical; they enjoy a sense of kinship with the vast, the austere and the impersonal which gives them a distaste for their kind. The Christian will rightly argue that the God of the hills is no substitute for the God of love revealed in Christ, and that the exaltation of the climber is no substitute for repentance, faith and charity. Moreover, if we find God in Helvellyn we are committed to finding him also in the tropical forests, and in the killing blasts of Everest or Antarctica—and, this, as I have said, is impossibly hard. The most I would claim for Helvellyn, that is, for the Religion of Nature in this country to-day, is that it provides certain valuable states of mind which are not only not hostile to religious insight, but are positively akin to it. In this hard, restless, thoughtless world we can ill afford

to neglect any such aids to reflexion, any such restoratives to the life of the spirit. As long as we remember all the qualifications I have suggested above; as long as we remember that the sight of God is promised to the pure in heart and not to the aesthetically sensitive, and the Kingdom of Heaven opened only to the repentant, the regenerate, and the loving—provided we remember all this, we may still hold, and hold with conviction, that by the 'quickening impulse' of 'sensible impressions' we may indeed be made

> more prompt
> To hold fit converse with the spiritual world.

LIST OF ESSEX HALL LECTURES

1893. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGY AS ILLUSTRATED IN ENGLISH POETRY, by Stopford A. Brooke, M.A., LL.D. (Out of print.)

1894. UNITARIANS AND THE FUTURE, by Mrs. Humphry Ward. (Out of print.)

1895. THE RELATION OF JESUS TO HIS AGE AND OUR OWN, by J. Estlin Carpenter, M.A., D.D., D.Litt. (Out of print.)

1897. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEACHING OF JESUS, by R. A. Armstrong, B.A. (Out of print.)

1899. THE RELIGION OF TIME AND THE RELIGION OF ETERNITY, by Philip H. Wicksteed, M.A., Litt.D. (Reprinted.)

1902. SOME THOUGHTS ON CHRISTOLOGY, by James Drummond, M.A., LL.D., D.Litt. (Out of print.)

1903. EMERSON, by Augustine Birrell, K.C. (Out of print.)

1904. THE IDEA AND REALITY OF REVELATION, by H. H. Wendt, Ph.D., D.D. (Out of print.)

1905. THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN THE POEMS OF TENNYSON AND BROWNING, by Prof. Henry Jones, LL.D. (Out of print.)

1906. THE MAKING OF RELIGION, by Samuel M. Crothers, D.D. (Out of print.)

1908. DOGMA AND HISTORY, by Prof. Dr. Gustav Kruger. (Out of print.)

1909. EVOLUTION AND RELIGIOUS PROGRESS, by Prof. F. E. Weiss, D.Sc. (Out of print.)

1910. THE STORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE UNITARIAN MOVEMENT, by W. G. Tarrant, B.A. (Reprinted.)

1911. RELIGION AND LIFE, by Rudolf Eucken. (Out of print.)

1913. HERESY: ITS ANCIENT WRONGS AND MODERN RIGHTS IN THESE KINGDOMS, by Alexander Gordon, M.A. (Out of print.)

1914. THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS AND MODERN PHILOSOPHERS OF RELIGION, by W. R. Inge, D.D. (Out of print.)

1918. THE PLACE OF JUDAISM AMONG THE RELIGIONS OF THE WORLD, by Claude G. Montefiore, M.A. (Out of print.)

1920. CHRISTIANITY APPLIED TO THE LIFE OF MEN AND OF NATIONS, by Charles Gore, D.D., D.C.L., LL.D. (Out of print.)

1921. THE LOST RADIANCE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION, by L. P. Jacks, M.A., D.D., LL.D. (Out of print.)

1922. ORTHODOXY, by the Rt. Hon. H. A. L. Fisher. (Out of print.)

1923. THE MORAL BASIS OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS, by Viscount Cecil, K.C. (Out of print.)

1924. THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE AS ILLUSTRATED IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGION IN NEW ENGLAND, by W. W. Fenn, D.D. (Out of print.)

1925. SOME PHASES OF FREE THOUGHT IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, by the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, K.C. (Out of print.)

1926. MAN IN THE LIGHT OF EVOLUTION, by Arthur Thomson, M.A., LL.D. (Out of print.)

1927. THE DIVINE RETICENCE, by Willard L. Sperry, M.A., D.D. (Out of print.)

1928. CHRISTIANITY AND THE RELIGIOUS DRAMA, by R. H. U. Bloor, B.A.

1929. THE MESSAGE OF THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE MODERN WORLD, by S. H. Mellone, M.A., D.Sc.

1930. THE IDEA OF GOD, by the Rt. Rev. A. A. David, D.D.

1931. MAN AND THE MACHINE, by Sir E. John Russell. (Out of print.)

1952. CO-OPERATION BETWEEN WORLD RELIGIONS, by Rabbi Leslie I. Edgar, M.A.

1953. THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF THE UNIVERSITY, by Sir Hector Hetherington, K.B.E., LL.D., D.Litt.

1954. TRUTH AND CERTAINTY, by A. Victor Murray, M.A., B.D., B.Litt., S.T.D.

1955. MEN, CHANCE AND HISTORY, by Alan Bullock, M.A.

1956. THE HISTORICAL JESUS: SCHWEITZER'S QUEST AND OURS AFTER FIFTY YEARS, by L. A. Garrard, B.D., M.A.

Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay and Company, Ltd., Bungay, Suffolk