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[We are publishing in two parts this essay, on a matter of topical as well as of perennial importance, which forms a chapter of a book in preparation by **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch,** a naturalist of Costa Rica. It was discussed at a specially convened meeting of the Indian Institute of Culture, Basavangudi, Bangalore, on December 4th, 1952, under the chairmanship of Shri M. A. Venkata Rao, evoking animated and thoughtful reactions from him and other participants in the discussion.—ED.]

RELIGION AND CONSERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

During the present century we have witnessed a rapidly growing awareness, first by men of special interests and then by a larger public, of the need of protecting the natural world in all its aspects. This "conservation movement" has become a mighty stream fed by multiple sources. Among the first to raise their voices in behalf of the wilderness and its denizens were those who loved the earth's unspoiled areas for the intangible values they offered—the beauty, the sense of mystery, the peace and the relaxation, the feeling of communion with forces older and more enduring than ourselves. Then there were those whose feeling of brotherhood with other forms of life was outraged by the persecution and wanton destruction of these. There were scientists who deplored the disappearance of rare animals and plants which they had never adequately investigated. There were hunters alarmed by the growing scarcity of "game." Finally, there were the agriculturists and economists who tardily realized that in the erosion and deterioration of soils, the wanton cutting of forests, the drying up of the watercourses, the pollution of rivers and the reckless exploitation of minerals, the material foundations of modern civilization were being undermined and destroyed.

It has for several years been evident to those who view the problem broadly that, in spite of the diversity of motives which inspire this concern for the preservation of the natural world, the objects of this solicitude—soil, water, vegetation and animal life—are all so closely linked by multiple interactions that, unless all are preserved together, all will be lost together. Thus there has been a growing tendency for these diverse interests to join in a single comprehensive campaign to protect all those manifold aspects of the physical world which we loosely lump under the term "Nature." There is, after all, only one kind of conservation, although it has many facets.

In all this recent agitation for the conservation of Nature, religion has been almost silent. Yet it was not always so. Man's earliest religions were intimately concerned with his relation to the natural world; and Oriental religions have ever supported the cause of conservation in a manner unfamiliar to us in Western lands. If we take a broad view of the development of religious thought, we find that it has passed through two distinct stages: The earlier cults were almost without exception religions of preservation; their aim was to ensure the safety and earthly prosperity of the tribe or nation; hence they could not ignore the natural foundations upon which the community's welfare depended. Although not forgetful of the soul's needs after the body's death, this was a subordinate motive in religions of this class.

There is evidence from many parts of the world that early man felt uneasy about taking the life of any form, whether animal or plant. This deeply rooted sentiment, doubtless springing from an instinctive recognition of the

fundamental sameness of all forms of life rather than from intellectual conviction, was rationalized in various ways, giving rise to beliefs which seem absurd to our colder and more critical modern intelligence. As in all discussions of religious matters, it is necessary to distinguish sharply between intuitions which spring from the very depths of our being and our largely unsatisfactory attempts to give a generally acceptable account, in rational terms, of these pervasive sentiments.

It is also important to keep in mind that man's treatment of other living things, including other individuals of his own species, has from the first been determined by several motives which are often in sharpest conflict. On the one hand there is sympathy with them as living beings more or less akin to ourselves, having wants and feelings somewhat like our own. Opposed to this, in the case of the lower kingdoms, has been our need to use their flesh for food, their skin for clothing or other products of their bodies for manifold purposes. And opposed to this again is the fear of vengeance, of the harm which these victims of man's material necessities may wreck upon him by natural or supernormal means.

In broad terms, we may recognize a religious motive, working toward the preservation of other forms of life, and the motive of self-preservation, which often leads to their destruction. The latter is included in that which in modern terminology we call the economic motive, which embraces not only the striving to get our basic necessities but also our attempts to satisfy that exaggerated acquisitiveness into which these primary vital demands have everywhere hypertrophied.

We who call ourselves civilized often find it extremely difficult to harmonize these two motives in our lives, the religious and the economic, the altruistic feeling which leads us to seek harmony with a larger whole and the egoistic impulse which impels us to feather our own nest regardless of the consequences to others. Primitive man experienced a similar conflict, which he strove to resolve with logic less penetrating than our own, with feelings less delicate and refined. His efforts in this direction were often ineffectual, leading to beliefs which seem absurd to us, to rites which strike us as stupid, grotesque, and often highly revolting.

If we view these rites as an alien onlooker they can only fill us with scorn and contempt; but if we recall that the savage, like ourselves, is striving to harmonize elements in his life which are perhaps radically incompatible, we shall look upon them with sympathy and understanding, with pity rather than with ridicule. Moreover, it is well to remember that that complete internal harmony, logical no less than emotional, which is so precious to the sage and the saint, is not an indispensable condition of the survival of man or of other animals. A balance of opposing attitudes, the ability to shift swiftly from one emotional state to another as external circumstances demand, is all that is necessary for the maintenance of life.

Primitive man's tenderness toward other forms of life was directed toward the vegetable no less than toward the animal kingdom. In particular those noblest of vegetable forms, the giant trees, so much statelier, older and more enduring than himself, inspired him with awe, reverence and wonder. The worship of trees was widespread among the European branches of the Aryan race, and among the Germans natural woods formed the earliest sanctuaries. The intensity of the feeling inspired by trees may be inferred from the severity of the penalty prescribed by the old Germanic laws for anyone who dared to peel the bark from a living tree. The culprit's navel was cut out and nailed to the spot whence the bark had been removed, then he was driven around and around until his entrails were wound about the trunk. Thus the offender replaced with his own vital parts the bark of which he had so thoughtlessly deprived the living tree.

In this instance, as with later laws

decreed for the protection of living things other than human beings, the modern reader is likely to remark that they imply greater respect for the life of an animal or a plant than for that of a man. This is to miss the essential point. Most legal codes, down almost to modern times, decree penalties which we look upon as pitilessly harsh for misdemeanours that we now regard as venial. The severity of the punishment was determined not so much by the magnitude of the crime as by the fact that it violated a tribal taboo or outraged the ruler's decree, with all the disastrous effects that might follow from disrupting the tribe's solidarity and exposing it to supernatural evils, or from undermining royal authority. It was not that animal or plant life was valued more highly than human life, but that, as in ancient Rome, the sanctity of law and custom, upon which depended the preservation of society, was placed above any individual life.

In that vast treasure-house of information on the customs and beliefs of primitive men, Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, we find numerous instances drawn from all parts of the world of the sanctity, which in cultures long dead or fast disappearing, attached to living trees. Thus, before their conversion to Christianity, the Lithuanians worshipped trees and maintained about their villages or houses holy groves, where even to break a twig would have been a sin. They believed that one who cut a bough in such a grove would through some mysterious agent of retribution lose his life or at least be maimed in limb.

In north America the Indians along the upper reaches of the Missouri River revered the great cottonwoods that grew in the river bottoms and were the most imposing trees of the region. They would not cut these trees for the logs they needed, but depended for their supply upon such trees as had fallen of themselves. The Ojebways "very seldom cut down green or living trees, from the idea that it puts them to pain, and some of their medicine-men profess to have heard the wailing of the trees under the axe." The Wanyika tribe of East Africa believed that every tree was the abode of a spirit. The coconut palm was held in special reverence, and the destruction of one of these trees was regarded as the equivalent of matricide, because the palm gives men life and nourishment, as a mother her child.

Among numerous peoples, when a tree was about to be felled because needed for timber, special ceremonies were performed at its foot for the propitiation of the indwelling spirit, lest it take revenge upon the despoilers of its abode; or apologies were offered, and expressions of regret that human need should cause the destruction of the living tree. When the Toboongkoos of Celebes were about to clear a piece of forest to make a rice field, they built a tiny house and furnished it with food, miniature clothes and some gold. Then they besought the woodland spirits to quit the area of forest destined for axe and fire and to take up their abode peacefully in the dwelling that had been made and provisioned for their accommodation.

In these and numerous other examples that have been collected by ethnologists, the attitude toward the tree ranges all the way from friendly feeling, such as might be inspired by another sentient being, to gratitude toward it as a source of benefits and worship as the body of a spirit with great power for helping or harming men. Nearly always the motive for revering and protecting the tree is religious rather than practical; only rarely, as in the case of the Wanyikas' coconut palms, is the economic aspect prominent.

The deliberate practice of conservation as we now conceive it is rarely apparent in the primitive man's treatment of trees. But, whatever the explicit motivation, the practical result is obvious. Men who hold trees in awe and reverence, who must enlist the assistance of their priest or medicine-man in order to fell them without dire consequences to themselves, who must make elaborate preparations for the accommodation of spirits dispossessed of their natural abodes, who perform expiatory sacrifices, or who at least approach the prospective victims of their axe in an apologetic mood—such men are not likely to destroy trees wantonly or without great need.

Such religious practices and quasi-religious sentiments result in the conservation of the woodlands so important to the continued prosperity of any society, whether of primitive hunters and food-gatherers or of modern city-dwellers dependent for their food upon large-scale, mechanized agriculture supported by an elaborate technology.

As to the beliefs upon which these practices are founded, should we not respect and even honour them as representing an earnest attempt to apprehend truths to which we, in the smug materialism of our age, are too often insensitive and blind? Whatever the faults and errors of our remote ancestors, there was one at least into which they did not fall: they did not, like so many of our contemporaries, suppose that all values are human values and that no other of the multitudinous goals toward which life tends is worthy of our reverence.

The animism which led primitive men to posit spirits in vegetables operated even more strongly in the case of animals, which move, see, hear, utter sounds and eat much as ourselves. This recognition of the essential similarity, in nature and in needs, of man and other animate creatures placed a restraint upon the wanton killing of the latter. In his summary of the religious belief of the South American Indians, Alfred Métraux stated:—

> Among the spirits that tend toward a greater individualization are the supernatural protectors of the animal species usually called the "Father or Mother of such-and-such kind of game or fish." In the myths these spirits are represented as particularly large specimens of the species, and, as a rule, they may take on human form at will.... These custodians of the species freely permit the use of their protégés as food, but they do not tolerate their wanton destruction by man, and they punish severely hunters who kill more than they actually need to survive. In some cases, these guardians could be propitiated by prayer and small gifts, but the exercise of moderation and self-restraint was the best way to gain their favour. The notion of a protector of the species was strong in ancient Peru, where the supernatural custodians were identified with constellations to which prayers were addressed. Even in modern times the Indians of the Puna de Atacama believed that the wild herds of the vicugna were led by Coquena, a troll who punished men who hunted vicugna out of greediness.[1]

The modern city-dweller or farmer who, taking his high-powered gun, sallies forth to kill animals he does not need as food often imagines that he emulates his vigorous, self-sufficient ancestors of a remote epoch. He believes that he is giving free and salutary play to a deep-rooted human "instinct" which centuries of civilized life has been unable to eradicate, and that by so doing he demonstrates his essential hardihood and manliness. In equating this killing for "sport," without danger to himself and without jeopardizing his means of subsistence, to the indispensable hunting of his distant forebears, however, he does a profound injustice to the latter.

Our available evidence shows that primitive man rarely went out to the hunt in this offhand manner, for mere diversion. To him the killing of wild animals was a serious business, to be undertaken only in response to pressing vital needs and to be approached, in many instances, only after fasting or laborious ceremonial preparations which would ensure the success of the solemn venture, ward off perils from the hunter, and prevent consequences of the slaughter which might be disastrous to the clan. Doubtless in the excitement of the chase, when he pitted his strength, endurance and skill against some powerful or wily animal, the primitive hunter knew that ex-

[1] *Handbook of South American Indians*, Vol. V, pp. 565-566. (Smithsonian Institution, Washington. 1949.)

hilaration which comes from the exercise of well-practised faculties at their highest pitch. Yet the thrill that might be experienced in the heat of the chase was rarely the motive for undertaking this pursuit. The savage huntsman as a rule required more valid reasons for killing his victims.

Australia was until recently occupied by some of the most primitive races of mankind, for many of whom the kangaroo was the mainstay of life. A kangaroo hunt was not to be lightly undertaken, without due thought and adequate ritual preparation. The kangaroo men went first to a certain sacred spot which from ancient times had been the scene of this important ceremony. Upon a ledge of rock they traced with white gypsum and red ochre designs which represented the white bones and red fur of the kangaroo. Then to the accompaniment of solemn chants calling for the future increase of the kangaroos, some of the men opened their veins and let their warm blood flow over the sacred ledge with its painted symbols of the kangaroo.

Then followed the chase; and if one of the animals was killed, its flesh provided a meal shared by the whole group. Even such primitive savages are not "children of nature," thoughtless of the future. They believe that the maintenance of their means of subsistence depends upon their active endeavour, and are willing to pour out their blood to ensure a continuance of natural bounty. It is not the ineffectiveness of the means but the greatness of the intention and the soundness of the underlying thought which should in this instance arrest our attention and command our respect. A substantial proportion of man's religious practices, from the Egyptian cult of Osiris and the Brahmanical kindling of the altar fire, to the rain dances of the Arizona Indians, stems from this same pervasive belief that the maintenance of the providential order is dependent upon the ritualistic and symbolic co-operation of mankind.

"The savage," wrote Frazer, "makes it a rule to spare the life of those animals which he has no pressing motive for killing." His care to avoid the needless slaughter of other creatures had various motives, some of which appear sound to modern man, while others fail to impress him as valid.

In the case of large and dangerous animals, like the elephant, the bear, the crocodile, or the whale, there was the very real danger that some of the tribesmen would be maimed or killed by their powerful adversary. In some cases there was apprehension lest hunting should diminish the abundance of a species important to the clan as a means of subsistence, either through the natural diminution of the population by the removal of some of its members capable of reproducing, or because animals of this kind might be offended and henceforth avoid the hunters.

There was uneasiness that the dead animal's ghost or spirit might pursue and take vengeance upon the man who killed it, or that its living relatives might take up a blood feud and exact retaliation, as in similar circumstances the tribesman himself felt bound to do. There was sometimes evidence of genuine sympathy for the creature about to lose its life, or perhaps for its bereaved mother. Each of these perils and misgivings led to appropriate rites for the propitiation of the prospective victim, for the appeasement of its ghost, or for the multiplication of its kind.

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(To be continued)