

## CHAPTER IX

### STUDY OF NATURE

NATURE presents the truths of religion in visible form, and confirms what we learn by meditating upon God. What we thus conceive we find existing in the material world. So it is that nature satisfies the demands of religion. For, like all that exists, nature reveals God. Things exist only for this purpose—to manifest the divine spirit which is in them and to which alone they owe their being. Everything is, then, divine in nature and in origin. So the whole of existence is one, though only relatively so as compared with the absolute unity of God. Because of this relative unity everything reveals its divine nature in a three-fold way in continuously progressive development. This truth underlies all real understanding of nature, and so is the essential condition of fruitful investigation into its essence.

Such real understanding is possible only to the man animated by the Christian spirit. Only as far as the searcher is convinced of the truth that the divine spirit which lives in him, and to which he himself submits, equally originates, supports, and energizes, all things, can he see this spirit in its unity, as well in the smallest occurrence as in the whole world of nature.

The best analogy of the relation of nature to God is that of a true work of art to the artist. In a lesser degree, the analogy holds between all human work and the

worker. Whatever a living spirit calls into being must bear in all its parts the impress of that spirit. So nothing can be perceived which does not thus bear the stamp of its origin. Now, as the artist's thought and feeling in his work can be seen by the understanding eye, so the creative spirit of God can be seen in his works. We do not see it because we do not give sufficient heed to discern the spirit which inspires the works of men. As the artist's very being is present in his work, so that it reveals his spirit, and yet his being is not lessened but rather strengthened by his work, so is it with the divine spirit. Though the spirit of God is present in all things so that they reveal that spirit, yet the being of God is not lessened. As the spirit of the artist lives in his work and can by that work be communicated to others, so the divine spirit lives in nature and can be communicated by nature. Yet, as the artist's work contains no material part of his being, so nature is not the body of God.

Nor does God dwell in nature as in a house. He lives in it as a fostering and developing spirit.

To the artist a true work of art on which he has lavished thought is like a beloved son going forth into the world fortified by his father's blessing and counsel. As the father is not indifferent to the kind of company his son keeps, yet is confident that his own spirit dwells in him and will keep him safe, so the artist is not without care as to who buys his picture, yet hopes that his own spirit, which pervades it through and through, will protect it and bring it to men who will receive that embodied spirit into their own souls and let it work in them.

If man feel himself one with the work of art he has created, yet which has no drop of his blood, no part of his frame, in it, and preserves and protects it, how much more shall God keep and guard his work? For God is

God, and man is only man. And as the artist continues to exist unchanged even though all his works perish, so God would be still the same though all nature were annihilated.

As the ruins of man's great constructive works tell succeeding and weaker generations of vanished human power, so the mighty remains of shattered mountains bear witness to the greatness of the spirit of God. Thus everywhere we find the same vital relation between the artist and his work and between God and nature.

It is well that we should try to get insight into the spirit which inspires human works, for so can the undeveloped soul gain profit from one more mature. Much more essential is it that we strive to study the things of nature that we may learn their meaning and their relation to the divine spirit. And we should be the more urged to this by the fact that nature is always accessible, while true works of art which set forth the pure spirit of man—itsself the spirit of God—are often inaccessible. True, we might find this spirit directly in men. But it is hard to distinguish in the individual what belongs to the general human spirit from what is peculiar to himself. On the other hand, in the pure works of nature the particular is quite overshadowed by the general. In them, therefore, the divine spirit can be more clearly discerned than in men, and in them, too, we see reflected the dignity and greatness of ideal human nature. There, besides, we find imaged man's aspirations and strivings to attain this ideal, so that from this silent teaching we may learn how to shape our lives.

Of all natural objects, none present so true a picture of human life as do plants, and especially trees.

Not only can the individual human life be seen mirrored in the growth of a tree, but also the life of the human