

# DON'T FORGET TO LOOK AT THE TREES

## A Spiritual Path from the Beauty of Nature to Ethical Action

*Chad Thralls*

IN HIS MANY BOOKS AND ARTICLES, the Scottish-born conservationist John Muir records powerful, ecstatic experiences of the beauty and awesome power of nature in spectacular places such as Yosemite Valley in California. For example, Muir describes a sunrise in Alaska, as a crimson light lit up the mountain peaks around him, like this:

Beneath the frosty shadows of the fiord we stood hushed and awe-stricken, gazing at the holy vision; and had we seen the heavens opened and God made manifest, our attention could not have been more tremendously strained.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the significance of such experiences for him, it is difficult to discern exactly how Muir understands God's relationship to the world. Is the religious language he uses to praise the beauty of nature an example of praising the Creator through the creation? Or has he moved completely past the Christianity of his youth to view nature itself as divine? Despite the appeal of his ecstatic descriptions, Muir does not provide clarity for Christians seeking to understand how to relate the beauty they experience in nature to God.

Even though retreat centres are often built in beautiful natural settings and scripture, especially the Psalms and prophetic books, is filled with imagery from creation, clear guidance on how to incorporate the natural world into our relationship with God is hard to find. There are very few voices in the history of Christian spirituality that can help us sort out the issues surrounding the relationship between God and the human attraction to the beauty of nature.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John Muir, *Travels in Alaska* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Some exceptions include Francis of Assisi's 'Canticle of Brother Sun', Bonaventure's *The Mind's Journey into God*, English poets such as George Herbert, Thomas Traherne and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe* and the journals of Thomas Merton.



*Sunrise over Kachemak Bay, Alaska*

What the classics of Christian spirituality do provide are a variety of road-maps of the journey towards God. The technical term for these maps is *spiritual itinerary*. In the history of Christian spirituality, the traditional understanding of the spiritual journey is the threefold path of purgation, illumination and union. This formulation was first articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius around 500 CE, and describes the stages through which the disciple moves in his or her journey to God.<sup>3</sup>

The first of these stages is the purgative way. This is the stage of beginners. Here disciples engage in self-purification and cultivate self-discipline to prepare themselves for greater intimacy with God. This stage is characterized by a discursive method of prayer. In the illuminative stage, disciples are drawn from discursive prayer and active self-purification to the peace of contemplative prayer. They enjoy brief experiences of God's presence. Here, their affections continue to be reordered and they develop a new relationship to the world and to God. It is a slow and gradual process. Finally, in the unitive stage, advanced disciples receive the gift of living continually in the presence of God. No longer do they experience moments of presence and absence. The unitive stage is a state of spiritual marriage in which disciples experience oneness with God.

In this brief sketch of the traditional spiritual itinerary, it is easy to see the problem it poses for us. In this pathway, nature is nowhere to be

<sup>3</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 150.

found. It provides no guidance for Christians for whom nature is a 'thin place', a place of powerful spiritual experience.<sup>4</sup>

### **Heschel**

I suggest that one writer to whom Christians can turn for guidance is the Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel provides his own threefold path, like the traditional triple way of Christian spirituality, to guide the life of the religious Jew. In what follows, I will put forward Heschel's spiritual itinerary as a means of helping Christians as well as Jews envision how to integrate nature into their own spiritualities.

Heschel (1907–1972) was a Jewish scholar, rabbi and activist who taught for many years at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. Born in Warsaw, Heschel studied for his doctorate in Berlin. Because he was lucky enough to obtain a visa, he left Warsaw six weeks before the German invasion of Poland. He obtained the visa to work at Hebrew Union University in Cincinnati, where he taught for five years. Heschel achieved fame for marching with Martin Luther King Jr during the Civil Rights movement and for his passionate opposition to the Vietnam War. It is less well known that he participated as an observer at the Second Vatican Council, lobbying the Roman Catholic Church to modify statements in its liturgy and teachings that did not fully respect Jews and Judaism.<sup>5</sup>



*Heschel marching with Martin Luther King Jr*

<sup>4</sup> See Eric Weiner, 'Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer', *New York Times* (9 March 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Gary Spruch, *Wide Horizons: Abraham Joshua Heschel, AJC, and the Spirit of Nostra Aetate* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2008), available at <http://www.ajc.org/atf/cf/%7B42d75369-d582-4380-8395-d25925b85eaf%7D/WIDE%20HORIZONS.PDF>, accessed 5 November 2013.

### ***Awe and Wonder***

In his book *God in Search of Man*, Heschel outlines three pathways that must be travelled simultaneously in humankind's search for God. The first of these is attending to the presence of God in nature. In contrast to the Christian triple way, for Heschel the spiritual journey begins with the human being's relationship to the created world. A colleague named Morton Leifman from the Jewish Theological Seminary recounts Heschel's advice when they walked in Riverside Park in New York. He would say, 'Don't forget to look at the trees; don't forget the river'.<sup>6</sup> Nature was a holy place for him. From a collection originally published in 1933, his poem 'Summer' is a celebration of his youthful experience of nature on a rainy day. Here are a few lines,

A soundless song weeps out of me—  
Longing mixed with happiness and thanks.  
Branches want to embrace me  
Stretching themselves and whispering ...  
A field like a river comes toward me to kiss me.<sup>7</sup>

In this poem, Heschel describes an enchanting experience of rain falling on fields, woods and grass, fainting amidst the intoxicatingly beautiful scene, and feeling that he is nothing and everything at the same time. This poem records a profound experience of unity with nature. The poet has joyously received a moment of ecstasy in which the boundaries that normally separate him from the world have fallen away. In the final stanza of another poem, Heschel writes that everything in creation can lead us to God:

I am a trace of You in the world  
and everything is like a door  
Let us all trace that trace of you  
and through all things go to you.<sup>8</sup>

For Heschel, there are a variety of ways human beings can relate to the world. Since the Industrial Revolution, humanity has exploited nature to an alarming extent. He describes this exploitation as human beings using

<sup>6</sup> Bob Abernethy, 'Abraham Joshua Heschel', *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* (18 January 2008), available at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/january-18-2008/abraham-joshua-heschel/1789/>, accessed 5 November 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'Summer', in *Ineffable Name of God: Man: Poems in Yiddish and English* (London: Continuum, 2004), 143.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, 'At Dusk', in *Ineffable Name of God*, 75.

the world as ‘a gigantic tool box for the satisfaction of [our] needs’.<sup>9</sup> In addition to humanity’s anthropocentric relationship to the world and its resources, he claims that progress in the natural sciences has diminished our sense of wonder at creation. Every day, we learn something new about the world around us. The mysteries of our beautiful world are increasingly explainable, and for Heschel this loss of mystery has profound consequences on our ability to be sensitive to the presence of God in creation.

***Sensing the  
presence of  
God in the  
world***

The first step on Heschel’s spiritual pathway is sensing the presence of God in the world. Though the essence of God is ineffable, Isaiah 6:3 states that the whole earth is filled with God’s glory. For Heschel, the earth should not be approached instrumentally, but as filled with the presence of God. Humanity does not sense the presence of God in the world because of its beauty, however. Heschel points out that the Bible does not praise the beauty of nature. Rather, it tells the reader to look beyond nature, to ‘lift up your eyes and see’ (33). Nature plays a role in his spiritual itinerary because its sublimity and grandeur point beyond itself to its Creator. Heschel even cautions that there is a risk in becoming enchanted by nature’s beauty. Nature is not ultimate. The beauty of the world issues from the grandeur of God. Thus the religious task is not to ‘praise the world for its beauty’, but to praise the Creator for the beauty of the world (96, 311–312).

Too often, human beings do not perceive the presence of God in the world around them. The challenge is continually to cultivate an awareness of the mystery beyond the surface facts of existence. The key is not to take the world for granted, but intentionally to keep alive our sense of wonder, awe and radical amazement at the world around us. Thus, awe and wonder that direct one’s attention from material objects towards God should be the chief characteristics of humanity’s attitude towards nature (45). Heschel claims that awe is ‘the cardinal attitude of the religious Jew’ (77). The most grievous sins are a lack of wonder, taking things for granted, callousness and hardness of heart.

***The Bible***

The second pathway that must be travelled on the journey to God is the way of the Bible. It is essential for the religious Jew to have the right approach to nature: taking time to stop and appreciate creation as an act of praise to God is an integral element of Judaism. But for Heschel,

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 34. Subsequent references in the text.

'The beginning of faith is ... not a feeling for the mystery of living or a sense of awe, wonder, and amazement. The root of religion is ... what to do with awe, wonder, and amazement.' (162) Simply put, nature does not provide sufficient knowledge of God. This brings Heschel to the importance of the Bible. The Bible is an essential complement to the praise of God through nature, because it is through the Bible that God speaks. In its pages, God speaks through events in history—such as the deliverance from Egypt and the giving of the Torah at Sinai—and in the midst of exile. The Bible records God speaking through the prophets' various denunciations of injustice as well as words of comfort in times of great distress at particular moments in the history of Israel.

### **Sacred Deeds**

The Bible is the second of the three pathways to God because it is through the Bible that God speaks. In the law and the prophets, the Bible articulates God's will for human life. The third pathway that leads to God is that of sacred deeds. This final stage exhibits just how different Heschel's itinerary is from the traditional threefold path of Christian spirituality. In the Christian triple way, the end of the journey is the experience of spiritual marriage or union with God. For most contemplative writers, the final stage of the itinerary is only partially experienced in this life, but begins here. As Bernard of Clairvaux writes in his commentary on the Song of Songs, in the unitive stage, the bride is kissed with the mouth of the Beloved.

Heschel ends in a very different place. Judaism stresses the importance of sacred deeds, efforts in which human beings put ideals into action. To be holy, Jews must follow God's *mitsvot* (commandments), which address us in the concrete situations of daily life. The world needs more than inwardness; it needs action. On top of this, Heschel goes so far as to say that God needs human beings to fulfil God's will in the world. Sacred deeds actually represent God in the world. They make God's presence known. The end of the spiritual journey for Heschel reveals that we become closer to God when we do God's will.

The concept of law is central to the Jewish tradition. The law is not a killjoy or an arbitrary device designed to limit human freedom. For Jews, law is a positive concept. It is a road-map or guide that communicates God's intentions for human life. Though God's will is presented in the form of commandments, Heschel insists that following them 'must not be reduced to external compliance with the law' (306). What the Torah requires is not rote obedience, but love. Just one chapter after revealing

the Ten Commandments, Deuteronomy 6:5 implores the reader to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’.

### ***The Journey to God***

Many Christians today intuitively sense the holiness of nature, but the classics of Christian spirituality generally lack guidance to help them understand how the experience of presence they feel in nature relates to their normal religious practices. The traditional triple way has nothing to say about sensing God’s presence in nature. But things are changing. Ecological voices with a deep appreciation for the beauty and complexity of nature are now prominent and emphasize the imperative of transforming our relationship to the world from an exploitive, anthropocentric one to a more sustainable one.<sup>10</sup> And over the last century, Christian spirituality has become much more interested in uniting prayer and action, spirituality and ethics, and Mary and Martha.<sup>11</sup>

What then does Abraham Joshua Heschel provide for Christians that we do not already possess in our own tradition? Heschel’s three intertwined pathways provide a clear road-map that Christians can appropriate to orientate themselves on their journeys to God. What he offers is a way of integrating contemporary interests in spirituality and nature, the ecological crisis, and social ethics into an elegant spiritual itinerary that, while constructed for Jews, is also useful for Christians. Heschel provides a way to understand how God can be approached through nature without lapsing into pantheism and to appreciate the significance of cultivating the religious dispositions of awe and wonder, the importance of just action in this broken world that needs transformation, and the bold suggestion that sensing awe and wonder at creation can lead to ethical action. Most importantly, he offers the insight that the experience of God through nature is an important first step in our journeys to God.

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<sup>10</sup> See the works of Thomas Berry, Sallie McFague, Belden Lane and Douglas Christie.

<sup>11</sup> Earlier voices in the tradition, such as Teresa of Ávila, sounded this note as well, but the concern became much more widespread in the twentieth century.